

The World's Greatest Living Hymn Writer

An Interview with Dr. Oswald J. Smith

By Robert D. Kalis



Dr. Oswald J. Smith

THROUGH the crowded streets of Toronto, Canada, we slowly picked our way. Construction of a new subway caused numerous delays and detours. At long last, we found The Peoples Church and pulled into the parking area. It was a Monday afternoon, but there were a surprising number of cars there. The church building was large, but not elaborate. There was considerable activity inside. We passed a bustling bookroom and several secretaries busy at their typewriters. Quickly, we were taken to the office of Dr. Oswald J. Smith, founder of the church and noted hymn writer. My heart beat a little faster as I realized that at last my desire for several years would be granted: I would meet the greatest living hymn writer and, in fact, one of the greatest Christian leaders of our time.

It was our privilege to visit Dr. Smith the day after his 81st birthday. The secretary announced us at the door of his study. Dr. Smith rose from behind his desk and warmly greeted us. His height surprised me; he is over six feet tall. Quickly he made us feel at ease and was ready in an instant to answer our questions which he did most graciously. In response to the first question, "How many hymns have you written?" without a moment's hesitation, he replied, "The Lord has enabled me to write 1200 hymns, songs, and poems down through the years of my ministry."

"What was the first hymn you wrote?"

"One of my earliest hymns was one for which I wrote both words and music — *Deeper and*

Deeper. I wrote the music first when I was only 21 years of age. I wrote the words later when I was 24. The words were much more difficult than the music."

"Did you have any formal music training?"

"No, nothing special. I took lessons, of course, when I was a boy, but melody and rhythm were born in me, so that they just naturally came out, and I've been able to do a little bit along that line ever since."

Although *Deeper and Deeper* was one of Dr. Smith's earliest songs, the first to become well known was *Saved! Saved! Saved!* written in 1917, eleven years after his conversion. "I just wanted to express my own personal experience of my salvation," Dr. Smith explained.

As a lad of 16, Oswald and his brother Ernie attended an evangelistic campaign conducted by R. A. Torrey in Massey Hall, Toronto. There on January 28, 1906, he was soundly converted. The marvelous change which took place at that time is expressed in the first stanza of his "testimony hymn":

*Saved! Saved! Saved! my sins are all forgiv'n;
Christ is mine! I'm on my way to heav'n;
Once a guilty sinner, lost, undone,
Now a child of God, saved thro' His Son.*

From that day to this, Oswald J. Smith has been involved in Christian service. The joy of his salvation compelled him to yield his whole life to the Saviour, as he says in the words of the third stanza of this hymn:

Saved! Saved! Saved! oh, joy beyond compare!

*Christ my life, and I His constant care;
Yielding all and trusting Him alone,
Living now each moment as His own.*

In a very interesting way, this "testimony" of Oswald Smith was "given" two years after it was written in the same hall where he had been converted. Paul Rader was conducting a campaign, and his song leader introduced this song to the public for the first time. "They sang it, 3,400 voices sang it, until it seemed they would lift the roof."

"Of all the hymns which you have written, Dr. Smith, which is your personal favorite?"

"They're all my favorites, of course, but *Alone With Thee* is my most favorite because of the music that God gave me for it. I think it's the music that reaches the heart, but it's not known like some of the others are. I wrote it in Winona Lake, Indiana, in 1914 when I was 24. I wrote the music one year later."

"Did it grow out of some crisis experience in your life?"

"It grew out of a very personal experience, an engagement that was broken and that left a tremendous impression upon me in those early days of my life."

The intense struggle over this disappointment and the glorious victory finally won can be traced in the words of this favorite hymn:

*Alone with Thee when others have forsaken,
And nought is left save solitude to me,
My weary heart turns throbbing with emotion,
To find itself at last alone with Thee.*

*Alone, dear Lord, ah, yes! Alone with Thee!
My aching heart at rest, my spirit free;
My sorrow gone, my burdens all forgotten,
When far away I soar alone with Thee.*

It is evident from this hymn that the author had established a personal prayer life.

"How were you led into your prayer life, Dr. Smith?"

"I was led to observe the morning watch very, very early in my life, soon after I was converted, and from that day to this, I have observed the morning watch. I have written all about this in my book, *The Man God Uses*. I meet God before I meet man. I spend the first hour alone with God, first of all, poring over the pages of the Bible, and then walking back and forth, up and down the floor in my study, pouring out my heart in prayer. I've done that 365 days of the year for over 50 years of my life now, and I in-

tend to do it the rest of my life."

"Has this morning watch had any direct bearing on your hymn writing?"

"I don't know that it has, except that there have been times when hymns have come to me during the morning watch, and I've stopped and written them down and then gone on with my prayer life.

"I write my hymns when I'm going through a great spiritual crisis," he continued, "and every time I go through a crisis of any kind, I generally express it in a poem or a hymn. That's how most of my hymns have been born."

"Have your hymns generally been finished products at once, or have you had to work on them?"

"Generally, I've written them right through at once. I've stayed right with them until I've been able to complete them. Occasionally, I've had to continue the following day or even several days after, but, as a rule, as I start to write a hymn, I complete it then and there."

This method of composition is well illustrated by the story behind *The Song Of the Soul Set Free*, which Dr. Smith said is his second best known hymn. In 1933, A. H. Ackley sent him the music of this hymn. "Mr. Ackley could not find words for it and asked me if I would try to write for it. I placed his manuscript on my piano in my home at 15 Conrad Ave., Toronto, and immediately went to work on it. The theme sang itself into my heart. Before many minutes had passed, I had the first three verses.

"Then I came to the closing verse, and I could not help but think of the angels who were unable to sing such a song. Finally, I turned to the chorus. I wanted it to be triumphant. Dr. Ackley's magnificent music, with its great climax at the end of the chorus, had to have words suitable, and I believe God gave them to me."

Dr. Smith collaborated with A. H. Ackley and his brother, B. D. Ackley, for twenty-eight years. "I met B. D. Ackley," he recalled, "in Buffalo, New York, where he was the minister of music in the Churchill Tabernacle when I was preaching there one time. The first hymn I wrote with B. D. Ackley was *Joy in Serving Jesus* in 1931. From the time I met him and his brother, I stopped writing music altogether. They could write so much better.

"The man I wrote for first of all was D. B.

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Towner, who wrote the music for *Trust and Obey* and many other well known hymns. He's the man that really started me in hymn writing. My association with him began in 1914 when I was attending McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and he was Director of Music at the Moody Bible Institute.

"I simply started sending him my hymn poems," Dr. Smith recalled, "and he started writing for them. We used to meet each other and work at the organ together. He'd work out the melody and ask me for suggestions. He and I put out a lot of hymns from 1914 until he died in 1919. *Christ is Coming Back Again* is the greatest hymn he ever wrote for me."

One of the first hymns for which Towner wrote the music was *Jesus Only*. This was published by Charles M. Alexander, famous song leader for Torrey, under whose ministry Smith had been converted, and later for Chapman. "Alexander," Dr. Smith explained, "put many of my songs into his books, and so they were widely distributed in those early years. Later, the Rodeheaver Company published my songs in their books."

After Towner's death, Dr. Smith worked with George C. Stebbins, Moody's great song leader and composer of the music for *Have Thine Own Way Lord, Some Day the Silver Cord Will Break*, and many more. (He died when he was 99 years and 10 months of age.) At present, Dr. Smith is writing hymns for John W. Petersen, Redd Harper, and for *Back to the Bible* broadcast.

"What do you think of the modern trend in

gospel singing?" we asked.

"I have no use for it at all. I don't appreciate it. I don't like it. I detest it. Rock music is terrible for hymns and gospel songs. There's no reverence in it at all. That type of music is very, very worldly."

"What is it that makes it worldly?"

"I suppose because it makes people dance. It gets into their feet. Music to become sacred has to be associated with sacred words first. Many of these hymns are so sacred to us because all our life they've been associated with sacred words. That's what makes them mean so much to us."

On the wall beside Dr. Smith's desk, I noticed a mounted copy of *The Glory Of His Presence*, the third best known of his hymns in the hymn writer's estimation. "Does that plaque have any special significance?" I asked.

"Somebody sent that to me. I don't know why he did."

"That happens to be my favorite of all your hymns, Dr. Smith. It seems to be so inward, and it usually brings the presence of the Lord wherever it's sung."

"It does? It is the favorite of a great many soloists."

The story of this beautiful hymn is found in Dr. Smith's own book, *Hymn Stories*, of which he gave us a copy:

"Sometimes in the darkest moments of life God gives a song — a song in the night. It was so with David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, and it has been so with me. For it was in just such an hour that *The Glory of His Presence* was born. Despair had driven me to God. Day after day, in the midst of heartache and disappointment, I stole away and walked alone with Jesus, and oh, how real He became! From the depth

of the valley to the mountain height above, I journeyed with Him, until the vision of His glory flooded all my soul. Words and music were wedded by B. D. Ackley. And what an example of interpretation!"

The keynote of the life of Dr. Oswald J. Smith has been evangelism: reaching people with the message of salvation. He has conducted many campaigns himself and has been a most ardent supporter of missionary endeavors to reach the lost in other lands. It is fitting, therefore, that Dr. Smith's best known hymn should be *Then Jesus Came*.

"The way that song was born," recalled Dr. Smith, "was like this: I was standing by the piano of B. D. Ackley in Philadelphia. We were trying over some new hymns, when suddenly Homer Rodeheaver walked into the room. He said to me, 'I'd like a hymn that tells the conditions of people before Christ met them and before they met Christ; and then the change that took place and their conditions after they met Jesus. Would you be willing to write such a hymn?'"

"I said I'd be glad to try. I went back to the China Inland Mission headquarters where I was being entertained in Philadelphia and sat down that evening and I wrote this hymn.

"I gave it to Mr. Rodeheaver the next day. He wrote the magnificent music to which it is now sung, and so it started on its way. When Homer Rodeheaver sang it, he would put up his coat collar and pretend that he was the man he was singing about. He would act it out right from beginning to end."

This best known hymn of Dr. Smith portrays the healing of a blind beggar in the first stanza, the deliverance of the demoniac of Gadara in the second, while the third describes the cure of a leper and the healing of miscellaneous other sick ones. The fourth stanza is not always in-

cluded in the published version of this hymn. It describes the resurrection of Lazarus and was actually the story Dr. Rodeheaver had in mind when he conceived the idea for this hymn:

Their hearts were sad as in the tomb they laid

Him,

*For death had come and taken him away;
Their night was dark, and bitter tears were
falling;*

Then Jesus came, and night was turned to day.

The fifth and last stanza describes the experience of Dr. Smith as well as the thousands whom he has introduced to Jesus. At the same time, it is an invitation to all to open their heart's door and invite Jesus to come in to stay.

So men today have found the Saviour able,—

*They could not conquer passion, lust and sin;
Their broken hearts had left them sad and
lonely,—*

*Then Jesus came and dwelt Himself within.
When Jesus comes, the tempter's pow'r is broken;*

*When Jesus comes, the tears are wiped away.
He takes the gloom and fills the life with glory,*

For all is changed when Jesus comes to stay.

At the close of our interview, Dr. Smith took us through the sanctuary. "We had to put up extra chairs last night," he remarked as he pointed out the clever design of the seating arrangement. Dr. Smith is now "Minister of Missions" at the church which he founded more than forty years ago. For many years, The Peoples Church has had the largest Sunday evening audience in all of Canada, and now also has the largest Sunday school as well. Its most outstanding feature is its missionary program, for the church has contributed more than seven million dollars to missions.

At 81, Dr. Smith is tremendously agile. His long and quick steps forced us to hurry to keep up with him. His entire manner is that of a man with purpose and determination. He exudes confidence. He has a great job to do, and he has been given power to do that job for more than 60 years.

Prayer and pains, through faith in Christ Jesus, will do anything.

— John Eliot, Apostle to the American Indians