

Charles Wesley, 1707-1788.

Notes from Dr. Julian's Hymnology:

Charles Wesley was the *great* hymn writer of the Wesley family – perhaps, taking quantity and quality into consideration, the great hymn-writer of all ages. He was the youngest son and 18th. child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, and was born at Epworth Rectory, Dec. 18th 1707. In 1716, he went to Westminster School being provided with a home and board by his elder brother, Samuel, then usher at the school, until 1721 when he was elected King's Scholar and as such received his board and education free. While he was at Westminster, his father received a letter from a wealthy Irishman asking him if he had a son named Charles, and if so, offering to adopt him and make him his heir. The acceptance of the offer was left to Charles himself who declined it. In 1726, Charles Wesley was elected to a Westminster Studentship at Christ Church, Oxford, where he took his degree in 1729, and became a college tutor. In the early part of the same year, his religious impressions were much deepened and he became one of the first band of "Oxford Methodists". In 1735 he went with his brother John to Georgia, as secretary to General Oglethorpe, having before he set out received Deacon's and Priest's Orders on two successive Sundays. His stay in Georgia was very short; he returned to England in 1736 and in 1737 came under the influence of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians, especially of that remarkable man, Peter Bohler, and also of Mr. Bray, a brazier in Little Britain. On Whitsunday, 1737, he "found rest to his soul", and in 1738, he became curate to his friend, Mr. Stonehouse, Vicar of Islington, but the opposition of the churchwarden was so great that the Vicar consented that he "should preach in his church no more". Henceforth his work was identified with his brother John, and he became an indefatigable itinerant and field preacher. On April 8th. 1749 he married Miss Sarah Gwynne. His marriage, unlike that of his brother John, was a most happy one; his wife has accustomed to accompany him on his evangelistic journeys which were as frequent as ever until the year 1756 when he ceased to itinerate, and mainly devoted himself to the care of the Societies in London and Bristol. Bristol was his headquarters until 1771, when he removed with his family to London and, besides attending to the Societies, devoted himself much as he had done in his youth to the spiritual care of prisoners in Newgate. He had long been troubled about the relations of Methodism to the Church of England, and strongly disapproved of his brother John's 'ordination'. Wesley-like he expressed his disapproval in the most outspoken fashion, but as in the case of Samuel at an earlier period, the difference between the brothers never led to a breach of friendship. He died in London, March 29th, 1788 and was buried in Marylebone churchyard. His brother John was deeply grieved because he would not consent to be interred in the burial ground of the City Road Chapel, where he had prepared a grave for himself, but Charles said "I have lived and I die in the Communion of the Church of England and I will be buried in the yard of my parish church". Eight clergymen of the Church of England bore his pall. He had a large family, four of whom survived him – three sons who all became distinguished in the musical world, and one daughter who inherited some of her father's poetical genius. The widow and orphans were treated with the greatest kindness and generosity by John Wesley.

As a hymn writer Charles Wesley was unique. He is said to have written no less than 6,500 hymns, and though, of course in so vast a number some of unequal merit, it is perfectly marvellous how many there are which rise to the highest degree of excellence. His feelings on every occasion of importance, whether public or private, found their best expression in a hymn. His own conversion, his own marriage, the earthquake panic, the rumours of an invasion from France, the defeat of Prince Charles Edward at Culloden, the Gordon riots, every festival of the Christian church, every doctrine of the Christian faith, striking scenes in scripture history, striking scenes which came within his own view, the deaths of friends as they passed away one by one before him, all furnished occasions for the exercise of his divine gift. Nor must we forget his hymns for little children, a branch of sacred poetry in which the mantle of Dr. Watts seems to have fallen upon him. It would be simply impossible...to enumerate even those hymns which have become really classical. The saying that a really good hymn is as rare an appearance as that of a comet, is falsified by the work of Charles Wesley, for hymns which are really good in every respect flowed from his pen in quick succession, and death alone stopped the course of the perennial stream.

Many are the stories and incidents connected with Charles Wesley's hymns.

From "Popular Hymns and their Writers" by Norman Mable.

The great American writer, Henry Ward Beecher, declared, "I would rather have written that hymn of Wesley's, 'Jesus, Lover of my soul' than to have the fame of all the kings that ever sat on earth. It is more glorious and has more power in it. That hymn will go on singing until the last trump; and I think it will mount up on some lip to the very presence of God."