

# Week 5

## O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing

Devotion by Dr. Steve Harper



CELEBRATING

*Charles Wesley*

300 YEARS

1707-2007

## O F O R A T H O U S A N D T O N G U E S T O S I N G

*Words: Charles Wesley, 1739, Music: Carl G. Glaser, 1839*

1.

O for a thousand tongues to sing  
my great Redeemer's praise,  
the glories of my God and King,  
the triumphs of his grace!

2.

My gracious Master and my God,  
assist me to proclaim,  
to spread through all the earth abroad  
the honors of thy name.

3.

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,  
that bids our sorrows cease;  
'tis music in the sinner's ears,  
'tis life, and health, and peace.

4.

He breaks the power of canceled sin,  
he sets the prisoner free;  
his blood can make the foulest clean;  
his blood availed for me.

5.

He speaks, and listening to his voice,  
new life the dead receive;  
the mournful, broken hearts rejoice,  
the humble poor believe.

6.

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,  
your loosened tongues employ;  
ye blind, behold your Savior come,  
and leap, ye lame, for joy.

# Week 5, Day One: Holy Passion

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## Psalm 119: 172 (NRSV)

My tongue will sing of your promise,  
for all your commandments are right.

Charles Wesley wrote “O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” to be sung on the anniversary of one’s conversion. Most likely, he had his own in mind. Looking back on his experience in the evening of May 21, 1738, he described the moment as one when, “I really began to live.” The hymn itself is a description of how a believer would seek to live and invite others to live. Originally containing eighteen stanzas, we will examine the six which are usually included in contemporary hymnals. We begin with these familiar words,

*O for a thousand tongues to sing*

*My great Redeemer’s praise!*

*The glories of my God and King,*

*The triumphs of his grace!*

It may be that the first line of the hymn is a tribute to Peter Bohler, the Moravian friend, who was instrumental in Charles’ conversion. On one occasion, he told Charles, “Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise him with them all.” For Bohler and for Wesley, the hallmark of the believer is a holy passion to praise God with the entirety of our being. Every human capacity is devoted to praise—so much so that we would wish we had a thousand tongues to praise our God!

We begin our meditations asking the question, “What is the deepest desire of my life?” When we have been touched by saving grace, the answer is “to be an instrument of praise to God and an instrument of evangelism to make Him known to others.” The natural outflow of conversion is worship and witness. Discipleship is rooted in holy passion.

## Prayer

O God, grant to me nothing more than the passion  
to praise You and offer You to others, Amen.

# Week 5, Day Two: Complete Dependency

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## John 15:5b (NRSV)

Apart from me you can do nothing.

Both Charles and John Wesley had grown weary of a Christianity fueled by self-effort. Anglicanism's eighteenth-century moralistic exhortation to "be good" and to "do good," had generated more than a decade of hard work by the brothers, but it had also brought them to the brink of religious despair. They had grown weary in well doing. It took the witness of friends like Peter Bohler to restore the classical Protestant understanding that we are saved by grace through faith—not of works—and that even our good works are the result of God's grace at work in us. Hence, Charles wrote,

*My gracious Master, and my God,  
Assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad  
The honors of thy name.*

We still have too much self-help Christianity today. We need a fresh reminder that God must "assist" us through grace mediated by the Holy Spirit if we are to be effective disciples. In too many instances we have put more trust in our programs and resources than we have put in God. We need to hear anew Jesus' words, "apart from me, you can do nothing." Complete dependence is a second characteristic of disciples.

When that dependency is in place, as Charles notes in the second stanza, "all the earth" becomes the place to declare the unsearchable riches of Christ. Our particular call to "spread the honors of God's name" may primarily invest us in places close at hand, or perhaps in places far away. It will not matter. All that matters is that we make our witness in full dependency upon the risen Christ.

## Prayer

Dear God, like the Wesleys, I get tired "trying" to be a good Christian. Give me grace to "trust" You to enable me to be one. Live in me and work through me, and use me wherever and however You choose. I ask no more than this, Amen.

# Week 5, Day Three: Singular Devotion

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## Philippians 1:21 (NRSV)

For to me, living is Christ...

Charles Wesley's heart had become Christ's home. He was living in the two great expressions of Christian life: "in Christ" and "Christ in you." His experience of the living Christ created a singular devotion, described in these words,

*Jesus, the name that charms our fears,*

*That bids our sorrows cease,*

*'Tis music in the sinner's ears,*

*'Tis life, and health, and peace.*

Christology is the core of Christian theology. Christlikeness is the essence of the Christian life. Offering Christ is the privilege of Christian evangelism. To be a disciple is to say without qualification, "Jesus is Lord!" His Lordship is first established in our souls, and then from that sure foundation, we seek to invite others to discover Christ's Lordship for themselves.

To borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, too many of us live with a hyphenated Christianity. We're liturgical-Christians, charismatic-Christians, evangelical-Christians, liberal-Christians, holiness-Christians, born-again Christians, activist-Christians, etc. We elevate a piece of Christianity to a level that makes it appear to be the whole. We run the risk of forgetting that Jesus is always larger than our particular emphasis makes him appear to be.

The answer to this dilemma is singular devotion to Jesus, returning him to the defining center, and trusting him to lead us into a fuller experience of God than any of our preferences can create. If Jesus is our Lord, we do not have to fear becoming truncated or sidetracked in our faith. He will create in us a fullness of life and lead us to a complete discipleship.

## Prayer

Risen Christ, live in me. Be the Lord of my life, so that I will not confuse a portion of Christianity for the whole of it, and so that I will not settle for a hyphenated discipleship, Amen.

# Week 5, Day Four: Great Salvation

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## Luke 19:10 (NRSV)

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

Charles Wesley knew there was no greater doctrine than that of the Atonement. But more, he knew there was no greater experience than that of being forgiven of sin. He knew there is no higher reference to Jesus than that of “Savior.” So naturally, he penned words that speak of the objective dimension of our redemption, words that speak of what Christ has done for us,

*He breaks the power of canceled sin,*

*He sets the prisoner free;*

*His blood can make the foulest clean;*

*His blood availed for me.*

We cannot save ourselves. But God has saved us through Christ! Each line in the stanza describes some aspect of that salvation. Sin no longer has power over us. We are no longer imprisoned by it.

Even the “foulest” person is a candidate for redemption. And all that “avails for me.” In every line there is certainty and celebration. Jesus has come to earth to seek out and save the lost.

One of the distinguishing marks of Christianity is the fact that we do not have to try to save ourselves. In other religions, an elaborate system of worship and ritualistic acts generates intense effort to win the favor of God, or the gods. As E. Stanley Jones rightly noted, non-Christian religions are based in what we do to reach God. But Christianity reverses the flow and declares what God has done to reach us. We do not have to provide the sacrifice, or much less, be the sacrifice. Christ is the lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world. Ours is a great salvation.

## Prayer

God, thank you for sending Christ to die for my sins, so I don't have to try to die for them, Amen.

# Week 5, Day Five: Great Salvation

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## Isaiah 53:5b (NRSV)

By his bruises we are healed.

Charles Wesley knew that salvation is not only what God has done for us in Christ, but also what God has done in us through Christ. In the fifth stanza, he turns to emphasize the subjective aspect of the atonement,

*He speaks, and listening to his voice,*

*New life the dead receive;*

*The mournful, broken hearts rejoice,*

*The humble poor believe.*

More than anything, salvation is about receiving new life. It is life so different that our former existence looks like death by comparison. Whatever we counted on to give us life in the past is now abandoned so that we may fully embrace the life Christ offers us. Charles' words are echoed in a more-recent gospel hymn, "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling." It is in our emptiness that we can be filled.

And when we come empty, the new life we receive makes our hearts rejoice. The Wesleys were intent upon connecting salvation and celebration—redemption and joy—holiness and happiness. The gospel really is good news. It does more than fill the mind; it stirs the heart. Salvation puts an exclamation mark in your soul!

All this is contingent on being one of the "humble poor." This is probably Charles' counterpart to Jesus' phrase "the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3) which is the condition for receiving the kingdom of heaven. Humility expressed as poverty of spirit (i.e. recognizing our need of God) is the door of human openness through which Christ enters to save us. He speaks. We listen to his voice. We invite him in to save us. And he does.

## Prayer

Dear God, help me to open my heart to Christ every day, even as I did when I first believed in him, Amen.

# Week 5, Day Six: Total Transformation

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## 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Charles Wesley knew that the tone of the gospel is always invitation. That which we have experienced, we commend to others. And when our offer of Christ is accepted, there is a total transformation. Charles speaks of that in the sixth stanza of the hymn,

*Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,*

*Your loosened tongues employ;*

*Ye blind, behold your Savior come,*

*And leap, ye lame, for joy.*

Something remarkable has happened when deaf people hear, mute people speak, blind people see, and lame people walk. The invitation is wonderful because the results are marvelous—nothing short of miraculous.

But remember, this is a hymn celebrating the anniversary of our conversion, not

merely one that looks back to a previous experience. It is a hymn that describes the ongoing life that comes from knowing and following Jesus. We continue to use our ears to be attentive to his word. We continue to use our loosened tongues to give him praise. We continue to use our eyes to see Jesus present among us. And we continue to use our legs to leap with joy for having received such amazing grace.

In the end, when Charles Wesley asks for a “thousand tongues” to sing God’s praise, he is not asking for a mouth crammed with tongues, he is saying that if he had a thousand lives (one tongue per lifetime), it would not be enough to describe the richness of God’s mercy. Would anyone want to miss something as magnificent as that?

## Prayer

Heavenly Father, creator of my tongue. I give it to you now, and always, as a vehicle to declare your praise and offer your salvation, Amen.