

Once to Every Man and Nation

by
Bill Dagle

Most civilized people do not enjoy wars, but wars are a sad reality of life. Jesus said, "In this world you shall have tribulation." The Bible goes on to say that in the last days, there shall be wars and rumors of wars until the Prince of Peace returns. In our hymnals are songs that relate to battle such as *Onward Christian Soldiers*, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and *Sound the Battle Cry* to name a few. One that is hard to find, however, is *Once to Every Man and Nation*. This hymn, originally entitled *The Present Crisis*, was written out of protest; yet it offers, for us today, great truths to help during times of conflict.

James Russell Lowell, the author, was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1819. His father was the pastor of the West Congregational Church in Boston for 55 years. James graduated from Harvard in 1838 and, as a lawyer, became an ardent champion of abolition. In 1876, President Hayes appointed him minister to the court of Spain and, in 1880, transferred him to Great Britain. Over the years, he was in great demand as a public speaker.

The poem, *The Present Crisis*, first appeared in print on December 11, 1845, in the Boston Courier. The 18 stanzas voiced Lowell's protest against the war with Mexico over the territory of Texas. James feared the acquisition of new territory would only enlarge the area of slavery in the United States. Eventually, music was added and the poem of protest became a hymn of challenge: "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side."

Written over 158 years ago, *Once to Every Man and Nation* is a great reminder of who is in control of history and who will ultimately write the last chapter.

Yet that scaffold sways the future
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.

Our nation was founded under God. Let's remember to look to Him for continued blessings as we humble ourselves, seek His face and pray. God will keep watch above His own.

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood,
For the good or evil side.
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Off'ring each the bloom or blight;
And the choice goes by forever,
Twixt that darkness and that light.

Then to side with truth is noble,
When we share her wretched crust,

Ere her cause bring fame and profit,
And 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses,
While the coward stands a side,
'till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied.

Count me o'er earth chosen heroes,
They were souls that stood alone,
Stood serene, and down the future
Saw the golden beam incline
To the side of perfect justice,
Mastered by their faith divine,
By one man's plain truth to manhood
And to God's supreme design.

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis Truth alone is strong
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own. Amen.