**The Story & Theology of Particular Hymns**

Lesson 4 – William Cowper – “There Is a Fountain Filled With Blood” (#253) & “O For a Closer Walk With God” (#534)

**Biography**

* The beginning of one book on Cowper begins, “One of the saddest lives ever lived was that of William Cowper.”
* 1731-1800
* Born in England as the 4th child to the chaplain to King George II
* William’s 3 siblings died when they were young and his mother died giving birth to child #5. William was 6 years old.
* He was bullied for 2 years at a boarding school which further contributed to his emotional frailty.
* His father wanted him to be a lawyer but William experienced runaway anxiety.
* Considering himself damned, William threw his Bible away and attempted suicide.
* He was committed to an asylum run by a Dr. Nathaniel Cotton who was a committed Christian.
* William came to faith in 1764 while under Dr. Cotton’s care when he read Romans 3:25 – “[Christ Jesus] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.”
* Soon after the asylum, William became acquainted with Rev. Morley Unwin and his wife, Mary.
* Invited to stay at their house for 2 weeks, William ended up living with the Unwins for 22 years.
* Poetry, literature, and gardening helped William deal with his deep depression and emotional fragility.
* After Rev. Unwin was killed from falling off his horse, Mary Unwin moved to Olney to sit under the preaching of John Newton. William moved with her and he became fast friends with John Newton.
* William Cowper contributed 67 of the 349 hymns found in the *Olney Hymnal*. He also assisted Newton in visiting the sick, dying, and distributing benevolent funds.
* After Newton left Olney, Cowper focused on writing secular poetry, including “Pity for Poor Africans” which contributed to Wilberforce’s efforts to abolish slavery in England.
* His last piece was *The Castaway* in which Cowper described himself in his depression as a sailor swept overboard into the Atlantic Ocean to die.
* Cowper’s depression intensified with age and he died from his melancholy on April 25, 1800.

**Occasion for “There Is a Fountain Filled With Blood”**

* Cowper wrote this hymn after another bout of depression in which he once again tried to kill himself.
* Cowper could never shake off the belief that God would not turn His back on him.

**Theology of “There Is a Fountain Filled With Blood”**

* Zechariah 13:1 – “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”
* Cowper begins with the objective reality of Christ’s blood making us whiter than snow. In verse 2, he brings it down to the experiential level by equating us with the sinner on the cross. Verses 3 & 4 talk about declaring to others the love of Christ and His ability to save sinners. Finally, looking through time and history, Cowper praises Jesus for the fact that He will save all that He has determined to save.
* Modifications:
  + On the 2nd line of verse 2, the Trinity hymnal says “and there have I” but Cowper wrote “and there MAY I” (this accords with his struggle with assurance).
  + The modification continues in that the lines of verse 4 are reversed. Originally it was “When this poor lisping, stamm’ring tongue lies silent in the grave, then in a nobler, sweeter song, I’ll sing Thy pow’r to save.”
  + Finally, originally verse 5 was verse 3 and what is our verses 3 & 4 were originally verses 4 & 5.

**Occasion for “O For a Closer Walk With God”**

* In December 1769, Mary Unwin took sick and appeared to be on the verge of dying.
* William’s anxiety and depression reared its ugly head with a vengeance because Mary was like a mother to him.
* During earnest prayers for her, Cowper began to examine his own spiritual condition and the result was this hymn.
* “Mary is the chief of blessings I have met with in my journey since the Lord was pleased to call me. Her illness has been a sharp trial for me. Oh, that it may have a sanctified effect….I began to compose these verses yesterday morning before daybreak, but I fell asleep at the end of the first two lines. When I awaked, the third and fourth verses were whispered to my heart in a way I have often experienced.”
* Mary would go on to recover.

**Theology of “O For a Closer Walk With God”**

* This hymn reflects Cowper’s inner struggles of a sensitive soul and an earnest desire to experience the peace of God’s abiding presence in his life.
* Genesis 5:24 – “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.”
* There is a connection between assurance of grace and salvation and sin remaining in our lives.
* WCF 18.4 – “True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; …. yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; (1 John 3:9, Luke 22:32, Job 13:15, Ps. 73:15, Ps. 51:8, 12, Isa. 50:10) and be the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair. (Micah 7:7–9, Jer. 32:40, Isa. 54:7–10, Ps. 22:1, Ps. 88)”

**Another Hymn**

* “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (#128)