

# And Can It Be: A Historical and Theological Analysis

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By Steve Weaver

Originally titled “Free Grace,” this hymn is one of several hymns by Charles Wesley that is still widely sung in the present day. Although we do not know exactly when “And Can It Be” was written, it is usually associated with a very early period linked with the Charles Wesley’s conversion.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of when it was written, the song clearly describes the experience of conversion and the wonder of one who is still amazed “That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”. Tyson points out the repeated use of “for me” in this hymn as evidence of the impact of the reading of Martin Luther’s Galatians commentary.<sup>2</sup>

1. And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Savior’s blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain—  
For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be,  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
Amazing love! How can it be,  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Wesley is clearly amazed at the extravagant grace of God evident in his own salvation. He is amazed that the One whom his own sins had caused his death would have offered his life up for him. Wesley puts himself into the place of the angry crowd that cried out “Crucify Him!” and whom Peter indicted on the Day of Pentecost of having crucified and killed by their hands (Acts 2:23). This thought causes Wesley to cry out “Amazing love!” and question in the words on which the modern title to the hymn is based: “How can it be, That Thou my God, shouldst die for me?” Wesley’s attribution of death to God is at first a shocking statement. He wished it to be so. It is doubtful that Wesley was himself espousing a patripassianism in these words. Instead, he wishes those who sing this hymn to understand the amazing love of God that resulted in the death of the Son of God, the God-man, Jesus Christ. This expression, as used by Wesley, is thoroughly orthodox as it reflects the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of Jesus. What is said of one nature can be said of the other since the two natures are united in one *hypostasis* or person. Scripture also speaks this way of the death of Jesus when Acts 20:28 records the apostle Paul exhorting the Ephesian elders “to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Here, the blood of God refers to the blood of Jesus, the God-man.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

2. 'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies:  
Who can explore His strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;  
Let angel minds inquire no more.

Again in stanza two, Wesley probes the depths of the mystery of the death of the Son of God for us. Here Wesley juxtaposes immortality and death. These two obviously do not belong together, but Wesley places them together to emphasize the “mystery” of the atonement. The depth of this mystery is highlighted by Wesley’s speculative description of angelic attempts to understand the “depths of love divine.” This is no doubt a reflection upon 1 Peter 1:12 which describes the gospel as “good news . . . into which angels long to look.” Wesley is content to put an end to the speculation with the declaration that it is simply a mystery of mercy.

3. He left His Father’s throne above  
So free, so infinite His grace—  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam’s helpless race:  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,  
For O my God, it found out me!  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,  
For O my God, it found out me!

In the third stanza, Wesley explores the *kenosis* or “self-emptying” of Christ in the incarnation. The amazing love of God is seen in that it caused the Son to leave “His Father’s throne above.” This demonstrates the freeness and infinite nature of His grace. Philippians 2:5-8 seems to be the Scriptural backdrop for this stanza. These verses describe the depths to which the Son has descended in the incarnation. Wesley reveals an understanding of the meaning of the Greek underlying the language of Philippians 2:7 in the Authorized Version. The phrase “made himself of no reputation” translates the Greek *ekenosen* which literally means “he emptied himself” (see the HCSB which translates it this way). Wesley evidently understands this for he says that the Son “Emptied Himself of all but love” in the incarnation. The climax of the incarnation, however, is seen in the hymn (as in Philippians 2:8) in Christ’s death on the cross. He “bled for Adam’s helpless race.” Again, the hymnist is forced to confess that the mercy of God alone is the source of this amazing love. The personal nature of the evangelism of the Wesleys is seen in the use of “me” throughout the hymn. That Christ died “for me” is repeated three times in the first stanza, and in this third stanza the mercy of God is said to have “found out me!” twice. The personal emphasis is even more evident in stanzas 4-6.

4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

In stanzas 4-6, Wesley seems to offer his own testimony from his experience of conversion. This has caused many scholars to conclude that this hymn was written soon after Wesley's conversion. It is important to note that although the language is profoundly personal, it also deeply biblical and theological. Wesley's view of his pre-conversion state was that of an "imprisoned spirit" bound by both sin and nature. Wesley draws on the imagery of a prisoner bound by chains in a dungeon. This is an apt image of the state of mankind as described in Ephesians 2:1-3.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (ESV)

This picture of mankind as dead in "trespasses and sins" and "by nature children of wrath" could be the source for Wesley's "fast bound in sin and nature's might." Giving credence to this theory is the next line where Wesley introduces "a quickening ray" emitted from the eye of God which caused Wesley to awaken from his slumber of sin and death. The language of quickening or "making alive" is present in the Authorized Version of Ephesians 2:1 and 4. "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; . . . Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ." The quickening of the sinner resulted in a dungeon now inflamed with light, chains being broken, and a free heart. Wesley's response to the quickening work of God was to rise up and follow the Christ who is the subject of this hymn. This combination of the biblical images of life, light, freedom from sin, and freedom of heart testify of a profound understanding of the transformation that takes place at regeneration.

5. Still the small inward voice I hear,  
That whispers all my sins forgiven;  
Still the atoning blood is near,  
That quenched the wrath of hostile Heaven.  
I feel the life His wounds impart;  
I feel the Savior in my heart.  
I feel the life His wounds impart;  
I feel the Savior in my heart.

Before Wesley's conversion, he longed for assurance of forgiveness. This longed for assurance has now come in the presence of the Holy Spirit. There may be an allusion to the inward witness

of the Spirit in 1 John 5:10, but is largely an experiential reality which Wesley expresses here. The “small inward voice . . . whispers all my sins forgiven.” Though deeply experiential, the basis for this experience is the objective work of Christ on the cross. It was Jesus’ “atoning blood” which “quenched the wrath of hostile heaven.” This vivid imagery of the death of Christ satisfying the wrath of a holy God is seen in the Scripture’s use of the word “propitiation” in Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2, and 1 John 4:10. The word “propitiation” means “to satisfy wrath.” Christ on the cross propitiated a holy God on our behalf.

6. No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach th’eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.  
Bold I approach th’eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Wesley begins his final stanza with words which reflect a familiarity with Romans 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation for them which are in Christ Jesus.” These hope-filled words provide an opportunity for reflection upon the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in justification. The reason that the believer need not fear God’s condemnation is that we are united to Jesus Christ through faith “Jesus, and all in Him, is mine.” This includes His righteousness, as Wesley specifies that the now alive sinner is “clothed in righteousness divine.” This evokes biblical imagery from Genesis 3 when God provided coats of skin to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve to Joshua the High Priest with dirty clothes for whom God provided a change of raiment in Zechariah 3. These words also reflect a careful reading of 2 Corinthians 5:21 which states, “For he [God] hath made him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” It is on the basis of this clothing with the righteousness of Christ that we are enabled to approach “th’eternal throne” boldly. Also alluded to here is the work of Jesus, our Great High Priest, in Hebrews 4:16 which allows the author to exhort his readers: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Wesley closes the hymn with the phrase “through Christ my own.” This is an apt summary of the hymn’s teaching and of Wesley’s theology. All our blessings are “through Christ” (the objective work of Christ) and they are by faith “my own” (the experiential possession). Because of its rich doctrinal and devotional quality, it is no wonder that this hymn has stood the test of time and remains a favorite by congregations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The enduring relevance of this hymn was brought home to me in recent years at the Together for the Gospel conferences (2008 and 2010) when a crowd of 4,000 plus mostly men under the age of 40 sang this hymn with deep affection at the top of their lungs. Tears streamed down men’s faces and arms were uplifted as they sang of the amazing love of God as seen in the death of Christ for their sins.