

STORIES
BEHIND
THE
SONGS
& HYMNS
ABOUT
HEAVEN

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ACE COLLINS



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This book was inspired by and is dedicated to Ruth Ann “Ruthie” Arnold, a woman of great faith and with a longing for heaven. She passed from this life to the next in 2018 at age eighty-two, hearing many of these songs sung by her husband, George, and her family.






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Contents



Introduction	9
Wayfaring Stranger	11
The Old Gospel Ship	18
If We Never Meet Again	25
Amazing Grace	32
Can [Will] the Circle Be Unbroken?	41
When We All Get to Heaven	48
Face to Face	56
Roll, Jordan, Roll	64
This Ole House	72
Farther Along	79
In the Sweet By and By	87
Glory Train	94
He Keeps Me Singing	102
Beyond the Sunset	111



Swing Low, Sweet Chariot	119
Child of the King	127
Peace in the Valley	134
We're Marching to Zion	141
This World Is Not My Home	151
I'll Fly Away	156
The Unclouded Day	164
Walk Dem Golden Stairs	171
Mansion over the Hilltop	178
Shall We Gather at the River	185
We'll Soon Be Done with Troubles and Trials	193
I Know Who Holds Tomorrow	200
When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder	207
When the Morning Comes	214
I Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now	222
Victory in Jesus	229
Acknowledgments	235
Notes	236

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Introduction



One of the most fascinating things I found when researching the stories behind songs about heaven is that most were inspired during difficult and trying times. These beloved hymns were often the product of suffering and penned by people looking for answers. Whether a slave, a person trapped in poverty, a preacher, or a teacher, the writer almost always acknowledged that life on earth was not fair. Hence, the need to look forward to a time and a place where love, compassion, and justice were found in abundance.

As I studied in detail the lyrics of these classic songs and hymns, I also realized something profound and inspiring. While they point toward an eternal life in heaven, almost all of them spell out ways to bring a bit of heaven to earth. In other words, they are less about the ultimate rewards of a Christian life well lived and more about how to live a Christian life in this world. In that way, these songs mirror the

parables of Jesus and his charge found in Matthew 25:35–40 to reach out to the least of these.

As I edited and rewrote the stories behind these amazing marriages of lyrics and music, an image continued to knock on my mind's door: the famous jazz funerals of New Orleans. As they march to the cemetery, the mourners are accompanied by a solemn, slowly moving brass band playing songs such as "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," but as soon as they leave the gravesite, the musicians break into dance and blast out an up-tempo version of "When the Saints Go Marching In." So, yes, while the songs spotlighted in these pages do reflect on the heartbreak of separation, they also forecast a time of reunion and celebration. And that is something to get happy about.

Life is a challenge, life is a trial, and life is not fair, but for the Christian, there is another life where the books are balanced and love abounds. These are the musical stories of heaven as seen through the eyes of people who lived their faith on earth. These chapters offer a road map to making the journey to glory a bit easier and more fulfilling. They are also testimonies to the fact that there is a wonderful victory waiting just over the hilltop.

Author's note: When possible, the lyrics to these powerful songs and hymns are published with each story. For chapters where that is not possible, I suggest readers go online and review the lyrics at various hymn sites.

Wayfaring Stranger



A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to gain eternal life?”

Jesus replied, “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?”

He responded, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side

of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"

Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Luke 10:25–37

I am a poor wayfaring stranger
Traveling through this world of woe.
There is no sickness, toil or danger
In that fair land to which I go.

I'm going home to see my mother,
I'm going home no more to roam;
I'm just a-going over Jordan,
I'm just a-going over home.

I know dark clouds will hover on me,
I know my pathway is rough and steep;
But golden fields lie out before me
Where weary eyes no more shall weep.

I'm going home to see my father,
I'm going home no more to roam;
I'm just a-going over Jordan,
I'm just a-going over home.

I'll soon be free from every trial,
This form shall rest beneath the sun.
I'll drop the cross of self-denial
And enter in that home with God.

When Jesus exposed the nature of prejudice in the parable of the good Samaritan, he likely revealed a picture of God that many in his audience had never seen. The God they thought they worshiped was a God of just one people. Those of different races or tribes were usually considered to be lesser beings and not a part of the Lord's plans. Not only was there no place for them in heaven, but they also were not to mix with the chosen ones while on earth. To have Jesus hold up the Samaritan as reflecting God's love, compassion, and grace must have been very sobering to many in that time and likely still is to this day. In a very real sense, this American folk song embraces a similar message but with a much different result.

There is no record of who wrote "Wayfaring Stranger." History proves that it has been around for at least two and a half centuries. It most assuredly originated in rural America. Some scholars have linked it to black spirituals, while others

have tied it to Native American stories, but no matter its origins, there can be no doubt of its intent. It is a song that reveals a faith deeper than most could imagine and a challenge few were willing to accept.

Long before the term *blues* was invented, the person who penned “Wayfaring Stranger” understood what it was to be drowning in sorrow. Reading between the song’s often depressing lines reveals a few obvious facts. The writer was likely poor, misunderstood, and homeless. It seems they were wandering because they were either lonely or lost. In a very real sense, the writer was a pilgrim engaged in a journey of searching. The unique thing about this pilgrimage was that the final destination—and the hope it would bring—could not be found on this earth.

According to the dictionary, *hopelessness* means having no expectation of good or success coming your way. Almost every line of “Wayfaring Stranger” screams out that the only thing waiting around the next bend is more sorrow, sadness, loneliness, and rejection. And yet, even though the writer expects nothing but pain on earth, there is a sense of hope found at the end of each verse. The suffering will not last! There is a place of acceptance and healing.

Over the past two centuries, “Wayfaring Stranger” has served as fodder for sermons, political speeches, and even charity fund-raisers. It has been sung in churches, on concert stages, in movies, on television shows, and in bars. In the 1940s, it became a hit for folksinger Burl Ives. During the

1960s, “Wayfaring Stranger” emerged as an anthem supporting integration and equal rights. Over the last fifty years, it has appeared on country, rock, popular, and religious charts and has been translated into more than fifty languages. Though “Wayfaring Stranger” is much younger than many well-known hymns, no song dealing with a pilgrim’s journey to heaven has been sung by more people. So the question is, Why does its message still endure?

Throughout history, there have always been nomadic people. Some chose to wander, while others were forced by circumstance to continually move around. The common theme for both groups was the lack of means to settle down. Because of the insight found in the haunting lyrics, the author of “Wayfaring Stranger” might have been a victim of birth due to poverty or a disability or events beyond their control. As they traveled, they might have found little compassion or charity. Poor and destitute or blessed with deep empathy, they must have witnessed despair, disease, and hunger. They saw people treated as if they didn’t matter. So in their travels, they observed a world that often revealed the worst of humanity.

Where “Wayfaring Stranger” moves from being a straight blues number and into a hymn that has inspired generations of people is its acknowledgment of grace. In spite of a lifetime of suffering and mistreatment, the author’s faith did not waver. They still believe that God has reserved a home for them in heaven. And once they cross the Jordan,

they will be held in much higher esteem than those who reviled them.

On the surface, “Wayfaring Stranger” embraces a message only the poorest of the poor could relate to. It seems to be a song for the slave, refugee, and orphan. But in truth, even those who have been deeply blessed cannot escape all the heartaches of an earthly life. Therefore, in one way or another, the message found in “Wayfaring Stranger” is universal. The song’s promise of a journey ending with being surrounded by loved ones is the ray of sunshine everyone can cling to. Yet “Wayfaring Stranger” is much more than a song that presents the rewards found in heaven. Viewing it that way misses the point the writer was likely trying to teach.

Just as Christ did with the parable of the good Samaritan, “Wayfaring Stranger” offers a challenge for the living. For most who wander the earth despondent and alone, as well as for those who have been abused or abandoned, all hope is dashed. These souls don’t know the security of home or the promise found in faith. They have never felt a kind hand and rarely heard loving voices. So the only way they will ever meet God is to experience the grace of one who has already been blessed.

Christ touched the lepers when no one else would. Jesus invited a tax collector to dinner when everyone else avoided him. Story after story proves that much of the ministry of the Son of God dealt with wayfaring strangers. He didn’t just offer them a ticket to heaven; he brought a bit of heaven

down to earth and, in the process, revealed how God expected all his children to treat one another.

The person who penned “Wayfaring Stranger” has been experiencing the joys of heaven for a long time, and whenever this song is sung, the writer’s wisdom and insight revisit earth and offer both a prayer of hope and a dynamic challenge. The prayer is that we each have the faith to endure the journey while maintaining our focus on God. The challenge is to love today’s wanderers just as Christ did during his walk on earth. Grace brings us to heaven, and grace shared can bring heaven to the wayfaring stranger.