

Hymn of the Month February 2008

IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST I GLORY

It is fascinating how God can take something dire and use it to His glory. God took the cross, the symbol of torture and death in the Roman Empire and has made it into a beautiful reminder of His love and redemption for mankind. God took the words of a conceited politician and the music of a disenchanted choir director and blessed them to become a hymn of praise and devotion. Our Hymn of the Month, *In the Cross of Christ I Glory* is a story in itself of redemption and a perfect reflection of God's transforming power in our lives and in the world.

Sir John Bowring wrote this hymn when he was approximately thirty years old. At that time he had already gained a reputation as a respected gentleman and notable linguist. It is reported that he was able to fluently converse in five languages by the time he was eighteen, and his knowledge increased such that he was fluent in over 100 languages by the time of his death. As a young man, he was interested in translation of major works of poetry from Eastern Europe and Asia and even wrote several original verses himself. Among his original works was *In the Cross of Christ I Glory*, written in 1825. While much is speculated about his inspiration for this hymn, nothing has ever been confirmed. It is most likely that it is simply an expression of his devotion to the cross of Jesus Christ as a young man. Sadly, this gentle expression would fade from Bowring as he became more powerful and political in his later years. He would go on to become a member of Parliament and eventually governor of Hong Kong, a position that he so poorly mismanaged he is considered responsible for the Second Opium war between Great Britain and China. Despite his tainted public service reputation, however, Bowring has been remembered as the writer of this famous hymn, and the title is inscribed on his tombstone in Exeter.

More fascinating about this hymn, however, is the tune. Ithamar Conkey was organist at Central Baptist Church in Norwich, Connecticut during the 1850s. A temperamental man like most church musicians, Conkey was disheartened one Sunday of Lent in 1851 when only one choir member was present for the service. Disappointed and frustrated, Conkey left the service after playing his prelude and did not return. As he sat at his piano later that day, he was distracted by the topic of the sermon series he walked out on earlier that morning. He recalled that one of the hymns to be sung to accompany the sermon was Bowring's *In the Cross of Christ I Glory*. While the words were vibrant in his mind, he felt the tune of that time too mundane and boring. Therefore, he composed a new tune to be used with Bowring's text and named it after Mrs. Beriah S. Rathbun, that faithful soprano choir member who had been the lone singer in church that morning. Since the 1850s, RATHBUN has been the standard tune for Bowring's words, and the hymn has remained a favorite in English speaking churches to this day.

While the stories of the hymn's history are interesting, it is the message of the hymn that is most important. The text of this work reminds us that there is nothing in this world that is too discouraging, too tempting, or too despairing that the love and redemption of Christ cannot overpower. We glory in the cross, though foolish to the world, because it is by the power of Christ's death and resurrection that we can overcome all obstacles, pain, and sin. As we observe this season of Lent, a period of penitence and self-denial, may we remember that through that cross, all bane and blessing, pain and pleasure are sanctified by our Lord, the risen Savior, Jesus Christ.