

# HEAR MY SONG

Meditations on life  
through favourite hymns



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## *Introduction*

I love hymns. It's not just because I've presented the BBC Television series *Songs of Praise* for more than twenty years and therefore probably know more hymns than most people have had hot dinners! The fact is I've always loved hymns. I loved singing them in Sunday school and in assembly, and I've loved singing them ever since.

It may be something to do with those unforgettable, stirring melodies – once sung, never forgotten. Who could fail to be moved by Handel's music for 'Thine Be the Glory', or Hubert Parry's 'Jerusalem'? How could you not be touched by the haunting tune for 'Abide with Me' or 'Be Thou My Vision'? Without a doubt, the marriage of words and music can sometimes be so sublime, it's impossible to think of one without the other.

But for me, it's the words that really count. I suppose it's because most hymn verses started off life as poems, often written at times of great inspiration, stress or emotion. It really doesn't matter if the writer was a psalmist putting pen to parchment three thousand years ago or a modern-day writer tapping away on a computer keyboard – the human condition has remained constant. We all recognize the same feelings – whether we're longing for comfort, pro-

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tection, guidance, or just worn down by world-weariness; whether our daily lives have become a struggle, or we can't sleep at night because we are troubled by the problems of what seems to be a heartless world around us. Whatever we're going through, because we're human, we share the same emotions – and it's those emotions that have been expressed in graphic, lyrical, inspirational words by poets and hymn writers down the ages.

When I was growing up, I learned some of the great poems of the English language parrot-fashion in class, and even now most of those lines are still imprinted in my mind. The same goes for hymns. Mostly they are in rhyming couplets, which makes them easy to remember, and in addition we easily recall the music to which the words fit, so we just have to hear that melody again for the words to come flooding back. Sometimes the wording might sound a little strange or even archaic, but the sentiment shines through to strike chords in our own lives.

More than that, the words of so many hymns obviously started life as prayers. Often they are directed straight to God in praise or supplication, and you can imagine that the writers were filled with a sense of prayer as they wrote. On many occasions, writers have said that the words almost wrote themselves, as if by divine gift. Certainly, the conciseness of meaning and the depth of emotion expressed in short lines of verse can make some words simply unforgettable. You'll have your own favourites. But for me, the

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verses in this book have real power to comfort and inspire. Take, for instance, these enduring words, written by Henry Lyte, which speak so evocatively of how helpless we feel at times of great worry:

**Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;**  
the darkness deepens: Lord, with me abide!  
when other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
help of the helpless, O abide with me.

And what encouragement can be found when we are in a dark tunnel of pain and uncertainty from the words George Matheson wrote when he was in the swirls of depression:

**O love that wilt not let me go,**  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
that in thine ocean depths its flow  
may richer, fuller be.

Because these favourites of mine are more than a century old, it's tempting to say, 'They don't write them like that any more' – but they do! Modern-day writers such as Stuart Townend, Dave Bilborough, John Bell and Graham Kendrick are wonderful wordsmiths whose songs are an outpouring of both their humanity and God's divinity, in just the same inspired way as the hymns of writers of years gone by.

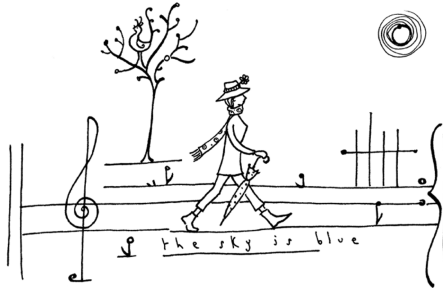
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I like to think of this book as a spiritual first-aid kit. Take a look at the chapter headings, and on days when they seem to express exactly how you feel, dip into the pages and see what speaks to you. You'll find so much that you need here – challenge, comfort, hope, thanks and love. And maybe this book needs another chapter, the one you create yourself. What hymns have stayed with you over the years – and why? Do they bring back heart-warming memories? Do they remind you of emotional times in the past, or periods of particular challenge or fulfilment? Do they give you courage to face difficulty or disappointment? Do they make you think about your responsibilities to God's world and people? Do they give you a clearer picture of what God truly means to you? There are many questions voiced in the lines of these hymns, but so many more answers!

Cherish the hymns you love. Hold them dear. Keep them close to your heart. Draw strength from them – and don't be afraid to let others hear *your* song!

*Pam Rhodes*

## *One more step along the world I go*



There's a little hymn I remember from my school days that often comes to mind nowadays. Do you remember this?

**Glad that I live am I;**  
that the sky is blue;  
glad for the country lanes,  
and the fall of dew.

After the sun the rain,  
after the rain, the sun,  
this is the way of life,  
till the work be done.

(Lizette Woodworth Reese, 1856–1935)

*One more step along the world I go*

Mostly, it's just the first line that pops into my head at certain moments when I find myself feeling grateful just to be here, to have all I have and be what I am. I think of those times as 'Glad that I live am I!' moments – and I look back and count my blessings as I remember each and every one of them. I suppose that's because they are balanced against all the mundane, tiring, upsetting, frustrating or even downright difficult times that seem to fill the rest of each day. Is it just me, or does life generally seem more frantic, more troublesome, more worrying with each succeeding year? For others, of course, it may be quite the opposite – that what worries them is having too much time on their hands as families move away and partnerships or work situations change, perhaps bringing loneliness and a lessening sense of worth. That's why I think those 'Glad that I live am I!' moments are important for all of us, especially as they often happen when you least expect them. For me, such moments come when I'm walking down the lane near home, for instance, and notice first the buds, then the blossom, then the berries in the hedgerow as the seasons change; or when I'm looking at the tiny, perfect fingers of a new grandchild; or getting my shoulders under hot water in a deep, sweet-smelling bath at the end of a long day; or in the company of good friends; or cooking a Sunday roast, then sitting round the table watching the family eat with enthusiasm; or glancing up towards someone I care about, only to find they are already looking

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at me with a loving smile . . . There are so many moments, each mentioned in gratitude in my nightly prayers, then stored away in the warmest corner of my heart.

But for most of us, those heart-warming moments are fleeting in comparison with the ordinary stuff of life – work, bills, family, health, disputes, politics, the environment – all those worries that exhaust us by day, then keep us awake at night. It is those concerns that often make up a very long list of requests that we pour out to God in our prayers.

So in this chapter, I think we should recognize and value all the blessings of life – the obvious and significant alongside the most menial and everyday. For challenges that threaten to defeat us, we can pray for God’s understanding and support – before we stand back to see the bigger picture, the rough and the smooth of our lives, and thank God for every glorious second.



**Fill Thou My Life, O Lord My God**

Praise in the common things of life,  
its goings out and in;  
praise in each duty and each deed,  
however small and mean.

(Horatius Bonar, 1808–89)

*One more step along the world I go*

This small verse, written by Horatius Bonar, who was a founder member of the Free Church of Scotland, sums up that sense of being thankful for even the most humble aspects of our lives, and wanting to show gratitude by doing our best with every task and situation, even those we don't enjoy much! That's a tall order because it would take nothing less than a saint to be humble and grateful for everything every day – but the sentiment is a good one because, whatever the challenges of your life, would you really prefer not to have had the gift of life at all? Life *is* a gift, and once given, it's ours to make what we want of it. That's the choice God allows us. Some days will be better than others. Some things may irritate or hurt us, but others bring us great pleasure. The secret is to value it all, treasure every precious moment because you have no idea how long – or short – your life is destined to be.



**Lord of All Hopefulness, Lord of All Joy**

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,  
whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,  
be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,  
your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.

(Jan Struther, 1901–53)

*One more step along the world I go*

Jan Struther, also known by her Polish maiden name of Joyce Placzek, became well known at the start of the Second World War for writing the book *Mrs Miniver*, which was made into an inspirational and popular film. Then she turned her hand to writing hymn texts for the brand-new hymn book, *Songs of Praise*, which became a national favourite. She wrote words for well-known melodies – and her idea for the traditional tune ‘Slane’ was a hymn that tracked each day, from the moment we wake up hoping for God’s bliss; then through the verse shown here, which asks for strength during our working hours; then God’s love, hoped for in the welcome of our home-coming; and, lastly, for God’s peace in our hearts at the end of the day.

I’ve chosen verse 2 because it’s good to think that Christ can truly understand the challenges of our day. After all, he’s been here too. He put in long hours as a carpenter. He needed skill, dedication and strength to get through every working day – and no doubt came home exhausted, just like us!



*One more step along the world I go*

**When morning gilds the skies,**  
my heart awaking cries,  
    may Jesus Christ be praised:  
alike at work and prayer  
to Jesus I repair;  
    may Jesus Christ be praised.

(German hymn, author unknown,  
trans. Edward Caswall, 1814–78)

Because the human experience hasn't changed much down the years, whether the writer is a psalmist three thousand years ago or someone writing only yesterday, the wish to dedicate our time and talent to God is a recurring theme in hymn texts. Down the years, writers have wanted to express the simple joy of being co-workers with God in the business of life and the needs of the world around us. Edward Caswall was inspired to write his much-loved hymn when he discovered an earlier anonymous German poem that speaks of a wish to live and work for Christ as an expression of daily prayer.

Writing almost a century earlier, Charles Wesley shared his heartfelt prayer that everything he spoke, thought or worked to create should be done in praise of God. These verses emphasize the joy and dignity that can be found in our daily work and responsibilities.

*One more step along the world I go*

### **O Thou Who Camest from Above**

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire  
to work, and speak, and think for thee;  
still let me guard the holy fire,  
and still stir up thy gift in me.

(Charles Wesley, 1707–88)



### **Brighten the Corner**

Do not wait until some deed of greatness you may do,  
do not wait to shed your light afar;  
to the many duties ever near you now be true,  
brighten the corner where you are.

*Someone far from harbour you may guide across the bar;  
brighten the corner where you are!*

(Ina Duley Ogdon, b. 1877)

Ina Ogdon wrote these words in a fit of pique. She was known as a talented speaker, and in 1913 was invited to undertake a prestigious speaking tour when calamity

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struck. Her father was involved in a car crash – and with great resentment, she agreed to cancel her tour in order to nurse him. Because she felt angry with God for allowing the tragedy to happen, she was bad-tempered with her father – until she stopped to think about how unkind she was being. She made a conscious decision to do whatever was needed in good heart to help her father recover, and be true to ‘the many duties ever near’. Her words were teamed with a lilting melody, and the resulting hymn was chosen as the theme song for a major evangelical campaign in the States, which meant that her simple commitment of resolve and loving duty, although born out of disappointment and resentment, became dear to many.



### **A Touching Place**

Feel for the people we most avoid.  
Strange or bereaved or never employed;  
feel for the women, and feel for the men  
who fear that their living is all in vain.

*One more step along the world I go*

*To the lost Christ shows his face;  
to the unloved he gives his embrace;  
to those who cry in pain or disgrace,  
Christ makes, with his friends, a touching place.*

(John Bell and Graham Maule, b. 1949 and 1958)

However bad certain times in our lives may seem, they're unlikely to be as desperate as the people and situations described in this uncompromising hymn. I first heard it in Glasgow, which is where John Bell, a charismatic and inspirational worship leader of the Iona Community, has been based for years. That's a city in which he will have seen much sorrow, abuse and prejudice – and he's captured it all in these moving words, which challenge us to respond with compassion and Christian love to those whose lives are troubled. The everyday existence that John and his co-writer Graham describe may bear little resemblance to the comfortable, secure lives most of us lead – but this hymn spells out the painful experiences of many, and moves us to show fellowship however we can in ways that are practical and caring.



*One more step along the world I go*

### **Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You**

We are pilgrims on a journey,  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

(Richard Gillard, b. 1953)

Richard Gillard, who's a songwriter and worship leader in New Zealand, takes up the idea of pilgrimage in this much-loved hymn, which recognizes that whoever we are, whatever our talents or challenges, we're all human beings on the same walk of life. How much easier it would be if we could really think of everyone around us as fellow pilgrims and companions, helping one another to bear the load – less 'me', more 'we'!

But it's the last two lines that impress me the most. It's all too easy to be bountiful, bestowing your care on those you recognize are in need. It makes you feel good to give your service to others. It's much harder to accept *their* need to give too. Knowing how to *receive* with grace is also a

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gift you can give others, one that allows dignity and acknowledgement for both parties.



**One More Step Along the World I Go**

Give me courage when the world is rough,  
keep me loving though the world is tough;  
leap and sing in all I do,  
keep me travelling along with you:

*And it's from the old I travel to the new;  
keep me travelling along with you.*

(Sydney Carter, 1915–2004)

We're inclined to think of this as a children's song, but I think the deceptively simple language softens a meaningful message. It's adults who, with maturity, recognize just how tough the world can be, and how much courage and resilience may be needed simply to keep going. I have a suggestion though: when you're heading somewhere you really don't want to go, try singing these words and their jaunty melody to yourself. I always find they give me the confidence to keep on track!



*One more step along the world I go*

Mostly, it's just the first line that pops into my head at certain moments when I find myself feeling grateful just to be here, to have all I have and be what I am. I think of those times as 'Glad that I live am I!' moments – and I look back and count my blessings as I remember each and every one of them. I suppose that's because they are balanced against all the mundane, tiring, upsetting, frustrating or even downright difficult times that seem to fill the rest of each day. Is it just me, or does life generally seem more frantic, more troublesome, more worrying with each succeeding year? For others, of course, it may be quite the opposite – that what worries them is having too much time on their hands as families move away and partnerships or work situations change, perhaps bringing loneliness and a lessening sense of worth. That's why I think those 'Glad that I live am I!' moments are important for all of us, especially as they often happen when you least expect them. For me, such moments come when I'm walking down the lane near home, for instance, and notice first the buds, then the blossom, then the berries in the hedgerow as the seasons change; or when I'm looking at the tiny, perfect fingers of a new grandchild; or getting my shoulders under hot water in a deep, sweet-smelling bath at the end of a long day; or in the company of good friends; or cooking a Sunday roast, then sitting round the table watching the family eat with enthusiasm; or glancing up towards someone I care about, only to find they are already looking