



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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ASH WEDNESDAY  
FAITH SONGS FOR LIFE RHYTHMS

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing:  
Songs of Repentance”  
Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

It could be said that Jesus was out to change the world. He was constantly pointing out how people should do things differently. When you give alms, don't make a public show of it like the hypocrites in the synagogue. Do it quietly and reverently. When you pray, don't be like those folks who stand on the street corner and pray out loud for all to hear. Instead, go into your closet and pray in secret. When you fast, don't make a big show of it, contorting your face as if you are in great agony; rather, wash your face, put on a smile, and go about your business because your fasting is between you and God. And don't invest your money and your soul in earthly things because nothing earthly lasts. Instead, place those things you treasure most in God's hands where they will never be destroyed.

Not that, but this. Not that way, but this way. Not what they say, but what I say. Over and over and over, Jesus was trying to get people to change directions. Your attention has been focused over there, he would say, but now it should be directed here. You have been traveling in that direction, but you ought to be going this way.

Anyone who has ever cared for a two or three year old toddler knows that you spend all of your time turning them around. Danger draws them like a magnet. When a child gets older and when she becomes a teenager, the stakes are higher and the challenge is harder. When we become adults, turning around becomes dramatically difficult. We often go in that direction when we ought to be going this way.

Repentance is what scripture calls this process of turning around. Repentance literally means to be going in one direction, stop, turn around, and go in the opposite direction. It sounds simple, but to most of us, repentance is a bold, scary word. It evokes fear of getting caught doing something wrong and changing our ways immediately before the wrath of God can catch up to us. If we were to pick a hymn that for most of us is synonymous with repentance, I daresay it would be “Just As I Am.”

I am sure there are many in this room tonight who attended revivals or crusades as children or adults and sang 152 stanzas of “Just As I Am” in order to “give the folks in the back plenty of time to make their way down front.”

Just as I am—without one plea,  
But that thy blood was shed for me,  
And that thou bidst me come to thee—  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am—though tossed about  
With many a conflict, many a doubt,  
Fightings and fears within, without—  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.<sup>1</sup>

This song is probably the best-known revival hymn, made popular by Billy Graham who gave his life to Christ during a crusade where this song was sung. By the way, he finally went forward on the last stanza of the hymn! For many people, hearing this hymn means a point of repentance, a time to turn around and go in the other direction. It should be noted, however, that in this song God bids us to come, “just as I am.” It does not insist upon “just as I might be, will be, can be, or should be.” No, this beloved hymn calls us to turn around just as we are now.

Billy Graham himself wrote that the author of the hymn, Charlotte Elliott, was an invalid most of her life. A devoted Christian, she nonetheless felt useless, unworthy, and unhappy because of her condition. In order to combat her depression, she wrote down the reasons she trusted in God. The hymn took shape. She repented. That is, she stopped going in the direction she was headed and turned around to recognize the blessings she enjoyed and the many ways God did enable her to serve.<sup>2</sup>

True repentance is about who we are now, recognizing the bad and the good and trusting our needed changes to God. Like Charlotte Elliott, we need to recognize when we are wasting our lives headed in the wrong direction and turn around instead.

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<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Elliott, “Just As I Am, Without One Plea,” 1835.

<sup>2</sup>Billy Graham, “Just As I Am, Without One Plea,” *Crusader Hymns and Hymn Stories* (Chicago: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1966), 34.

It is not easy to be honest with ourselves. And when we are, we do not always know what to do with what we discover. Like the prodigal son and his older brother, we realize that we are in the wrong place, but we do not always know how to get back to the right place.

John Newton understood this truth firsthand. His mother died when he was six and, after a couple of years in school, he joined his sea captain father on his ship at the age of eleven. His true education was in the subjects of immorality, debauchery, malevolence, and hatred. He spent time in jail and alienated everyone, including his father. It was not until he read Thomas à Kempis' book *The Imitation of Christ* that Newton had his "just as I am" moment. Caught in a violent storm at sea, John Newton thought he was about to die and changed his course in life.

At the age of 39, Newton became a minister and served for fifteen years as pastor at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Olney, England. It was here that he cared for his people and wrote many hymns, one of which is likely the best loved hymn of all time.<sup>3</sup>

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see.

Most of us recoil at that word "wretch." I do. Few of us would ever think of ourselves as being in a "wretched" condition. Yet, I can easily think of wretched things I have done to other people or to myself that put me going in the opposite direction than God wants me to go. If we think about it, all those things we confessed to a little while ago—the things we have done or not done, deafness to the mind of Christ, grieving the Holy Spirit, pride, hypocrisy, impatience, self-indulgence, envy, dishonesty, negligence in prayer, indifference to suffering, prejudice, waste, pollution—all are rather wretched things to do. Newton chose the term "wretch" because it fit him well. The point of the hymn is not how "wretched" we are; rather, it is how gracious God is when we turn and accept God's amazing grace. Newton's hymn helps us to put words to whatever our experience of estrangement from God has been:

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<sup>3</sup>Graham, "Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound," 7-8.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,  
His Word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be,  
As long as life endures.<sup>4</sup>

Repentance need not be wrapped up in fear, for it is the love of God, not God's wrath, which urges us to turn around. Jesus called fishermen, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, women, men, children, religious, and unbelieving to turn around and follow him. And he did it with love and compassion.

Charles Wesley discovered this truth firsthand when he and his brother John were leading a meeting in a small village in Ireland in 1740. As the evening progressed, some of the villagers protested the Wesleys' theology and a riot broke out. A kind farm wife and a convenient spring house provided the brothers with a safe place to hide. During the hours of their refuge, it is said that Charles wrote the hymn "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," a text which expresses every person's need to find safety and hope in the protection of God.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly,  
While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high.  
Hide me, O my Savior, hide, till the storm of life is past;  
Safe into the haven guide; O receive my soul at last.

Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on thee;  
Leave, ah! leave me not alone, still support and comfort me.  
All my trust on thee is stayed, all my help from thee I bring;  
Cover my defenseless head with the shadow of thy wing.

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<sup>4</sup>John Newton, "Amazing Grace," 1779.

<sup>5</sup>*The Story of Fifty Hymns* (Minneapolis: General Mills, Inc., 1939), 60.

Plenteous grace with thee is found, grace to cover all my sin;  
Let the healing streams abound; make and keep me pure within.  
Thou of life the fountain art, freely let me take of thee;  
Spring thou up within my heart; rise to all eternity.<sup>6</sup>

It is often in the songs of our faith that we fully recognize who we are and whose we are. We find words to express our sorrow and remorse for things we have done wrong and for things we have failed to do. We realize that God is our true home and our anchor in the storms of life. And so we sing:

O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

We discover the unfailing love of God, the grace that turns our true repentance into salvation, and the joy of life God intends us to have. It is when we have truly repented that we are able to sing the joy of our faith in God. When we have turned and redirected our path, then we can truly sing:

Come, thou fount of every blessing,  
tune my heart to sing thy grace;  
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,  
call for songs of loudest praise.  
Teach me some melodious sonnet,  
sung by flaming tongues above.  
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,  
mount of thy redeeming love.<sup>7</sup>

Repentance, as Jesus taught, is all about finding our way back to God's redeeming love. Whether we have turned away from it, forgotten it, or simply ignored it, God in Christ calls us to turn around and go in the right direction. And when we do, we will likely travel with a song in our heart. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup>Charles Wesley, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," 1740.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," 1758.