

**The Hymns
of
W. Vernon Higham**

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A Personal Testimony

At a time when the Christian faith is at a low ebb and the thought of godliness is not acceptable, it may seem strange to be producing some simple hymns that express a longing for God and for His influence upon our lives. Nevertheless, it has been my desire from my early days in the Christian faith to write at least one hymn of some spiritual value. All my life I have loved the rich Welsh hymnology of my background. It is my earnest prayer that some of these hymns will speak to others and encourage fellow believers on their spiritual pilgrimage.

I was born in Caernarfon, in North Wales, my mother being a native of that town, whereas my father hailed from the North of England. The language of the town and of my friends was Welsh. My home was bilingual, although my brother and I spoke Welsh to each other. During the depression of the 1930s life was hard for everyone. In one sense as a family we were comfortably established as compared with most. Our family owned and ran a grocery and also a small farm two miles out of the town. Nevertheless we lived in a time of great poverty and no business could really succeed. Added to this was my father's failing health. Eventually the family moved to Lancashire, my father's home county, and for the next stage of my life Bolton was to be my home. It was a great wrench to move from a market town to a large industrial town, from a place where everyone knew one another to a place which seemed so big and so full of strangers. There was the task of settling into a new school and also the change of language to cope with. Perhaps loneliness was the main problem I encountered and, because of this, my brother and I became companions as well as brothers, despite the five year gap between our ages.

Spiritually I had known nothing other than every family who attended the means of grace. The majority of any congregation in

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my home town in Wales were people who experienced the great Revival of 1904. I really believed that all grown-up people were godly folk. The Sabbath day was special and I must say that I truly loved the house of God, although I was often in trouble because of my mischievous nature. Whilst in Caernarfon I went with my grandmother to her chapel on Sunday evenings, having been with my parents to another in the morning and afternoon. I remember very little of what was said but I had my favourite preachers. Two qualities I particularly admired at that time were illustrations and brevity! In all this, however, the influence of my grandmother was very strong in my life. Despite the fact that I was but 7 when she died, her words remained. She would often take me with her as she visited her friends. Her conversation was always about the Lord and the marvellous works and transformation of lives she had seen during the Revival. I found it both thrilling and fascinating and to this day I have such a clear impression of her that the memory of her words seems but a few years ago. In addition I cannot omit mentioning my parents and their devotion to the things of God who, in His mercy, in later life visited them with saving grace.

After moving house several times, which for me also meant changing schools, we eventually found our spiritual home in the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist chapel in Bolton, which was part of the Welsh Presbytery of Manchester. Although there were many other Welsh denominations in the area which offered love and friendship generally, we remained in our own, and the chapel in Bolton soon became the very centre of my life. We had left Caernarfon in 1939 when I was 12 and before long a great war broke out that was to change all our lives. Times of fear occurred during air-raids, times of sorrow came with untimely deaths. We experienced times of great fellow-feeling, and long dark winters when all stayed at home in the evenings. I believe that in those days family life became particularly important. It was our custom to walk together to chapel on Sunday morning as there was no bus service. We walked there again for Sunday School, followed by an early evening service.

There was also a weekly prayer-meeting followed by a meeting

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called 'Y Seiat' (The Fellowship Meeting) and one of my clearest memories regarding spiritual things was being asked by the Elders to write an essay on the 1859 Revival and read it to the members. I was 14 at the time! I can recall searching through the bound copies of Welsh magazines of the nineteenth century and reading the weekly accounts of that Revival. My heart was won, and though I remember nothing of the meeting apart from the dread I felt as I sat in the front row waiting to be called to speak, from that time onwards Revival became my greatest desire.

Towards the end of the war I served in the coal mines, as most conscripts did at that late stage. Then afterwards I applied to train as a school teacher in the college at Carmarthen in South Wales. I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. I loved the place and the company of men from all parts of South Wales. I applied myself to my work and enjoyed the times in schools during teaching practice. Following this I taught Welsh in a school in Cardiff, where I made many friends. One, in particular, was a young man like myself from North Wales. We were both faithful to our respective chapels and, whenever we met, we would talk about the things of God. The outcome of this was that we both resolved to serve God in some capacity. They were precious days for me.

I returned home to teach at a school a few miles from Bolton, and I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed my work, especially teaching Art. I well remember standing on my own in the classroom one day and recalling to mind my promise to serve God. By that time I was the superintendent of the Sunday School in the Welsh Chapel and had even been appointed an elder in my early twenties! Nevertheless, as I stood alone in that room I asked myself if I would be satisfied still to be in that position in 40 years time. In my heart I knew there was only one answer. The next step was to break the news to my parents. They were so happy that we were together again at home and they advised me to wait for three years in order to test the call. This I agreed to do.

Then began the process of appearing before Presbytery, and later the Candidates' Board; but in the meantime a kind friend who was

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a Greek scholar gave me free lessons in classical Greek for two years. Eventually I was faced with the entrance examination in Biblical knowledge and in Greek and when I appeared before the Board. I believe they had a sense of apprehension as my description of the call fell short of that which was expected. However, I came from a solid Welsh Calvinistic Methodist background and I was accepted. My home church was saddened rather than glad, possibly because of my increasing zeal.

The theological college was situated in a beautiful seaside town in West Wales. The buildings were imposing and the discipline required was acceptable to me. I wonder how many young men on entering theological college go through a kind of culture shock? The first revelations of higher criticism almost drove me to despair. Was there no more to the Christian faith than all these unreliable facts and uncertain truths? Amongst the students there was a group of fine men, about four in all, who stood out as different. They would meet frequently for prayer, and whenever I found myself in the company of one of them, although I felt a kind of kinship with them, there was a barrier between us. I had no idea what that barrier was until one of them challenged me about my faith. In my reply I listed all the good and commendable activities I was involved in, and when I had finished he very gently pointed out to me that I had been describing self-righteousness. By then I knew that I was not a Christian and it came as a terrible shock to me.

The first term came to an end and I talked to my parents about not returning to college. They responded by saying that the honourable thing to do was to return and complete the course, quoting the Biblical principle of perseverance. I loved my parents and felt greatly indebted to them. I would never consider going against their will, and so I returned. It is difficult to describe the deep chasm of conviction, a yearning for something that you could not explain. I felt as if there was a lost chord in my life that ruined every melody.

Then, one Saturday in January 1953, I experienced an upsetting incident. I had to leave for a village on the last bus to preach there

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the next day. When I alighted from the bus I met an elderly lady who kept what was called the chapel-house where I was to stay overnight. In conversation we began to talk about the Revival of 1904 which she remembered well and, to my astonishment, she informed me that it had meant nothing to her! I was deeply shocked that a person could be so near God's work and yet be untouched by it. As I spent the rest of that long evening alone, I knelt to pray and I was aware of a presence that I had not known before. In this glorious approach of God, I knew that I had become the Lord's and I praised and thanked Him for His mercy towards me. His truth became alive, and from then on there was no turning back.

The news that the Saviour was real had to be made known, and on returning to college I immediately and constantly challenged both staff and students. The good news of the Gospel was too glorious to be hidden and I honestly believed at that time that if you explained the way of salvation clearly to a person he or she would eagerly believe.

My college days came to an end and my first pastorate was in a mining town near Swansea. I had a branch church and also worked with the main church to which it was attached. Imagine having in your congregation the sister of Evan Roberts, the young man used of God in 1904. Her name was Mary Roberts and it was an inspiration to be in her company. Her husband was Sidney Evans who had been closely associated with Evan Roberts in those early days. As well as this, a lady called Miss Rachel Rees, who helped Evan Roberts spiritually before the Revival, attended the chapel. These and others soon became known to me and they often shared the vivid recollections that they had of better days.

My second pastorate was in the beautiful green hills of West Wales, in a village called Llanddewi-brefi, where my family spent four happy years. My wife, Morwen, whom I had met during my college days, knew far more of those very special people who had also been greatly blessed in 1904. We were partners together in the quest of seeking God in Revival power.

My third church was in Cardiff and is the one of which I am

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presently the minister. When I first came here in 1962 I had only preached in English six times and I was more familiar with the Welsh Bible and hymns. Even so, there was no doubt in my mind that I was in God's will, and we both worked hard as we gave our all. After about two years I had a serious illness which was to remain with me for fifteen years. The first onset came with alarming suddenness and it was at that time, as I began to come to myself, that these words and phrases were formed in my mind. I cannot describe how near I felt to my Lord. Eventually I ventured to write them down:

*"I saw a new vision of Jesus,
A view I'd not seen here before,
Beholding in glory so wondrous
With beauty I had to adore.
I stood on the shores of my weakness,
And gazed at the brink of such fear;
'Twas then that I saw Him in newness,
Regarding Him fair and so dear."*

As I continued I realised that the lines had become a hymn. On my return home to my wife and three little children I felt so glad to be with them, yet I was reluctant to relinquish that living presence which I was then experiencing. The hymns remained silent for seven years, then I found a few more coming to me both in English and Welsh. Sometimes it would happen suddenly at night, and at such times I honestly felt as if I was a secretary writing them down. Not all came with such rapidity but many did, and my heart rejoiced in Him.

There is one hymn, however, that is perhaps the closest to my heart, and may be one that is more suitable for private meditation than public singing. It came at a time of great personal frailty and longing for God:

*"Deep in my heart there is a sigh,
A longing, Lord, for Thee;
To know the depths that in Thee lie,
The grace of Calvary."*

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*O grant that I might understand
Thy glorious mystery,
More of Thyself, and by Thy hand
Obedience stir in me."*

Many others came in times of great joy and out of love that floods the heart. There have also been long periods of none, then followed a few more.

My hope is that these spiritual poems may in some small way help other travellers as we continue our journey home, fellow citizens of a great kingdom, the kingdom of God. We shall see the Lord Jesus Christ in all His majesty and be with God forever. For He is the end of the journey and the ultimate destination for us as Christians ... *"looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith"* (Hebrews 12:2).

W. Vernon Higham
May 1998

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WORSHIP AND ADORATION

1

Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

I Peter 1:8

(77.77.D. Aberystwyth or Hollingside)

Let my soul for ever praise
What Thou art, O God above,
Worship Thee with joy, and raise
Glorious anthems of Thy love.
Listen to my soul acclaim
Wondrous stories of Thy care,
Thanking Thee for Him who came
Ever more this joy to share.

Joy unspeakable is mine,
Full of glory, full of grace,
Gift of mercy, love divine,
Radiance of my Saviour's face!
Let this joy for ever flow,
Till my being glows with Thee;
Let this radiance in me show
Glimpses of eternity.

Who are these arrayed around,
Breathing vengeance on my soul —
Fiery trials that surround,
Testing hard if I am whole?
Yet my joy in Thee will stay;
Knowing of Thy tenderness,
Nothing shall my heart dismay,
Or remove Thy faithfulness.

Worship and Adoration

Glorious joy, a gift from Thee
Born in heaven, a child of grace,
Shows a gentleness to me
With a smile from Thy dear face.
When I tremble in distress,
And my heart cries out in pain,
Thou, my God, wilt ever bless,
And this joy shall firm remain.

Then Thy ransomed shall be brought
Unto Thine eternal fold,
Every soul that Thou hast bought,
Fashioned, burnished in Thy mold.
Hear my heart rejoice in Thee;
Overflowing grace abound;
Now and then my glory be,
For in Christ my soul is found.

2

*For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and
glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly.*

Psalm 84:11

(77.77.D. Hollingside or Aberystwyth)

See, my soul, the courts of God,
Graced with mercy, peace and joy,
Where the saints have gladly trod,
There to meet and Thee enjoy.
For Thy presence I will weep
That I may in Thee delight;
Better far Thy doors to keep
Than to dwell in sin's dark night.