

March's hymn of the month 2019

By
Bill Dagle

I enjoy westerns and the time that is reflected in our American history. One fun thing I do, as I watch the movie, is to find out what year the movie represents and see if the songs fit. I've seen our hymn of the month made part of a movie dated pre-1860 which can't be because the song wasn't written until 1864. Somebody didn't do their homework. It's been observed that our hymn has been employed in many western soundtracks and was a favorite of director, John Ford. It even appeared as late as 2013 in the western, **The Lone Ranger**.

So how did a preacher who once said, "I would rather preach a gospel sermon to an appreciative, receptive congregation than write a hymn" write a song that would outlive all his messages? Well, I won't pretend to have the answer, but would remind you what Ephesians 5:19 says, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Hymns are not God-breathed like scripture, but are certainly inspired by the circumstances of life and the graciousness of our heavenly Father. Most hymn historians agree on how Pastor Robert Lowry was inspired to write his best song, and I think Dr. Al Smith's explanation is the best. Dr. Al gave us this story in Pastor Lowry's own words:

"One afternoon in July, 1864, when I was the pastor at Hanson Place Baptist Church, Brooklyn, the weather was oppressively hot, and I was lying on a lounge in a state of physical exhaustion. I was almost incapable of bodily exertion and my imagination began to take wings. Visions of the future passed before me with startling vividness. The imagery of the apocalypse took the form of a tableau. Brightest of all were the throne, the heavenly river, and the gathering of the saints. My soul seemed to take new life from the celestial outlook. I began to wonder why the hymn writers had said so much about the 'River of Death' and so little about 'the pure water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb.' As I mused, the words began to construct themselves. They came first as a question of Christian inquiry, 'Shall we gather?' On this question and answer, the hymn developed itself. The music came with the hymn."

Dr. Lowry's sermons have faded away, but the truths of his song stand tall and strong over 155 years later. Someday soon **Shall We Gather at the River** will become a reality for those who are trusting in Christ and his saving grace. We will see the heavenly throne and the river of life proceeding out of it and spend eternity with those who have gone before us.

Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod;
With its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God:

On the margin of the river, washing up its silver spray,
We will walk and worship ever, all the happy golden day.

We

Ere we reach the shining river, lay we ev'ry burden down;
Grace our spirits will deliver, and provide a robe and crown.

Soon we'll reach the shining river, soon our pilgrimage cease;
Soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace.

Chorus

Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

The hymn of the month for March 2019: **Shall We Gather at the River**