

## October's hymn of the month

By

Bill Dagle

The preacher, Francis Rowley, opened his new hymn with these words, "Can't you sing the wondrous story." The line is reminiscent of the line, "Can't you hear the angels singing," from the old hymn, *When They Ring Those Golden Bells for You and Me*, won't you agree? Well, Pastor Rowley's opening line didn't last long, less than a year; for in 1887, Ira Sankey would publish the pastor's song in *Sacred Songs and Solos*—one of the many hymnals that Ira Sankey would publish. Now, the opening line which became the title read this way, "I will sing the wondrous story." That hymn has gone down in history as an all-time favorite.

Born on July 25, 1854, Francis Harold Rowley was the son of a doctor who lived in Hilton, New York. Francis would attend Rochester University and Rochester Theological Seminary; and by 1878, he was ordained a pastor in New York. Over the next 14 years, he would pastor churches in Parker City, and Titusville, Pennsylvania, and North Adams, Massachusetts.

It was at the First Baptist Church of North Adams, Mass. in 1886 that he recorded the following account, "I was the minister of the First Baptist Church of North Adams, Massachusetts in 1886. The church and community were experiencing a period of unusual interest in religious matters, and I was assisted by a remarkable young singer by the name of Peter Bilhorn. One night, after the close of the service, he said, 'Why don't you write a hymn for me to set to music?' During the night these verses came to me." That was the beginning of what became, *I Will Sing the Wondrous Story*.

As in the case of so many hymns, this one could have fallen to the wayside; but it hasn't. Because of good doctrine and strong music, this song has stood the test of time. Unlike so many poems that disappear, this one has stayed thanks to the music which gave it flight. We have Peter Bilhorn to thank for that.

It would appear that God's hand was on Peter right from the start. He was born in Mendota, Illinois in 1862. His father would die fighting in the Civil War leaving a family of six behind. At the age of seven, Peter almost died in a drowning accident. In 1879, he opened a carriage business in Chicago and, in 1882, was converted under the preaching of Dr. Pentecost. Over the next years, he worked with Root, Stebbins, Chapman, Moody and Billy Sunday. By 1886, he sold the carriage business and went into full time evangelistic work of composing and publishing gospel songs. He also invented and manufactured a portable folding organ weighing only 25 pounds. I know this because I own one.

Peter Bilhorn is remembered for writing 2,000 gospel songs including the music for our hymn of the month. Also, he would precede Homer Rodeheaver as Bill Sunday's song leader. Oh, how I would have loved to have seen those meetings. He even travelled to London, England, in 1900 to conduct a 4,000 voice choir in the Crystal Palace.

Are you singing the "Wondrous Story"? If not, why not? The story begins with a baby who, as a man, died on a cross and, as God, the Son, was resurrected from the grave. He is now seated at the right hand of God, the Father, and lives ever to make intercession for you and for me. In the words of Francis Rowley, "Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story for the Christ who died for me."

I will sing the wondrous story Of the Christ Who died for me;  
How He left His home in glory For the Cross of Calvary.

I was lost, but Jesus found me, Found the sheep that went astray.  
Threw His loving arms around me, Drew me back into His way.

I was bruised but Jesus healed me, Faint was I from many a fall,  
Sight was gone, and fears possessed me, But He freed me from them all.

Days of darkness still come o'er me, Sorrow's path I often tread,  
But His presence still is with me; By His guiding hand I'm led.

He will keep me till the river Rolls its waters at my feet;  
Then He'll bear me safely over, Where the loved ones I shall meet.

Chorus:

Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story, of the Christ Who died for me,  
Sing it with the saints in glory, Gathered by the crystal sea.

The hymn of the month for October: **I Will Sing the Wondrous Story**

(For pictures of Francis Rowley, make sure to check out A 1,000 Words from the header.)