

What a Friend We Have in Jesus—May's Hymn of the Month 2025

“For a Mother's Eyes Only”

With the arrival of May each year we have the opportunity to honor very special persons—our mothers. For me, Mother's Day is a day full of memories of the greatest mom one could ever have. She is home in heaven now, but her investments in my life still live on today. Now, that's fine. We all have had a mother, but what hymn could be so special on Mother's Day?

Originally the hymn was titled, “What a Friend Who Understands” or others say it was titled, “Pray Without Ceasing.” Whatever the case, Joseph Scriven had composed the poem to comfort Jane Scriven, his mom, back in Ireland. Joseph had left his home there in 1845 to escape the memory of his departed fiancée. She died accidentally in a river after being thrown from her horse. It was the night before their wedding. Now, ten years later, while living in Port Hope, Canada, the poem was written for his “mother's eyes only”—never thinking anyone else would ever see it. So began a story behind the hymn with many twists and turns.

From the 1906 Ira D. Sankey book, *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns*, we get the first part of the story:

“Returning from England in 1875, I soon became associated with P. P. Bliss in the publication of what later became known as *Gospel Hymns No. 1*. After we had given the completed compilation to our publishers I chanced to pick up a small paper-covered pamphlet of Sunday-school hymns, published at Richmond, Virginia. I discovered this and sang it through, and determined to have it appear in *Gospel Hymns*. As the composer of the music was my friend, C. C. Converse. I withdrew from the collection one of his compositions and substituted for it, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” Thus the last hymn that went into the book became one of the first in favor.

As published in the small Richmond hymnal, the authorship of the words was erroneously attributed to the great Scotch preacher and hymn-writer, Dr. Horatius Bonar. We were in error, also, assigning the words to him. Some years afterward Dr. Bonar informed us that he was not the author, and that he did not know who wrote it. It was not until six or eight years after the hymn first appeared in our collection that we learned who the author really was.” (pages 296 and 297)

So, it wasn't until *Gospel Hymns No. 1* was published in 1887, one year after his death, that Joseph Scriven got the credit he richly deserved. The new title for the poem was used for the first time in *Gospel Hymns No. 1*, and now *Gospel Hymns No. 5* finally gets the author right.

If intended for a “mother's eyes only,” how did Charles Converse discover it? One story related that the poem was published in the Port Hope, Canada Guide in 1870. Someone then sent a package to New York City wrapped in this copy of the Port Hope Guide. The poem ends up being published in a New York newspaper. From there, the poem makes its way to Erie, Pennsylvania and to an Estey organ store where Converse worked. Charles Converse, then, composed the music for the poem, thus preserving it forever.

A poem written for “a mother's eyes only” to comfort her during a time of illness has blessed millions since its first appearance in print in 1875. This song had such humble beginnings that even Joseph never

could have realized what he had done for all who would follow. The final twist of the story is one that I will publish next week and reveal “the rest of the story”:

What a Friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptation? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness, Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden, Cumbered with a load of care? We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer. Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer; in His arms He'll take and shield thee, Thou wilt find a solace there.

To understand more about the story behind the hymn, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, we made our way up to Port Hope, Canada. (See *A 1,000 Words* page.) It was there that we discovered the “rest of the story.”

When Joseph came to Canada in 1850, he was offered a position as a tutor for the Pengelley family. This position he held for five years during which time he met Eliza Catherine Roche, Mrs. Pengelley's niece. Joseph fell in love with Catherine; and by 1859, they were engaged to be married. Joseph was a Plymouth Brethren; Catherine was a member of the Church of England. Catherine wanted to follow the Brethren faith and insisted on being baptized before their marriage took place. So in April 1860, she was fully immersed in a very cold Rice Lake which lead to a case of pneumonia. She died on the sixth of August four months later. This second death of a fiancé marked a turning point in Joseph's life from which he never recovered.

He gave away what money he had and spent the rest of his life helping the poor and destitute. His benevolence was said to be of an extreme kind. He wrote this: “The wearing of gold and expensive clothes made in the world's style is as much forbidden as stealing. If I spend five cents on some unnecessary thing for ornament, it costs that much money, and that money would buy something for a needy person.” For over 20 years, he managed a dairy for a destitute widow in Port Hope. Joseph would walk the streets of Bewdley and Port Hope preaching to whoever would listen. On one occasion, he was actually arrested for disturbing the peace. Joseph spent the summers in Port Hope and his winters in Bewdley. It was there he became good friends with a James Sackville, a fellow believer.

If it was lost loves or simply age, time was taking a toll on Joseph. Mr. Sackville had this to say, “His body was just worn down with toil, and his mind was wearied with failure and disappointment in his work during past years.” Mr. Sackville was caring for Joseph when, on the morning of August 10, 1886, Joseph was nowhere to be found. It wouldn't be until a little after noon that the lifeless body was discovered in the spillway of Rice Lake. Water had claimed the third soul in this story of twists and turns.

In 1869, Joseph had published a collection of his hymns in Peterborough, Ontario. *What a Friend* was not included. He composed the hymn while living with the Sackvilles near Rice Lake. He sent one copy to his mother in Ireland and gave a second copy to Mrs. Sackville. No other attempts were made by Mr. Scriven to make the hymn known. The Lord would take over at this point and send the hymn around the world.

I close with this interesting request by Joseph Scriven. Because of his friendship with the Pengelley family, Joseph's final resting place would be the Pengelley family cemetery. It was his wish that he be buried near his beloved, Catherine. His request was that they be "in such a position with feet near feet, so that one day when we rise from the grave, we will face one another." That day is quickly approaching. Do you have a "friend in Jesus," and will you be ready for that day? (See *A 1,000 Words* page for pictures.)