

Once to Every Man And Nation

A Challenge To Christians And A Dying World.

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by for ever
'Twixt that darkness and that light.

By the light of burning martyrs
Jesus' bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever
With the cross that turns not back;
New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
Truth forever on the scaffold.
Wrong forever on the throne.
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above his own.

1. Background Behind The Song

James Russell Lowell was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1819. Judging from the content of his writing and the fact that his father was a minister, it is clear that he received a good bit of instruction from the Bible during his childhood. He received his education at Harvard and sat for the bar. Then he chose to make his career in literature. As a literary writer, he tackled many political and spiritual subjects. His political feelings were not all talk, and he did his part by serving as an American diplomat overseas to other countries.

The fact that Lowell spent a bit of time with Ralph Waldo Emerson during his later years as a student at Harvard should cause us to carefully check out his theology. But it is clear that he did not agree with Emerson's transcendental views:

James Russell Lowell, like Whittier, was an avid poetic spokesman for various reforms in the nineteenth century. Unlike the rest of the New England School, Lowell was highly influential also through his prose. His 1865 essay on the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, in fact, destroyed Thoreau's reputation for the rest of the century. (BJU Press, *American Literature for Christian Schools*, BJU Press, Greenville, SC, 1991,1994, p. 184)

Some interesting thoughts can also be gained by examining his song in two hymn history books:

In 1845, at the same time Abraham Lincoln was opposing in Congress the agitators for a war with Mexico, the famed poet James Russell Lowell was using his talent to speak out against what he thought was the plan of slave-holding states to gain more territory. It was a ninety-line poem, later reduced to thirty-two lines, which became one of the strongest hymns challenging the national righteousness ever printed. (Helen Salem Rizk, *Stories of the Christian Hymns*, Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 31)

Although Lowell's writing was inspired by political conditions in our nation 135 years ago, the hymn is valid for today. The *strife of truth with falsehood* continues, and we need to be reminded of what this hymn says (William J. Reynolds, *Songs of Glory, Stories of 300 Great Hymns and Gospel Songs*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990, p. 222)

Many of his poems contain strong spiritual themes. In the *First Snowfall*, he addresses the situation of a dead child and how God is still present and comforting:

I thought of a mound in sweet Auburn
Where a little headstone stood;
How the flakes were folding it gently
As did the robins the babes in the wood.

Up spoke our own little Mabel,
Saying, "Father, who makes it snow?"
And I told of the good all-Father
Who cares for us here below.

Again I looked at the snow-fall
And thought of the leaden sky
That arched o'er our first great sorrow
When that mound was heaped so high.

I remembered the gradual patience
That fell from that cloud-like snow,
Flake by flake, healing and hiding
The scar of our deep-plunged woe.

And again to the child I whispered,
"The snow that husheth all,
Darling, the merciful Father
Alone can make it fall!"

Then, with eyes that saw not, I kissed her;
And she, kissing back could not know
That my kiss was given to her sister,
Folded close under deepening snow. (Hazel Felleman, *The Best
Loved Poems of the American People*, Doubleday, New York,
1936, p. 244-245)

In a *Fable for Critics*, Lowell is evaluating the writers of his day. The evaluation he does of himself is very telling:

There is Lowell, who's striving Parnassus to climb
With a whole bale of isms tied together with rhyme,
He might get on alone, spite of brambles and boulders,
But he can't with that bundle* he has on his shoulders
The top of the hill he will ne' er come nigh reaching
Till he learns the distinction 'twix singing and preaching;
His lyre has some chords that would ring pretty well,
But he'd rather by half make a drum of the shell,
And rattle away till he's old as Methusalem,
At the head of a march to the last new Jerusalem. (BJU Press,
American Literature for Christian Schools, BJU Press, Greenville,
SC, 1991,1994, p. 186)

Although the above does not specifically state that he is a Christian, the following excerpt from the end of *A Years Life* is a little less vague:

The poet now his guide hath found, And follows in the steps of
Love. (<http://famousamericans.net/jamesrusselllowell/>)

I think the following excerpt from a biographical sketch of Lowell gives a good picture of what many of his poems (and this one in particular) were aimed at:

No man was more thoroughly imbued than he with the fundamental principles of American democracy--a democracy without demagoguism--no man more jealous than he of the untarnished reputation of America in politics and literature, no man more quick to see any departure from the high ideal of the republic, and his flaming pen was turned to attack whatever assailed this ideal--at one time slavery, at another time vicious political methods threatening the purity of democratic society. His radicalism was always conservative, his criticism always constructive. (<http://famousamericans.net/jamesrusselllowell/>)

It appears that the writer of this hymn had strong convictions spiritually which rolled over into strong outspoken political beliefs. This song was originally written in protest of a war that was seen as unjust and something that would advance the spread of slavery. Thus, it would seem to fit in very well with a patriotic CD advocating liberty and justice for all. His challenge to us is to choose the hard path and to stand up for what is right.

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

2. God’s New Messiah

After challenging us to make a decision between truth and falsehood, good and evil, the songwriter clarifies the decision even more. It all has to do with “God’s new Messiah,” and based on how we respond to him, we will either reap “bloom or blight.”

Why would the Messiah be called new? At first glance, this can seem a bit blasphemous or theologically incorrect. However, Israel was expecting the Messiah to come as a conquering king. But could it not be that God sent a new (or different from what was expected) Messiah, who came as a baby born in a lowly stable?

The song could also be implying that the first “messiah” (or way to salvation) was the atoning sacrifice of a lamb offered on the altar. The new Messiah would be God’s Son come to permanently and once and for all pay the price for our sins.

We must be careful that we do not take allegories out of context or they can be deceiving. It is clear from the rest of the song that there is only one right and wrong, only one truth, and ultimately only one Messiah and correct choice in life. “God’s new Messiah” clearly represents a new life, a new law, a new freedom and a new hope for a dying world.

“Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”
(II Corinthians 5:17)

3. New Calvaries

After presenting the choice between good and evil, the lyrics graphically portray the cost of choosing what is good. It says “By the light of burning martyrs, Jesus bleeding feet I track, Toiling up new calvaries ever, With the cross that turns not back.” Wow, following Jesus requires sacrifice. For many, it even cost them their lives. Jesus only had to go up Calvary once. But the allegory for us is that we must take up our cross and go up our “calvaries” (trials) many times. Each time, God is able to teach us new lessons, as in each area we die to a different part of ourselves and give Him complete control.

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.’”
(Matthew 16:24)

“We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.”
(II Corinthians 4:8–11)

4. New Occasions Teach New Duties

After sharing of the sacrifice in taking up our cross, the writer states that “New occasions teach new duties.” Why does God continually give us new challenges (often in the form of new occasions or circumstances)? It is so that we will continue to grow and learn. As we take advantage of these opportunities, we will mature in our Christian walk. Then God will hold us responsible for what we do with what He has taught us. Thus, as new occasions come along, we learn more and are responsible for more.

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”
(Romans 8:28)

“But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.”
(II Peter 3:18)

5. Time Makes Ancient Good Uncouth

The song boldly states that “Time makes ancient good uncouth.” How can time make what was once good become bad? Although right and wrong never change, man is constantly challenging God’s laws, which are written in the heart. The definition of good is thus changed by cultures, in order to help them appease their nagging conscience, as they try to convince themselves that what they are doing is right. God’s ways and laws are seen as barbaric and restricting to our culture, where every man does what is right in his own eyes.

“For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.”
(Romans 2:14–15)

“In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”
(Judges 17:6)

6. Keeping Abreast Of Truth

After explaining that over time, men have come to call good bad and bad good, the song states that “They must upward, still and onward, Who would keep abreast of truth.” Again does truth change? No, but if you want to find truth, you must be constantly fighting upwards through the shrouds of “truth” until you finally reach the real thing. At this point, we have to fight to stay in line with the truth not because the truth is moving, but because as human beings, we are constantly being drawn by the world.

“For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.” (Romans 7:22-25)

7. Keeping Watch Above His Own

The song ends by saying “And behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above his own.” This is such a comforting ending for us as Christians. Although we know what is going to happen at the end of time, what happens between now and then is dim and unknown and perhaps even frightening to us. Although at times we cannot see God through the shadows, we can be sure that He is always there. He may at times watch and allow us to stumble due to our own choices. But as a good parent, He watches out for us and is working through all of our circumstances for our good.

“I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” (Psalms 37:2)

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.” (Psalm 46:1-3)