

Great Hymns, our help in ages past, will help once again this Saturday at Our Lady of Grace

By Elizabeth Whitfield

Beloved hymns have been sung throughout the ages and across all continents; some for centuries, others mere decades; but these favourites continue to inspire, bring joy or relief, to those who contemplate their moving texts and stirring melodies.

It is not surprising hymns were first written as the fruit of an intense emotional experience ranging from utmost elation to abject suffering. Well-known is the 1748 conversion of Englishman John Newton; a self-proclaimed wretch who once was lost but then was found, and saved by amazing grace.

The Captain of a slave trader during a treacherous storm, he believed his ship surely would sink, but 'Thro' many dangers, toils and snares...?', 'twas grace that brought him safe thus far, and grace that led him home; but few know the fascinating histories of other great hymns.

In 1778, Reverend E. P. Scott was a missionary in India. At the prompting of the Holy Spirit, but against the advice of his peers, Scott set out alone to visit a remote village, determined to share the Gospel. Soon he was met by a large group of warriors who quickly surrounded him and pointed their spears towards his heart. Bowing slowly, Scott took out his ever-present violin, closed his eyes, and sang his own composition, All Hail the Power of Jesus Name, in the warriors' native language.

After the first four verses, Rev. Scott realized he was still standing, and that all around him were peaceful and quiet, every spear lowered. The mighty warriors soon welcomed Scott amongst themselves, and now his powerful hymn has been translated into every existing language.

In 1873, a wealthy Chicago lawyer, Horatio Spafford and his wife Anna, had a beautiful home, four daughters and a son. He was a devout Christian and faithful student of the Scriptures, but at the very height of his financial and professional success, Horatio and Anna suffered the tragic loss of their young son. Shortly thereafter the Great Chicago Fire destroyed almost every real estate investment the family had. Spafford scheduled a trip to Europe in order to give his wife and daughters much needed vacation time to recover from the tragedy.

He sent his wife and daughters ahead of him but remained in Chicago to take care of some unexpected business. Several days later he received notice that his family's ship had encountered a collision, drowning all four of his daughters; only his wife had survived. Boarding a boat to reunite with Anna, it was on this trip Spafford penned the now famous and remarkable words, 'When sorrow like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, God has taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul!'

Emotional experiences that inspired the writing of great hymns are not confined to the annals of history. Twila Paris Wright is a Contemporary Christian songwriter who penned her hymn 'We Will Glorify?', based on scriptures from Revelations and Psalms in 1982.

Wright said of her inspiration 'When God calls us to do something, even during extreme adversity, He finds a way to enable us. This is a song of exaltation and adoration; an offering of joyous praise!'

In support of the Aurora United Church Rebuild Project, a Hymn Sing, featuring these great hymns and many others, will be presented this Saturday, October 25, at 7.30 p.m. in the sanctuary at Our Lady of Grace Parish Church, 15347 Yonge St., Aurora. Organ, brass, and timpani will accompany the congregation and a mass community choir. All are invited to attend. Freewill offering, and refreshments to follow.

Come, sing, listen, and lend your support!