



# ADULT STUDY

from *www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com*

## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 4

# Will You Come and Follow Me? An Adult Lenten Study on Hymns

*To God Be the Glory*

## Introduction

The season of Lent is a journey of following in the footsteps of Jesus. In the middle year, or Year B, of the three-year lectionary cycle, the stages of this journey are narrated by the Gospel readings for the Sundays in Lent. On the first Sunday, the journey takes us into the wilderness with Jesus for forty days of fasting and prayer, a time of preparation during which we learn to mourn our sins and a time of testing during which we seek his strength to overcome temptations (Mark 1:9–15). The second Sunday transports us alongside him in ministry as he calls us to take up our crosses and follow in discipleship (8:31–38). On the third Sunday, we travel with him to Jerusalem and witness his courageous assault on the corrupt practices of the religious establishment of his day as he overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple (John 2:13–22). Then we listen as he predicts that he will be “lifted up,” not in exaltation but in humiliation: lifted up on a cross for our salvation so that those who believe in him “may not perish but may have eternal life” (3:14–21).

The fourth Sunday in Lent in Year B thus uses as its Gospel reading that most quoted of all biblical verses, John 3:16. The most widely known congregational song to cite John 3:16 is a text by the prolific American hymn writer Fanny Crosby, “To God Be the Glory.” Out of

the roughly nine thousand hymn poems that she wrote during her ninety-five years, some of which achieved international renown, this one was not widely recognized until decades after her death, when it made a circuitous route from New York City to London, England, to Nashville, Tennessee. But its title beautifully captures the spirit of its author, a woman who never sought fortune for herself but worked solely to give glory to God. Her life and her writings inspire us to do the same.

## Woman of Two Hundred Pseudonyms

Frances Jane Crosby was born on March 24, 1820, in Putnam County, New York. At age thirty-eight, she married a fellow teacher and musician, Alexander Van Alstyne (known as “Van”), who was eleven years younger than she. Recognizing that her reputation as a poet was already established by the time of the marriage, he encouraged her to retain her own surname rather than adopt his.<sup>1</sup> Thus, most of her hymns appeared with “Miss Fanny J. Crosby” listed as author. However, at the height of her career, from the 1860s to the 1890s, she was writing so prolifically that she adopted an array of pseudonyms to conceal the fact that any given hymnal from her publisher might consist almost entirely of her works. In addition to more obvious choices such as “Fanny Van Alstyne,” “Mrs. Alexander Van Alstyne,” and “Mrs. Van

A.," she also wrote as "The Children's Friend," "Carrie Bell," "Mrs. Kate Smiling," "Frank Gould," "James Black," and a host of other pen names, for a grand total of 204! Already, this practice offers evidence that she did not spend her professional career seeking glory for herself.<sup>2</sup>

Before her career as a writer of hymn texts, she had achieved a degree of recognition under another title, that of "The Blind Poetess." When she was only a few weeks old, a person claiming to be a physician had attempted to treat her inflamed eyes by putting a hot poultice on them, supposedly to draw out an infection. Instead of curing her, however, the combined heat and chemical contents of the poultice scarred her corneas. As a result, from infancy forward, she could see nothing but a few colors and intense contrasts in shades of light. Far from viewing this outcome as a tragedy, however, she often argued that her blindness was "a special gift of God."<sup>3</sup> She noted how unlikely she would have been to receive an advanced education had she not been sent to the newly founded New York Institution for the Blind at age fourteen. There, she added to skills she already had as a singer and guitar player by mastering the harp, organ, and piano (including a range of styles, from classical to ragtime). Her feats of memory (she had been challenged as an eight-year-old to memorize the Bible in full!) were amplified as she was taught to commit the poetry of others to memory and to compose verses of her own.<sup>4</sup> Whenever dignitaries came to visit the institution—people such as then governor of New York, William Henry Seward; President John Tyler; poet William Cullen Bryant; senator and former president John Quincy Adams—the gifted Miss Crosby was expected to create and recite a rhyming tribute for the occasion. Thus, from her perspective, she was the beneficiary of opportunities she might never have received had she retained her sight.

While Fanny wrote secular poetry as a student and subsequently a teacher at the New York Institution, her career as a hymn writer did not begin until she was in her midforties. Introduced to William Bradbury, a musician who had been composing tunes for the evangelical revival sometimes known as the Second Great Awakening, she was invited to join the group of writers working for his publishing company to create Sunday school hymnbooks. Although she went on to compose texts for numerous composers and publishers, authoring works that sometimes garnered these other people handsome

royalties, she never received more than a dollar or two per poem. When her friends argued with her that she should demand greater compensation, she declined. In fact, what money she did receive she almost immediately gave away, electing to live in virtual poverty in a tenement on the Lower West Side, surrounded by immigrants and poor working-class people of multiple ethnicities. It was for these people that she wrote her hymn texts: simple, direct, and sometimes sentimental in language, promising better days to come in heaven, if not on earth. In her chosen neighborhood, as in her dedicated work with the homeless of New York's Bowery Mission, she received yet another cherished nickname: "Aunt Fanny."

## Circuitous Route to Fame

"To God Be the Glory," written in the early 1870s, is somewhat atypical of Aunt Fanny's hymns. Since most were composed for use in a revival context, they exert a direct emotional appeal, frequently using first-person singular pronouns ("All the Way, My Savior Leads Me"; "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine"; "I am Thine, O Lord"; "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross"; "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior"). In contrast, the only pronouns in "To God Be the Glory" refer to the One who "gave his only begotten Son." Still, the music of the hymn, composed by William Howard Doane, shares many features of the standard "Sunday school" or "gospel hymn," as the genre came to be called during this era. March-like and repetitive, it is more catchy than complex—and with good reason. Since radios and audio-recordings were not yet in existence and many people were too poor to purchase hymnals, let alone musical instruments, if a tune could not be learned after a single hearing, it was unlikely to survive.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike other collaborations between Doane and Crosby—"Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior"; "Safe in the Arms of Jesus"; "Rescue the Perishing"—"To God Be the Glory" did not achieve popularity until long after both author and composer had died. Ira Sankey, the soloist and song leader who worked with famous evangelist Dwight Moody, took the hymn with him on a tour of England, where it achieved some recognition. Three quarters of a century later, when Billy Graham traveled to England to conduct his 1954 London Crusade in Haringay Arena, someone gave a copy of the hymn to the crusade's song leader, Cliff Barrows. Coincidentally enough, Barrows had experienced his conversion to Christ at age eleven, when his pastor

preached on the Bible verse John 3:16. Barrows decided to include Crosby and Doane's hymn in the songbook he put together for the revival series. It met with such a vigorous reception that he ended up using it virtually every night. Once he had returned with Graham to the United States, they used the song as part of their crusade in Nashville, Tennessee. Again, it was enthusiastically received and thereafter began making its way into denominational hymnals.

## O Perfect Redemption

What does this now-popular hymn have to offer us, especially during the season of Lent? Foremost is its focus on God's saving work in Jesus Christ, particularly through his coming death on the cross. Christ "yielded his life, an atonement for sin, / and opened the lifegate, that all may go in." Some hymnals shy away from the universalism implied in the last line and alter its pronoun from "all" to "we." After a refrain of exuberant praise, the second stanza continues:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
to every believer the promise of God;  
the vilest offender who truly believes,  
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Again, the original words have been the source of some controversy. Fearing that the last line might be misunderstood to suggest that the "moment" of conversion is all that matters for the Christian life, alternate phrasings appear in some hymnals (and some hymnals omit the second stanza altogether): "The vilest offenders who truly obey / that moment may enter the heavenly way"; "The vilest offender who truly believes, / in faithful obedience, a pardon receives." Regardless of the wording, the first two stanzas focus on the grace by which Jesus' death "redeems" or "buys back" sinners from the forces of evil holding us captive, at the price of Jesus' own blood.

The third stanza celebrates not only Christ's redemptive death but also his life and teachings and the joyous gift his followers are offered in the life to come:

Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,  
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;  
but purer, and higher, and greater will be  
our wonder, our transport, when Jesus we see.

Knowing Fanny Crosby's personal history, it is hard not to hear a special resonance in the final phrase. What "wonder and transport," indeed, to *see* Jesus! When people attempted to commiserate with her about her blindness, her frequent retort was instead to rejoice that the first face she would ever actually *see* would be that of her Savior when she awoke in his presence in heaven.

---

**Regardless of the wording, the first two stanzas focus on the grace by which Jesus' death "redeems" or "buys back" sinners from the forces of evil holding us captive, at the price of Jesus' own blood.**

---

## To God Be the Glory

Even beyond its focus on God's work through Jesus on our behalf, Crosby's hymn exhorts us to work *we* might undertake as a discipline for the season of Lent. The challenge appears not only in the hymn's opening line but also in its refrain:

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the earth hear his voice!  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the people rejoice!  
O come to the Father through Jesus the Son,  
and give him the glory: great things he has done.

Spreading the word of God to all the earth, lifting our voices in praise, our task is to *give God the glory* in all that we say and do.

But we are not simply called to offer praise to God. We are also called to give honor to that which is worthy of honor and to refrain from honoring that which is not. We have already seen how Fanny Crosby shunned any tribute for herself from her hymns, whether refusing to be given more than a few dollars' payment for her texts or using pseudonyms to ward off excessive recognition of her authorship. When she learned that a hymn of hers had been instrumental in someone's conversion to Christ, her response was not to feel pride in her own achievement but—as she told one of her biographers—to "give thanks to God for giving me a share in the glorious work of saving human souls." In short, to *God be the glory*, not to me.

Further, to *God* be the glory, not to any other person or thing. The earliest Christian lists of what came to be known as the seven deadly sins included a sin known as *kenodoxia* in Greek or *vana gloria* in Latin, both of which translate literally into English as “vainglory.” Vainglory is not quite the same thing as vanity, although

activities in themselves. But when they assume *top* priority, when they eclipse the significance of the “great things [God] has taught us, / great things [God] has done” (as we sing in Fanny Crosby’s hymn), then we are challenged to put some effort into reorienting our attention and appreciation.

As Paul writes to the church in Galatia, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:14). No possessions, no accomplishments, no passing fancies deserve the tribute awakened by this one astonishing gift: that God “so loved the world” that Christ “yielded his life an atonement for sin / and opened the lifegate that all may go in.” Or,

---

## When people attempted to commiserate with her about her blindness, her frequent retort was instead to rejoice that the first face she would ever actually see would be that of her Savior when she awoke in his presence in heaven.

---

the concepts have much in common. Vainglory is literally “empty” (*keno, vana*) glory; it is energy wasted by ascribing great worth to that which is not truly worthy. Think of our celebrity culture, in which events affecting the lives of millions take a backseat in the news cycle to star athletes arrested for drunk driving or popular singers photographed in questionable attire. Think of our commercial culture in which advertising ceaselessly appeals to us to purchase newer items with more bells and whistles when what we already own is more than enough for our needs. People and things have taken over as the recipients of glory, eating up our attention while feeding us nothing in return but empty calories. None of us are immune to such distractions.

Yet the demands of the Christian life ask that we cultivate immunity. Suppose we could wear some kind of “attention meter” around our wrists for the remainder of Lent: a meter not to measure our resting and exercising heart rate or the number of calories we have expended in any activity but to measure when our pulse quickens with attention, when our interest is piqued and held by some person or activity or event. What would this “attention meter” tell us about our priorities? Would we get high meter readings during Bible study, prayer, church attendance, participation in service on behalf of our neighbors? Or would our interest more likely spike while watching sporting events or television dramas, listening to favorite music, eating a good meal, exchanging personal stories with a friend? Not that there is anything wrong with any of the latter

to shift to an image from a different hymn writer, Isaac Watts, whose writing next calls for our attention: “All the *vain things* that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.”<sup>8</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Biographical details can be found in Bernard Ruffin, *Fanny Crosby: Heroes of the Faith* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Co., 1976), 91.
2. *Ibid.*, 105.
3. *Ibid.*, 219.
4. *Ibid.*, 41.
5. *Ibid.*, 95.
6. *Ibid.*, 101.
7. *Ibid.*, 148.
8. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” stanza 2. Emphasis mine.

---

*Mary Louise (Mel) Bringle is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Brevard College in North Carolina. Considered one of today’s most gifted hymn text writers, she is past President of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. She served as Chair of the Glory to God hymnal committee.*

*Beverly A. Howard is Professor of Music at California Baptist University and organist at Calvary Presbyterian Church in Riverside, California. She is a former editor of The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song and was a member of the Glory to God hymnal committee.*