

**Hymn of the Month**  
September 2007

COME, YE SINNERS, POOR AND NEEDY

There are very few passages in the Scripture that are able to describe the human experience of God's forgiveness as vividly as that of the Prodigal Son's return home into his father's waiting arms. The Gospel of Luke paints the picture of the father eagerly running out to greet his son as he returns from his raucous living, giving us the example of God reaching out to offer His forgiveness to each of us. This very passage was the inspiration for the refrain of our Hymn of the Month: *I will arise and go to Jesus/ He will embrace me with His arms/ In the arms of my dear Savior/ O there are ten thousand charms.*

Interestingly, this refrain was not a part of the original hymn, *Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy*. The first recorded appearance was in Southern (U.S) hymnals as early as 1811, listed as a sung response to several hymns. The writer is unknown, and this refrain is believed to be an old-fashioned camp-meeting response. It was probably first added to *Come, Ye Sinners* by hymnist Philip P. Bliss in his 1874 publication, *Gospel Hymns*.

The verses of the hymn were composed much earlier (1759) by English pastor Joseph Hart. Two years before he wrote this hymn, Hart was converted to Christianity following a Moravian service he attended on Pentecost Sunday. Despite his rearing in a Christian home, Hart entered a stage of rebellion in his early twenties characterized by a lifestyle of carnality and a philosophy of anti-Christian sentiments. He was known as an enemy of the cross, and went to great lengths to discredit Christianity and its followers. Hart published a pamphlet entitled, "The Unreasonableness of Religion" as a response to one of John Wesley's sermons, earning him a reputation not unlike that of Saul.

Hart fell into a depression in the 1850s. It was during this time that he developed a Spiritual conviction that eventually led him to the Moravian meeting in 1857 and his eventual conversion. Filled with the Holy Spirit and anxious to share his experience, Hart took to writing poetry, from which the text of our hymn was derived. The text reiterates in each stanza the unmerited grace that God has for those who repent and turn their lives over to Him. A self-described "monstrous sinner," Hart understood that God is capable of delivering each of us from any conceivable sin, and that He waits for us, like the father of the Prodigal Son, with open arms and immediate forgiveness.

Joseph Hart entered a field of ministry and preached as a non-Anglican preacher until his death in 1768. His reward was burial in the dissenters' cemetery on City Road in London along with Isaac Watts, John Bunyan, and Susanna Wesley. Ironically enough, this cemetery is located directly across the street from the home and church of John Wesley, the very preacher Hart once opposed.

The very core of Christianity is the forgiveness of Jesus Christ extended for all to receive; for while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The nature or amount of our sin is irrelevant. Once we realize our need, arise and go to Jesus, we can be sure that He will run to us, embrace us in His loving arms and say "Welcome Home!"