

Sing Those Old Hymns With Feeling!

(This play is supposed to start like a normal worship service. Announcements should be done at the beginning, as well as any other church business. Amy then gets up, and she is decidedly lacking in energy and enthusiasm. She halfheartedly tells the congregation to stand and sing “Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus.” The song begins and is decidedly not inspirational. After just a few words into the song, Chris stands up, exasperated.)

Chris: (In a loud voice, motioning for the singing to stop) Stop. STOP. STOP!!!!

Amy: (Confused. This is the first spark of life we have seen in her.) What’s the matter?

Chris: This...all this... is the matter. Where’s the spirit? Where’s the enthusiasm? This hymn is about trusting in our Lord. Why are you singing it like a dead woman?

Amy: (Insulted) Well...I...I...just...Well I never!

Chris: I’m sorry, Amy. I don’t mean to offend you, but I just can’t stand it when a wonderful hymn like this is sung like a funeral dirge.

Amy: (A bit mollified) But it’s an old song. I’ve sung it a hundred times before, and quite frankly, it’s like a Disney song. It’s happy and trite.

Chris: Really? Do you know who wrote this hymn?

Amy: No.

Chris: Her name was Louisa Stead.

Amy: Okay....

Chris: Do you know why she wrote the song?

Amy: Her church needed something to sing on Sunday?

Chris: Wow. You are cynical, aren’t you? Let me tell you why she truly understands how sweet it is to Trust in Jesus.

(The lights fade to black. Amy and Chris back off to one side, and a tight center spot comes up to reveal Patti.)

Patti: My name is Lily Stead. I’m nobody special. Just a woman who tries to follow the Lord as well as I can. I do know a special woman, though. (a big smile) My mother, Louisa. My earliest memories are filled with her. Her wonderful smile. The love that I could feel radiating from her. The way she and my father looked at each other. I had the perfect mother and the perfect family.

One day, we decided to go out to Long Island for a picnic. It was a gorgeous sunny day, and my mother had packed a wonderful lunch. After I had exhausted myself playing near the shore, we ate far too much food. We all laid back on the blanket to relax, and then suddenly, there was a scream. We all bolted upright, and my father saw a young child drowning in the ocean. He didn't hesitate. He ran right into the waves to save the poor child. I remember being so proud that my father was the only one brave enough to do that. Then my pride turned to horror. My father ended up drowning as he saved the child.

In an instant, my life was radically changed. My father was gone. Completely gone. I couldn't believe it. We had his funeral. We buried him. And I still couldn't believe it. He was my father. He was supposed to always be there for me. Now he was gone.

Unfortunately, that was just the beginning. My mother couldn't get any work, so we had no way to support ourselves. We lived entirely off the kindness of strangers. So often I would ask my mother, "What are we going to eat tonight? There's nothing in the kitchen." She would smile and say, "Trust in Jesus, dear. He will provide." And you know what? He always did. Sometimes, my mother would set the table for a meal even though there was no food. She would tell me to get ready for dinner, even though there was nothing to eat. She would even sit me down at the table and thank Jesus for the food that He was *going to* provide. Then there would be a knock at the door, and a basket of food would be sitting on our stoop. There wouldn't be any explanation – just a basket of food.

When I got a little older, my mother said that she thought God was calling us to South Africa to be missionaries. I asked her why. She told me that she always wanted to be a missionary, but she thought her poor health (she was always very frail) would make it impossible. She said that she realized after trusting in Jesus ever since my father died, she could trust in Jesus to keep her health from getting in the way of being a missionary.

I was quiet for a little while and then I asked her something I had been thinking about for a long time. I asked her, "If daddy hadn't died, would you be able to trust Jesus the way you do now?" She didn't hesitate. She said, "Absolutely not." She said she wished my father hadn't died, but there was some good that came out of the tragedy, and one of those good things was that she had learned how to really trust in Jesus. Then she showed me a poem she wrote: "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus."

(The lights go down. Patti leaves, Chris and Amy come back to where they were.)

Chris: Do you still think it's a Disney song.

Amy: (visibly affected) I...I had no idea.

Chris: Louisa Stead knew what it really means to trust in Jesus, and she found it sweet. The hymn should be sung like that.

Amy: (She turns to the congregation as a completely new worship leader.) Let's all stand and sing that wonderful hymn like we all know what it means to really trust in Jesus!
(Amy leads the congregation in the hymn. Chris goes back to his seat, and Amy doesn't notice. At the end, Amy turns to where Chris was.)

Amy: How was that? Wait... (looking around) where are you? Chris?

Chris: (From his seat) I'm back here, Amy.

Amy: (Confused) Why?

Chris: You led the hymn wonderfully. My job here is done.

Amy: (Disappointed) But I want to hear more.

Chris: More about what?

Amy: More about how the hymns that we sing were written.

Chris: (Coming back up). Okay. Let me see. There are so many wonderful hymns to choose from. Do you know "It Is Well with My Soul"?

Amy: Yes, of course.

Chris: Do you know who wrote it?

Amy: No, of course not.

Chris: His name was Horatio Spafford.

Amy: (smiling) You're making that up, aren't you?

Chris: (annoyed) No. He is a model of how every Christian should deal with tragedy.

(The lights fade to black. Amy and Chris back off to one side, and a tight center spot comes up to reveal Jay.)

Jay: You probably haven't heard of me. That's okay. I used to be a lawyer and businessman in Chicago. I was really successful, but more importantly, I was truly blessed. God gave me a wonderful family: a saintly wife, a brilliant son, and four beautiful daughters. We were all dedicated to serving the Lord. We worked in the soup kitchens and helped the poor. We were very active in our church and in the ministry of D. L. Moody. Life was nearly perfect.

Then my little boy was struck by Scarlet Fever. We all prayed for him. Our church prayed for him. Our friends prayed for him...but he died anyway. We buried him, and we took comfort in the Lord. Then came the Chicago fire. Thankfully, we didn't lose anyone dear in the fire, but I

was heavily invested in Chicago's real estate. We lost everything. My family started eating in the soup kitchens that we used to serve in.

However, God was faithful. My law business slowly picked up, and soon, we were able to recover financially. Once we could live without the help of others, I made myself a promise. You see, it was always my wife's dream to visit England. However, every time we had saved enough money to go, some need would arise in the community, in the church, or in the Moody ministry. And my saintly wife would put aside her dream and use the money we had saved to meet that need. I decided that was never going to happen again. As soon as we saved enough money, I booked a trip to England.

At the last minute, some business came up that I couldn't put off, but I didn't want my wife to put her dream on hold any longer. I told her to take our daughters and go to England. I would get on the next ship as soon as I was done and meet them there. So I took them down to the pier, watched them board the ship, waved goodbye, and went back to the office.

A few days later, I was sitting in my office finishing up my business, anxious to leave. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. I opened the door to find a messenger standing there. He told me that the ship my wife and daughters were on had capsized. He handed me a telegram. It was from my wife. It had two words on it. "Saved Alone." My daughters. My four lovely daughters. They were all dead.

I took the next ship to England to comfort my grieving wife. It was a terrible voyage. I spent almost the entire trip in my cramped little room, trying to figure out why God would allow so much tragedy in my life. My son, my daughters, my business. Why did God allow all that to happen? Hadn't we served Him faithfully over the years? Is this the way He rewards His servants?

After a couple of days, the captain himself came to my door. He told me that by his reckoning, we were over the very spot where my family's ship had capsized. He thought I should know that. I immediately ran to the deck and looked out on the ocean. The watery grave that held my beautiful daughters.

I can't explain to you the rush of emotions I felt. I was sad. I was angry. I was horrified. I was nearly out of my mind. I stayed there for a long time, yelling at God, crying out to him, and begging him for some explanation. Then suddenly, everything changed. I calmly went back to my cabin, sat down, took out pen and paper, and I began to write. When I was done, I had a poem that explained everything. Today, people call it a hymn: "It Is Well with My Soul."

(The spot goes out, Jay leaves, Chris and Amy move back to where they were, and the lights come up.)

Amy: Wow. What an amazing man.

Chris: I think Horatio would say, "What an amazing Lord."

Amy: Absolutely. (Turning to the congregation) Let's sing "It Is Well with My Soul."

(She leads the congregation in singing the hymn.)

Amy: (turning to Chris) Okay...let's hear another one.

Chris: Well...let's see...

Amy: Wait...can I make a request?

Chris: Sure.

Amy: No deaths this time? Both of the stories you told me are amazing, but at the same time, they're really depressing. Do you have a story that is a little...happier?

Chris: Well...some of the greatest hymns of the Christian faith were born out of tragedy, but not all of them. Take "His Eye is on the Sparrow," for example. It was written by Civilla Martin in response to an inspirational friend of hers.

(The lights fade to black. Amy and Chris back off to one side, and a tight center spot comes up to reveal Patti.)

Patti: My husband, Walter Martin, was an evangelist, so we travelled all over the U.S. He preached the word of the Lord, and I helped out however I could. Back in the spring of 1905, we were in Elmira, New York. We were talking to the pastor of the church in which my husband had just preached, and he kept referring to a couple he called the "Doolittles." It seemed like every time someone had a problem, they went to the Doolittles for inspiration. As the conversation went on, I came to realize that the Doolittles were the most influential couple in the congregation...more so than even the pastor and his wife.

I asked if the Doolittles had been at the service, and the pastor said, "No. They can't attend services." I was a bit confused, so I asked, "Is there any way we could meet them?" The pastor was instantly delighted. He said, "They would love to meet you."

He took us to an old, run-down house in the middle of the country. The pastor knocked twice and then just opened the door and went in. We waited for a moment, and a man in a wheelchair came out. The man was positively beaming. He rolled over to the pastor and pulled him in for a big hug. Then he turned to us as if we were a beautifully-wrapped gift on Christmas morning and asked, "Who do we have here?"

Once the pastor introduced us, he shook each of our hands and seemed more genuinely pleased to meet us than anyone else to whom we had ever been introduced. He then told us that we must meet his wife. He turned his wheelchair around and started rolling towards the room he had come out of, and we followed.

In the next room, we found his wife in bed. We later learned that she had been bedridden for 20 years. We had the most wonderful time speaking with them about the Lord and all He was doing in our lives and in theirs. The time simply flew by, and when we were forced to leave, we were genuinely sad.

Every time we made it back to the Elmira area, we went to see the Doolittles, and every time, it was more of a blessing than the time before. I remember one time I asked Mrs. Doolittle, “How can you be so happy all the time? You can’t get out of your bed, and your husband can barely get around in his wheelchair.” She just smiled at me and said, “His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.” Those words touched my heart in way that few words ever had. The beauty of that simple expression of boundless faith gripped my heart and fired my imagination. I couldn’t stop thinking about her words, so I sat down and wrote a poem based on them.

(The spot goes out, Patti leaves, Chris and Amy move back to where they were, and the lights come up.)

Amy: It’s hard to believe the Doolittles could be such a blessing in their situation. That’s an incredible story.

Chris: That’s what happens when you really understand that God watches over each and every one of us.

Amy: (Turns to the congregation) Let’s stand and sing that hymn. While we sing, think about how our lives would change if we really believed the words.

(She leads the congregation in singing the hymn.)

Chris: You know, Amy, not only were many of the great hymns born out of inspiring events, some of them ended up *producing* inspiring events.

Amy: Really?

Chris: Yes. For example, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” originally appeared as an anonymous poem in *The Gospel Magazine*. Later, it became known that the author was the Reverend Edward Perronett. While that’s not a very inspiring story, something amazing happened when another man, Reverend E.P. Scott, sang it.

(The lights fade to black. Amy and Chris back off to one side, and a tight center spot comes up to reveal Brian.)

Brian: I’ve been a missionary in India for several years. Not long ago, I heard about a savage tribe on the continent that had never heard the Gospel. The Lord laid it on my heart to go to them, so I started making inquiries of those who knew where this tribe could be found. To a man, they all told me not to go. They told me that the men of the tribe were truly barbaric and would simply kill me on sight. However, the more I tried to put the tribe out of my mind, the more the Lord kept telling me to go.

I eventually came to the point where I could no longer resist the Lord's calling. Ignoring the warnings of the experts, I went to find the tribe. I traveled on foot for several days, following the directions that the experts had given me. I was about to give up the search when suddenly and without warning, I was surrounded by a group of fierce warriors. Their faces were painted with bright, blood-red markings, and they each carried a spear...which was pointed right at my heart. It seemed clear to me that the experts were right. I had come all that way just to get myself killed.

Resigned to this fact, I slowly put down my travel pack and pulled out my violin. I decided that if I was going to die, it would be with a hymn on my heart. I closed my eyes and began to play "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name." When the death stroke didn't come after the introduction was over, I began to sing as I played, but I kept my eyes closed. I got through two complete verses, and when I had finished the phrase, "Let every kindred every tribe," I opened my eyes to see that the warriors had all lowered their spears, and some of them were openly weeping. I finished the hymn and lowered my violin. The warriors took me to their tribe peacefully, and I spent the next two years giving them the Good News of Jesus Christ!

There is a saying: "Music soothes the savage beast." I don't know about that, but I do know that an inspired hymn opens the hearts of even the most savage man.

(The spot goes out, Brian leaves, Chris and Amy move back to where they were, and the lights come up.)

Chris: Can you imagine being in Reverend Scott's shoes? Would have been able to sing a hymn when men were standing in front of you threatening your life?

Amy: I can't imagine being able to do that. Of course, I am sure that Reverend Scott didn't do it under his own strength! (Turning to the congregation) Let's sing that hymn, concentrating on what it means for every kindred and every tribe to sing His praises!

(She leads the congregation in singing the hymn.)

Chris: (To Amy) You're a teacher, right?

Amy: Yes, I am.

Chris: Do you call the roll every day?

Amy: I am a teacher, but I don't teach in the 1970s. Calling the roll went out with Disco, didn't it?

Chris: Maybe, but I am glad it didn't go out of style before 1893. Another great hymn was inspired because a Sunday School teacher, James Milton Black, called the roll every Sunday in his class.

(The lights fade to black. Amy and Chris back off to one side, and a tight center spot comes up to reveal Daniel.)

Daniel: I was a Sunday School teacher for a long time, and I have to be honest with you – it wasn't always a rewarding experience. Sometimes, I felt like a babysitter. More often, I felt like someone who was trying to herd cats. Every once in a while, however, something truly special would happen, and those events are the ones I really remember.

For example, one afternoon I was walking through town and saw a tiny girl leading her father through the streets. The sight was so odd that I watched them for a while, and I finally figured out that the little girl's father was drunk. She was doing the best she could to lead him home. My heart went out to that little child, and I approached them, ready to lecture the drunken man about how he should be setting a better example for his daughter.

As I got near them, however, I saw the child's expression. I had never seen such utter hopelessness in the face of a child. I suddenly realized that lecturing her father would do no good, and it would only serve to depress the child more. So instead of lecturing her father, I simply turned to her and said, "Sweetheart, there is hope – real hope for you. If you can, come to First Methodist Church this Sunday, and I will tell you more." She looked at me, but she didn't say anything. However, a flicker of hope registered in her eyes, and the very next Sunday, she was there. I added her name to the roll, and by the end of the hour, I was rewarded by a genuine smile on her face.

Over the next few months, I was thrilled to see her in class every Sunday. Each Sunday when I called her name and she quietly answered, "present," a chill would run down my spine. She was genuine proof of how the Good News could bring joy to any heart.

Then one Sunday, I called her name and there was no answer. I looked up, and her seat was empty. I can't tell you how my heart fell. It was honestly difficult for me to get through the lesson with the other children. When Sunday School was over, I skipped church and went looking for her. I knew her name, so it didn't take long for me to get directions to her home.

When I arrived there, her father was sleeping off a bender, and her mother was nowhere to be found. She was in bed sick. I went out to find a doctor and brought him to her. He diagnosed her with pneumonia, and he gave her medicine. I paid for everything, and I told her to hide her medicine from her father. I was afraid he would try to sell it so he could buy more alcohol. I kissed her on her forehead, and she rewarded me with that wonderful smile again.

As I walked home, I couldn't stop thinking about calling the roll that morning. I called the roll, and she wasn't there. I suddenly realized how terrible it would be if the roll was being called from the Book of Life, and I was not there to answer it! By the time I got home, I had a fully-composed poem in my head, so I sat down and wrote: "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder, I'll Be There."

(The spot goes out, Daniel leaves, Chris and Amy move back to where they were, and the lights come up.)

Amy: Did she live?

Chris: What?

Amy: The little girl with pneumonia. Did she live?

Chris: We don't know. Mr. Black never left any record.

Amy: Why not?

Chris: Probably because he knew that whether or not she lived wasn't as important as whether or not she would be there when the Roll was called.

Amy: You're right. (To the congregation) Let's sing that hymn, thinking about whether or not we'll be there when the Roll is called up yonder!

(She leads the congregation in the hymn.)

Chris: Amy, do you know who Fanny Crosby is?

Amy: Even I know that. She was one of the most prolific hymn writers in history. "Blessed Assurance," "Draw Me Nearer," "Safe in the Arms of Jesus," and "All the Way My Savior Leads Me" were all written by her.

Chris: Very good! Did you know she was blind?

Amy: (surprised) Really?

Chris: Since childhood. She wrote the last hymn you mentioned, "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," as an attempt to explain how Jesus helped her through her disability.

(The lights fade to black. Amy and Chris back off to one side, and a tight center spot comes up to reveal Patti.)

Patti: When I was about six weeks old, my parents noticed that my eyes were swelling. The town's doctor was away, and they felt like they couldn't wait for him to get back, so they asked around town and found someone else who said he was a doctor. He said my eyes were infected, and he put a hot poultice on them to draw out the infection. My parents said the swelling went down, but then they realized that I wasn't responding to things they would hold out in front of me. Soon, they learned I was blind. Actually, I wasn't completely blind. I could tell the difference between night and day, but that's about it.

Now before you start feeling sorry for me, let me tell you a few things. Because I couldn't see, I couldn't read. So if I wanted to draw comfort from the Scriptures, I had to memorize them. I know the first five books of the Bible by heart as well as Proverbs and the Gospels. I also know large parts of the other books in the Bible as well. I have to say that nothing is more comforting

than being able to mentally “turn the page” of the Bible to find just the verse I need in any situation.

Also, I think that because I can’t see anything, I am not as easily distracted as everyone else. This allows me to have a “soul-vision” that makes me think about things in a completely different way. People tell me that I always bring a new perspective to their problems, and I believe I have my blindness to thank for that. Now I don’t want you to think that being blind was easy. Far from it. However, I don’t think I could have been nearly as effective a servant of the Lord had I been able to see with my eyes.

Every once in a while someone who hears my story asks me what I would say to that man whose poultice ruined by eyesight. That’s simple. I would tell him that he gave me the greatest gift anyone could have ever given me. My blindness made me rely on my Savior, and He has never failed to lead me right where I needed to go.

(The spot goes out, Patti leaves, Chris and Amy move back to where they were, and the lights come up.)

Amy: (to the congregation) Let’s sing “All the Way My Savior Leads Me”

(the congregation sings)

Chris: Would you like to hear one more?

Amy: Sure.

Chris: Do you mind if it involves death?

Amy: I guess not.

Chris: Okay. But even though this story has death in it, it also has new life.

(The lights fade to black. Amy and Chris back off to one side, and a tight center spot comes up to reveal Jay.)

Jay: My name is William Mackay. I’m a doctor. I help people with their hurts. Sometimes, I even save their lives. It’s a wonderful job, because I know that I am doing exactly what God wants me to do with my life. How do I know? Because He used my job to bring me back to life. Now I am just trying to do the same for others.

When I was young, I was a wicked, wicked man. I had no respect for authority, no respect for women, no respect for anything but my own pleasure. In fact, that’s why I decided to study medicine. I knew people would look up to me as a doctor, and I would have an important place in society. Most importantly, however, I knew that I would make a lot of money.

Believe it or not, my mother was not happy about my desire to become a doctor. She was an incredibly pious woman. A saint in every sense of the word. She had tried to raise me in a Godly way, but I resisted her at every turn. When I told her my plans to study medicine, she knew why I was choosing that profession, and she thought it would lead me to even more ruin. The day I left home to pursue my studies, she gave me a Bible. She implored me to read it, but I sold it for the price of a drink the first chance I got.

Well...I did become a doctor, but I wasn't happy. Sure, I had money, prestige, and the admiration of people. But that brought me no happiness. I treated patients, but I did so out of habit, not out of a desire to help them. Then, one day, a seriously injured man was brought into the hospital. He was a poor laborer, and his injuries were just too severe. I knew that all I could do was make him comfortable. I told him that I didn't think he would live for long, and I asked if there was anyone I could notify.

He told me that he had no family, but he needed to see his landlady. He owed her money, and he wanted the debt to be clear before he died. Also, he wanted her to bring him The Book. We sent a message to her, and she came. She took his money, and she gave him a Bible. He read from it when he had the strength, and once his strength gave out, he clung to it under his covers. I was amazed that he always had a happy expression on his face, despite the fact that he was dying.

Eventually, he did pass on, and there are certain things I had to oversee as his physician. One of those things was the disposal of his personal effects. As I watched the nurse remove the man's Bible from his arms, I recognized it. I thought, "It can't be." I asked the nurse to hand it to me. I opened it to the front page, and there it was. My name...written in the neat hand of my mother. It was the Bible my mother had given me. I had sold it for the price of a drink, but it had been sent back to me in the arms of a saintly man. My head spun. My knees got weak.

I looked at The Book with a deep sense of shame. It had given comfort to my patient in his last hours. I hadn't bothered to comfort him at all. It had been a guide to him in life and through death's door. I had sold it for next to nothing, because I thought I needed no guide. As I held The Book in my hand, I realized that I had been dead all my life, but my dying patient brought me my Bible so that I could finally start to live.

God revived me right then and there. Soon after, I wrote a poem asking him to revive us again and again.

(The spot goes out, Jay leaves, Chris and Amy move back to where they were, and the lights come up.)

Amy: Let's stand and sing "Revive us Again."

(The congregation sings)

Amy: Well, Chris, I have to say that I was pretty angry when you stopped me at the beginning of the service, but I'm glad that you did.

Chris: Don't expect this every Sunday! I'm beat!

Amy: So am I. (to Mark) Pastor, I think it's time for you to take over.