

“Jesus, Lover of My Soul”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

THE BEAUTIFUL HYMN, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*, written by Charles Wesley (1707-1788), brought a new warmth to English hymnody. Earlier hymns, especially those by Isaac Watts, were majestic and strong and reverent. The hymns of Charles Wesley are sweeter and more loving. They touch the heart. The author's older brother, John Wesley, thought the hymn *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* to be so intimate as to be improper so that he would not include it in his collection of hymns. Early editors changed the word *lover* to *refuge* or *Savior*. Far from being irreverent, however, this hymn like many of the 6,500 which Charles Wesley wrote, was the product of intimate experiences with the Lord.

The eighteenth child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, young Charles received his early education from his outstanding mother. After completing his formal education at Westminster School, London, and Christ Church, Oxford, he was ordained and sailed to America. He served as secretary to the governor of Georgia. Though the trip seemed unfortunate in many ways, it providentially brought him in contact with Peter Boehler. This devout Moravian stirred the Wesley brothers to seek God anew. On the return from America a fierce storm almost sank the ship on which Charles was a passenger. He recorded the experience in his diary:

“... The ship made [took] so much water that the captain, finding it otherwise impossible to save her from sink-

ing, cut down the mizzen mast. In this dreadful moment, I bless God I found the comfort of hope; and such joy in finding I could hope, as the world could neither give nor take away. . . . Toward morning the sea heard and obeyed the Divine Voice, ‘Peace be still.’”

The influence of this experience is evident in the first two stanzas of *Jesus, Lover of my Soul*, which was written two or three years later and has been claimed by Christian mariners everywhere as the *Sailor's Hymn*.

Shortly after returning to England, Charles was taken sick. He suffered from pleurisy, fever and dysentery. On May 21, 1738, he was in critical condition. While alone in his room in London, he had a vision of a woman coming into his room and declaring, “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth arise and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities.” Charles responded obediently to the vision and later recorded in his diary:

“I arose and looked into the scripture. . . . At midnight I gave myself up to Christ: assured I was safe sleeping or waking. Had continued experi-



Charles Wesley

Author of “Jesus, Lover of My Soul”

ence of His power to overrule all temptations; and confessed with joy and surprise that He was able to do for me above what I can ask or think."

According to the testimony of his older brother John, "His strength returned also from that hour." The influence of this glorious healing and conversion is evident in the third stanza of *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*.

The hymns that began to flow profusely from Wesley's heart from that very day have warmed the hearts of Christians young and old ever since. A young Christian boy was sorely tempted with impure thoughts and pictures in his mind. He knew this to be sinful, but because of the constant vileness of his schoolmates he had great difficulty. He brought the problem to a godly minister who responded by ask-

ing whether he knew any hymn by memory. "Yes, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*," he replied. The wise counsellor advised the boy to sing or to repeat the hymn to himself every time he was tempted. The advice was followed. The hymn, which was originally titled *In Temptation*, was used to good advantage. The boy overcame the temptation, and later in life was used of God to help other boys with similar problems.

An old Christian warrior, Charles Finney, one of America's greatest evangelists, was walking the grounds of Oberlin College where he had been president. As he walked, he heard the congregation in the church in which he had preached for forty years begin to sing. He lifted his own voice and sang with them, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*. Before

the dawn of the next morning, he had joined another choir singing around the throne of God.

Nearly 230 years after its original publication in 1740, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* is among Christendom's greatest hymns. The famous preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, exclaimed, in regard to this hymn: "I would rather have written that hymn of Wesley's than to have the fame of all the kings that ever sat on earth. It is more glorious. It has more power in it. I would rather be the author of that hymn than to hold the wealth of the richest man in New York. He will die. He is dead and does not know it. But that hymn will go on singing until the last trump brings forth the angel band; and then I think it will mount up on some lip to the very presence of God."