



Parish of Finchampstead and California

HYMN FOR THE WEEK

18 - 23 MAY 2020

Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia

Background to the hymn

Of the major feast days of the Christian calendar, the Ascension is probably the least celebrated, partly because it always falls on a Thursday and has never been established in the UK as a public holiday. And it raises difficult questions about what happened, how it happened, and the extent to which what we take to be scientific norms were suspended. Charles Wesley's great Ascension hymn takes as its starting point the accounts of the Ascension in Luke and Acts, situating us as we sing or read it with the disciples on the mountain. As with all Wesley's hymns it is infused with Biblical quotes and allusions, some of which are highlighted in the comments which follow. These comments are based on the original 10 verse hymn, which is a carefully constructed whole; the implications of subsequent changes resulting in the more familiar and shorter versions in many modern hymnbooks are discussed separately. It's worth noting how verses 1 to 6 emphasise the glorification of Jesus which the Ascension heralds while verses 7 to 10 consider the implications of this for us as Christians.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Charles Wesley, M.A. 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. After education at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, he was ordained as an Anglican clergyman shortly before travelling with his brother John to Georgia in 1735. He returned to England the following year and in 1738 had a 'conversion' experience when he "found rest to his soul." After a short curacy in Islington his ministry was identified with that of his brother John, and he became an indefatigable itinerant preacher. After his marriage in 1749 he was usually accompanied by his wife Sarah. He wrote hymns throughout his life - some 6,500 in all. Many of these hymns were focused on aspects of Christian doctrine and faith or on Biblical events, but others were much more personal (his conversion and marriage) or related to current events. Bristol was his base for many years until he returned to London in 1771. He was troubled by the relations of Methodism to the Church of England, and strongly disapproved of his brother John's ordinations. Though he expressed his disapproval in the most outspoken fashion, the differences between the brothers never led to a breach of friendship. When he died he was buried in Marylebone churchyard rather than in the burial-ground of the City Road Chapel; he 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."

As written by Charles Wesley (1739)

1 Hail the day that sees him rise,
Ravish'd from our wishful eyes;
Christ awhile to mortals giv'n,
Re-ascends his native heav'n!

2 There the pompous triumph waits,
"Lift your heads, eternal gates,
Wide unfold the radiant scene,
Take the King of Glory in!"

3 Circled round with angel powers,
Their triumphant Lord, and ours,
Conqueror over death and sin,
Take the King of Glory in!

4 Him tho' highest heaven receives,
Still he loves the earth he leaves;
Tho' returning to his throne,
Still he calls mankind his own.

5 See! He lifts his hands above!
See! He shews the prints of love!
Hark! His gracious lips bestow
Blessings on his church below!

6 Still for us his death he pleads;
Prevalent, he intercedes;
Near himself prepares our place,
Harbinger of human race.

7 Master, (will we ever say)
Taken from our head to-day;
See thy faithful servants, see!
Ever gazing up to thee.

8 Grant, tho' parted from our sight,
High above yon azure height,
Grant our hearts may thither rise,
Following thee beyond the skies.

9 Ever upward let us move,
Wafted on the wings of love,
Looking when our Lord shall come,
Longing, gasping after home.

10 There we shall with thee remain,
Partners of thy endless reign,
There thy face unclouded see,
Find our heav'n of heav'ns in thee!

The Alleluias at the end of each line, which are such an important feature when this hymn is sung, but which were not introduced until 1852, are omitted in both versions.

Hymns Old and New (2008)*

1 Hail the day that sees him rise,
To his throne above the skies;
Christ the Lamb, for sinners giv'n,
Enters now his highest heaven!

2 There for him high triumph waits,
"Lift your heads, eternal gates,
He hath conquered death and sin,
Take the King of Glory in!"

3 Circled round with angel powers,
Their triumphant Lord and ours,
Wide unfold the radiant scene,
Take the King of Glory in!

4 Lo, the heaven its Lord receives,
Yet he loves the earth he leaves;
Tho' returning to his throne,
Calls the human race his own.

5 See! He lifts his hands above!
See! He shows the prints of love!
Hark! His gracious lips bestow
Blessings on his church below!

6 Still for us he intercedes;
His prevailing death he pleads;
Near himself prepares our place,
He the first-fruits of our race.

7 Lord, tho' parted from our sight,
Far above the starry height,
Grant our hearts may thither rise,
Following thee above the skies.

8 Ever upward let us move,
Wafted on the wings of love,
Looking when our Lord shall come,
Longing, sighing after home.

** Changes from Wesley's original version are underlined. With the exception of v5 line 4 and the omission of Wesley's final verse, all these changes were made in successive versions of Hymns Ancient and Modern.*

Comments

Verse 1 sets the scene as we join the first disciples at the time of Jesus' ascension. *Ravish'd* means taken from sight and in this usage has no hint of the sexual overtones we might read into the word nowadays. *Wishful sight* reflects the disciples' *looking up towards heaven* (Acts 1:11). Line 3 emphasises the temporary nature of Christ's time in the world, line 4 that his permanent location is heaven.

Verse 2 and 3 are strongly informed by Psalm 24:7 & 9, not only in content (Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in), but also in structure with the repeated final line, *Take the King of Glory in. Pompous* in verse 2 line 1 meant *magnificent*, not *self-important*. *Triumph* conjures up the Roman spectacle of the victorious general returning home; Jesus' victory is made explicit in Colossians 2:15. Verse 2 line 3 (*Wide unfold ...*) and verse 3 lines 1-2 have echoes of the heavenly scenes around the throne in Revelation (eg 4:1-2; 5:11-12).

Highest heaven (verse 4 line 1) seems to imply a hierarchy of heavenly heights, emphasising not only the extent of Jesus' exaltation (see Ephesians 4:9-10; Hebrews 7:26), but the degree of separation from *the earth he leaves* (line 2). Yet his continuing connection with humanity overcomes this apparent distance, reflecting in a few words key elements of the farewell discourses in John's Gospel (eg 13:1).

Then in verse 5 Wesley inserts some down-to-earth imperatives: See! See! Hark! *Lifts his hands* in the traditional Ascension posture, mirroring the crucifixion. *The prints of love* - the evidence of resurrection offered to Thomas (John 20:27). Lines 3&4 describe how he puts into practice his nurturing of his followers (see Ephesians 4:11 and encouragement to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia in Revelation 2:8-11 and 3:7-13).

And while he does that, he continues also (verse 6 lines 1&2) to plead our case with God the Father (Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2). *Prevalent* means *Having prevailed* (over death and sin). *Prepares our place* reflects John 14:2-3 (*Where I am, there you may be also*). *Harbinger* means *forerunner* or *one who has gone before* (see Hebrews 6:20).

From verse 7, with its change of tone almost to a conversational style in line 1, the hymn takes us back imaginatively to our standing with the original disciples on the mountain (as in verse 1 line 2), and explores the implications of that for our lives. In simple terms it's about aligning our hearts towards our exalted Lord (verse 8 line 3) and looking forward singlemindedly to the time when we *find our heav'n of heav'ns* in him (verse 10 line 4).

Looking when our Lord shall come (verse 9 line 3) - see 1 Thessalonians 4:15. *Longing, gasping after home* (verse 9 line 4) - the intensity of feeling here reflects that of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8.

Thy face unclouded see (verse 10 line 3) - see 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.

Subsequent changes to the hymn

The comments in this section are quite detailed and may try the patience of some readers - please feel free to skip them. I've included them to show how the updating of old hymns is rarely a neutral exercise - almost always it has theological implications as well as stylistic ones.

Some changes really needed to be made, for example where Wesley used words that were no longer in common use even a hundred years later. But later editors have not always taken care to preserve Wesley's precise structure and meaning (as in verse 1), and a few of their changes seem arbitrary.

Verse 1: *Ravish'd* and *wishful* needed replacing, but there was no need to alter line 2 so comprehensively away from the disciples' and our experience of the Ascension. Similarly lines 3 & 4 change the sense from Jesus' temporary incarnation and return to heaven to atonement (*the Lamb, for sinners giv'n*) and implied heavenly reward.

Verses 2 & 3: *Pompous* also needed to be replaced but removing *the* and inserting an adjective (*high*) before *triumph* turns Wesley's very specific reference to a Roman Triumph into a weaker generality. And I can see no reason at all to swap line 3 in verse 2 with line 3 in verse 3!

Verse 4: Wesley's line 1 (*Him tho' ...*) is inelegant and the rewording is justified (though *Lo* is an archaism). Line 4 is a 21st century change to avoid *mankind*, but a valid one since Wesley himself uses *human race* in verse 6.

Verse 6: Lines 1&2 - A good change to avoid using *prevalent* without altering the sense. Line 4 - *Harbinger* needs replacing but *first-fruits* is not a synonym - Paul uses *first-fruits* in a very specific way in relation to Jesus' resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20&23); again the editors introduce an idea which is not there in Wesley's hymn.

Verse 7, as noted above, is somewhat unconventional, but omitting it prevents Wesley's intended change of emphasis at this point being realised.

Verse 8: Line 2 - *Yon* could have been replaced by *the*. Changing *azure* to *starry* summons up a night-time image in place of the day-time blue sky, thereby again distancing us from Wesley's plan that we see ourselves as witnesses to the Ascension.

Verse 9: Line 4 - why exchange the desperation of *gasping* for the sentimentality of *sighing*?

Omission of verse 10 deprives the hymn of Wesley's fine climax.

Where to find the hymn

There are quite a few versions, including instrumental ones, on YouTube. If you put *Hail the day that sees him rise* into your browser you should find a reasonable selection. Some of them stick to Wesley's words, though I haven't found one which uses all 10 of his verses. The tune is usually Llanfair.

Try: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7b_ODz_jgTs (5 verses using mainly Wesley's original words; choir and organ; words displayed)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjofDCZlyRY> (amended words; choir and organ; words displayed; very slow)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTJjQn-TtU8> (5 verses using Wesley's original words; soloist and instrumental in the style of a Georgian gallery hymn; words not displayed; fast)