

What A Friend We Have In Jesus



By Rob Pue

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I've always had a great interest in music. I enjoy almost all types of music, and music is a wonderful gift from God. The Bible is replete with references to music. In Genesis 4, we read about the first musician, "Jubal," who was the fourth generation from Adam, in the lineage of Cain. Genesis 4:21 tells us that Jubal was *"the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe."* And in Exodus, when God closed the Red Sea after the Israelites passed through it, Moses' sister, Miriam led the Israelite women *"with tambourines and dancing"* as she sang.

Also in the Old Testament, we have the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes, all song-related books. In the New Testament, we read of Jesus and His disciples singing in Matthew 26, the apostles singing in Acts 16, the angels of heaven singing when Jesus was born, recorded in Luke 2, and more song lyrics in Revelation 5, 7 and 15.

Perhaps the most famous musician in Scripture is David. And we read in 1 Samuel 16, *"when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took a harp, and played with his hand: so, Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him."* Yes, music can, indeed soothe the soul, as we praise our Heavenly Father and His Son.

Maybe I'm just too old, but one type of music I really *do not*

like is most of the modern Christian songs, or “Contemporary Christian” music. Today, it’s rare to find a radio station that plays the old hymns. Most carry only “Contemporary Christian” programming.

Most of our churches today have also followed suit, offering “praise choruses” rather than the old hymns that I remember from my youth, growing up in church. And if those old, sacred hymns *are* played in church today, the “praise and worship teams” seem to find it necessary to “modernize” them, jazz them up, and give them a rock beat.

I wish they’d just leave well enough alone. It’s such a joy to hear them sung just the way they were originally written. I think a lot of people would agree with me on that. I’ve been to churches where they try to please everyone in the crowd – doing some rock & roll style “praise and worship” songs and one or two hymns thrown in to appease the old folks. Here’s what I’ve noticed every single time: when the modern songs are performed, everyone is standing – because they’re supposed to – but almost no one is singing. But when the hymns are played, as originally composed, the entire building seems to come alive with everyone singing in unison. Even the young people. And they don’t need the lyrics projected up on a screen either, because they know them. I wish the church bands would see that and stop with all the showmanship.

One of my favorite old hymns was written in 1855 by Joseph Scriven. I’m sure you know it. It’s called “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” I’ll take that any day over the drums and guitars of a modern “praise and worship” song. Because the old hymns of our Christian faith weren’t just emulating secular pop culture songs; they weren’t meant to just touch our emotions as we sing soft-rock “love songs” to Jesus. They were written with deep honor and reverence for God, and they’re richly filled with good theology. Each one is a Bible lesson in itself.

There still are some churches where only those hymns are sung, but they're few and far between now. As one who has a real interest in music, I especially like to know the stories behind the songs...what inspired the writing of the song? What was happening in the songwriter's life that caused him to compose the lyrics? And where did the melody come from? In the case of those old hymns, they were inspired by God Himself, and they still have deep meaning, soothing the soul with rich spiritual truths. I kind of wish that each time one of those old songs is sung, the song leader would tell the story behind it. That's something that is rarely, if ever, done. So, I'd like to do that here.

Joseph Scriven had a life of heartbreak. He lived in Dublin, Ireland and at the age of 25, tragedy struck, as his fiancée drowned in a lake – just one day before they were to be married. I can't imagine the heartbreak...well, actually, I *do* know that heartbreak, and I'll share that with you later. As for Joseph, while still trying to heal from this deep, emotional wound, he decided to immigrate to Canada...he would never see his mother again.

Ten years later, in 1855, he received word that his mother was facing a crisis, so Joseph wrote the poem that became "What A Friend We Have In Jesus," – for her. She was so taken by the beautiful words that she gave it to a friend who had it published anonymously. It quickly became a hymn, though no one knew who had written it, until just before Joseph died.

In the New World, Joseph once again fell in love and was engaged to be married to Eliza Catherine Roche, but tragedy struck again, when Eliza contracted tuberculosis and died in 1860, before the wedding could take place.

Joseph is described as "a man of short stature, with iron-gray hair, close-cropped beard, and light blue eyes that sparkled when he talked." He spent his life in obscurity in Port Hope, Canada, doing ministry work for the Plymouth Brethren and

Baptists. He's remembered for cutting wood for widows and giving away his clothes and money to those in need.

Joseph never did marry, and in October of 1896, he became critically ill. A neighbor tended to him as he lay in bed and it was then that the neighbor asked about the rumor he'd heard that Joseph was the one who had written "What A Friend We Have In Jesus." His reply was, "The Lord and I did it between us."

Shortly thereafter, the delirium of his illness caused him to get out of bed one night and wander outside. There, he staggered and fell into a small creek and drowned at the age of 66. History only tells us that "his grave was arranged so that his feet were opposite those of his lost love, Eliza Catherine Roche, so that at the resurrection, they might arise facing one another."

By all accounts, he was a humble man who endured more heartache and pain than most of us could ever relate to, but rather than become bitter, he poured his life into serving God and serving others. The legacy he leaves behind is this beautiful song that we all know and love today. Next time you hear it, remember the story of its writer, a soft-spoken, humble man called Joseph Scriven.

Let the words he wrote back in 1855 resonate with your heart today. *"What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. Oh, what peace we often forfeit; oh, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

"Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a Friend so faithful, Who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness. Take it to the Lord in prayer.

"Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Savior, still our refuge! Take it to the Lord in prayer. Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer. In His arms He'll take and shield thee. Thou wilt find a solace there."

I wonder how many of us today could maintain such faith and confidence in God, after suffering the loss of a fiancée, traveling to a new country, knowing no one, and never having the means to travel back to visit our dear mother. All Joseph Scriven could do was comfort her in her time of need with a simple poem he wrote and mailed to her. But those words have endured so many generations and continue to inspire so many hearts and souls yet today.

You may not know this, but I, too, lost a fiancée. She was killed in a car wreck – exactly one week before Christmas in 1988. It would be an understatement to say that my soul was in shock and my heart was deeply wounded. I remember going to help her family empty out her apartment, and picking up the Christmas presents she had already wrapped and prepared for me. "Why her, Lord?" The loss was unbearable. I had already written a song for her, several months before that tragic car accident. I'd written several other songs before that too, but never wrote another one. Listening to it after her death, the words I penned for her seem to foretell what eventually happened, but they were still a celebration of her life. In my time of grief, it was music that helped to soothe my soul, and although it wasn't specifically a Christian song, it was what I wrote for my lost love with words I didn't fully understand until after she was gone. Certainly, God had a major role in that.

That dark and sad time in my life prepared me for many more losses and many more challenges and hard times that lay ahead in my future....and through that tragedy, God gave me the training to be able to comfort and minister to others who've had to endure similar things.

Two years later, God blessed me with the love of my life – my wife and I have been married since 1990, and I love her more today than the day we said, “I Do!” God is good.

I doubt I’ll ever write any kind of song that becomes such a powerful hymn of faith and trust in our Lord, but like Joseph, I’ve devoted my life to serving God and serving others, and this is what we should all be doing, whatever our circumstances may be. We should be using whatever gifts and talents the Lord has blessed us with to bless and serve others. We should live quiet, humble lives, and when our souls outgrow these earthly bodies, I pray each of us is remembered for our steadfast faith in the One Who saved us from our sins and our humble service to others in His name.

“What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. Oh, what peace we often forfeit; oh what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”

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