

Pastor and People.

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER?

NOTES ON THE REV. DR. LOWRY'S GREAT HYMN.
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The river, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb, may be considered as the symbol of the Church's life, or that of the individual member of the Church. As such, could anything be more expressive—beautiful? It is perfect, and though all symbols are inadequate—a matter which no one knew better than the gifted author, yet how suggestive, how true, so far as it goes! A river is irresistible, it must have its way; so with the blessed life. A river is pure, clear as crystal; so is the blessed life. A river is mysterious as to its source, having its rise in the distant hills, far removed from the stratagems of the enemy; so with the blessed life. A river is perennial, able to stand the summer's heat and the winter's cold; so with the blessed life. The peasant who builds his house on its banks has never missed it for a single day. When he wakes at night and looks out of the window, it is there. When he rises in the early morn, it is the first thing that meets his eye. It was there, he knows, before he was born, and it will be there to minister to his children, and his children's children, after he has gone; so with that blessed life which we have through Jesus Christ our Lord, well represented by proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb.

Life is like a stream, beginning like a silver thread in the distant hills, but ever increasing in volume. The child's life is a very feeble thing—chiefly animal, but as years roll on, his mind opens up, and takes a wider range. At every stage new feelings are awakened, new powers are started, new hopes are kindled. Every change that takes place, every relation we form, touches a cord whose vibration will not cease with time. It is not long till the child discovers this. It is not long till love answering love welcomes the mother that never wearies in her ministrations by night or day. He is conscious of life opening up then—of a fountain unsealed altogether new and strange. Still more does he feel this, when, smitten with a yet deeper love, he looks into the fair young face of her that is to be the partner of his sorrows and his joys. Still more when he becomes a parent, and takes his first-born in his arms. Still more when death enters the little circle, and takes from his side the desire of his eyes. Still more when he opens his soul to receive the loving life of heaven, and rejoices in a newly-found Saviour. New feelings—powers—are ever springing up as we advance in years. The horizon rises as we ascend the hill; the tide rolls on with a deeper volume, and the will with a mightier sweep carries us on into the ages.

But it does not follow from all this that life becomes purer and better as we advance in years. On the contrary, its growing fulness may be its growing misery. The new elements that may have entered in during its progress may have added to its power, but may have taken away from its enjoyment. For we all know that life is essentially corrupted—corrupted at the fountain, so that unless some cleansing power, *ab extra*, be introduced, those new elements will prove gall and wormwood in our experience. Who would care to have such a life, invested with such an awful power, though prolonged for a thousand years? Degraded though the soul be, it is not so degraded as to seek for such an existence. It seeks for something better than the present, and were there nothing better within its reach—did no vision of a nobler, purer life, ministering to its faith, and quickening its energies, dawn upon it, who would not join in the cry of the patriarch?—"Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and light to the bitter in soul, which long for death but it cometh not, which dig for it more than for hid treasures, and which would rejoice and be exceeding glad to find a grave?" But it is of the better life that Dr. Lowry speaks, and of which this great Apocalyptic symbol speaks—the river clear as crystal—the blessed state concerning which Christ said: "I have come that ye may have life, and that ye may have it more abundantly." More abundantly not as regards one line, but every line—the intellectual line—the social line—the moral line—the spiritual line—and even the sensuous line (the eye for beauty, the ear for song, and so on); for we cannot suppose that this, the source of so much pure enjoyment here, is

to have no place in the new heaven and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. The symbol of the river ever growing in volume and power, is expressive. Read the hymn over once more.

Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod,
With its crystal tide, forever,
Flowing by the throne of God?

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.

Ere we reach the shining river,
Lay we every burden down;
Grace our spirits will deliver,
And provide a robe and crown.
Yes, we'll gather at the river, etc.

At the shining of the river,
Mirror of the Saviour's face,
Saints, whom death will never sever,
Raise their songs of saving grace.
Yes, we'll gather at the river, etc.

Soon we'll reach the silver river,
Soon our pilgrimage will cease,
Soon our happy hearts will quiver
With the melody of peace.
Yes, we'll gather at the river, etc.

LATIN VERSION.

Fluvione colligēmus
Qua sint seraphim sancti—
Fluvio amena cujus
Fons est throno Domini?

Etiam, nos colligēmus orā—
Pulcherrimā, pulcherrimā orā;
Mox sanctis colligēmus orā
Juxta thronum Domini.

Soluti omni onere
Pervenimus fluvium,
Et purgati omni labe,
Accipēmus stephanum.
Etiam, nos colligēmus, etc.

Et, nacto amne lucido—
Vultus Jesu speculo—
Morte separandes nunquam,
Profundēmus pceanam.
Etiam, nos colligēmus, etc.

Mox, mors victa, labor actus,
Nos felices erimus
Coram Deo et Agno,
Multis stephanis claro.
Etiam, nos colligēmus, etc.

Now hear the story of the hymn, for the information I furnish is entirely reliable. It was written by the Rev. R. Lowry, D.D., in July, 1864, then living in Brooklyn, N. Y., pastor of the Hanson Place Baptist Church. One afternoon, the weather oppressively hot, the author was lying on a lounge in a state of physical exhaustion. In that happy hour his fancy took wings, and visions of the future world passed before him with startling vividness. Much of the imagery of the Apocalypse took the form of tableaux. Brightest of all was the throne, the river, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne, and the gathering of the saints. Still breathing heavily in the sultry air of that July day, his soul seemed to take new life from the celestial outlook. He began to wonder why the sacred poets had written so much about the river of death, and so little of the river of life. While he mused the fire burned, and the thoughts began to shape themselves in words—first as a question of Christian solicitude: Shall we gather at the river? and then they broke out in chorus, as an answer of Christian faith: Yes, we will gather. On these, the question and answer, the hymn developed itself. The music came with the hymn. The author has never been able to tell which had priority of birth.

They are twins. No attempt to dis sever them has been successful. They were born from the same afflatus. They came together, and must go together. When the song had formulated itself in the author's mind, he sprang up, sat down to his organ, played the tune through, and sang the first stanza and the chorus. Then he proceeded to write it out, and easily the words dropped from his pen, and took the rhythmic form and fashion with which we are now so familiar. In short, the hymn was simply the gush of a grand experience on the part of the author, which he had no power to resist, on that sultry afternoon when his nerves were unstrung, and when his faith and fancy dwelt on things unseen.

Such is the *genesis* of this noble hymn, which has taken such a hold on Christendom—beautiful for its simplicity, as all great works are, and touching, by

reason of the many tender thoughts which it suggests. There can be no doubt as to its great popularity. It early found its way into the Sabbath School Hymnal, prepared by the American Tract Society; and think of 40,000 children with their teachers, in connection with the Brooklyn Sabbath schools, singing it at their May anniversary the year following its birth, on parade and in their churches. And during the twenty years since what a comfort, what a cheer, it has been to thousands!

It has been sung in hours of deep sorrow, and seasons of holy joy; on land, on the sea; at the bedside of the dying; at the parting of friends; in convention halls and churches; on the field of battle, and on the quiet camping-ground. It soon crossed the ocean, and became known in Great Britain and on the Continent, and some of the most distant missionary stations, e.g., Sandwich Islands, received it, and translated it into their different vernaculars.

A flood of popular music has come in since this hymn began its life—come and gone; but this remains, and there are few places where this noble lyric would not be sung heartily, if only some leader would start the melody; for there is something in the music that stirs the blood, and something in the words that appeals to all that is the purest and best in the soul. Many instances, too, might be given, illustrating its quickening and refreshing power; but I must content myself with one, or say two, for this paper is already too long. The first is in connection with Dr. Lowry himself. He had been preaching at Asbury Park, N. J., and was proceeding to his hotel, when a gentleman introduced himself, and said: "I want to tell you how much I am indebted to you for that one song, 'Shall we Gather at the River?'" When my daughter was on her death-bed, three months ago, she asked us to sing it. It was the song she loved to sing when she was well, and the only one she wanted to hear when she was dying; and so we gathered around her dying bed, and sang. Yes, sir, I thank you for the comfort of that song."

The other case I mean to mention is that of a young man who had been stricken down with fever in the military hospital at Alexandria, during the late war in Egypt. A lady visitor, hearing him moan piteously for his mother, sat down by his side, and laid her hand on his burning brow, for which he was grateful. The sun was then setting, and flinging his waves of light on the yellow water of the Nile. Seeing this, she began to sing, "Shall we gather?" and as she sang one weary day and another was raised in a listening attitude. On stopping, one said: "Oh, lady, sing that again," and she sang it again. Then closing she said to the lad: "Will you be there?" Whereupon a bright light shone in his eye, and a faint utterance fell from his lips: "Yes, I shall soon be there," and soon after he took his departure.

The author of such a hymn is a public benefactor. His work is better than a gold mine. It bears a wealth to many a heart—to generations unborn, such as the fabled Pactolus, flowing on golden sands, never bore. Who can speak of the mission of one such hymn and its far-reaching power? Surely if the statesman, the general in high command, the philosopher who has struck out some new truth, made some happy discovery, by which his fellow-men are enriched for long ages, the author of such a hymn as that under consideration is entitled to gratitude; and Dr. Lowry is not without grateful recognition on the part of the good and the great in his day. A pleasing instance of this occurred at the Century Sabbath School Convention in London, England, 1880, at which the Doctor was present, occupying an obscure position, but who, it seems, could not be hid. After the last of the appointed speakers had left the platform, the chairman, Sir Charles Reed, M.P., rose and said: "I am told that the author of the hymn, 'Shall we Gather at the River?' is in the room. We would all like to hear him." Making his way from the rear seats, Dr. Lowry advanced to the platform, where he was welcomed by the chairman, and introduced to the audience. The reception was so enthusiastic that for some minutes it was impossible for him to speak. It was a suitable recognition due to such a man, and a spontaneous testimony to the value of a song, which doubtless the two hundred delegates present had made a household word.

Dr. Lowry is still with us in the flesh, doing a grand work for the Master, in Plainfield, N. J. Many a noble discourse has fallen from his lips, and many a precious utterance from his pen; but nothing that he has ever said or done is likely to surpass the regal song, struck out like a single note from the spheres on that hot July day referred to—nothing to surpass it in permanent power. Many a one has had reason to honour the name of Dr. Lowry, and many for long years to come will rise up and call him blessed, and praise him in the gates.