Yesterday, Today, Forever

Words by Albert Simpson (1843-1919), Music by James Burke (1858-1901)

Albert Benjamin Simpson, often known as A.B. Simpson, was born in 1843, on Canada’s Prince Edward Island. His family moved to remote western Ontario after his father lost his fortune and sought work there. Simpson’s parents were devoutly religious and encouraged their children to be the same. They paid for Albert’s older brother to receive ministry training, but they couldn’t afford to pay for Albert’s education. When Simpson was 15, he came across the book Gospel Mystery of Salvation, which showed him that “The first good work you will ever perform is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Until you do this, all your works, prayers, tears, and resolves are vain.”

“I threw myself on my knees at once,” Simpson said, and prayed, “Lord Jesus, Thou has said that ‘him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.’ Thou knowest how long and how earnestly I have wanted to come, but I did not know how. Now I come the best I can and I believe because Thou hast commanded me to believe that Thou dost receive me, that Thou dost save me, and from this moment I am Thy child, forgiven and saved, simply because I have taken Thee at Thy word, and I now dare to look up in the face of God and say, ‘Abba, Father, Thou art mine.’”

Simpson went on to Knox College in Toronto and started pastoring around 1865. In 1873, he moved to the United States to pastor in Louisville, Kentucky. When he moved to a pastorate in New York City, he was confronted with the overwhelming need to reach masses of immigrants. His church leadership didn’t support that, so Simpson started the Gospel Tabernacle, where he could welcome everyone to learn about Jesus. The immigrants’ needs opened Simpson’s eyes to the importance of taking the Gospel to faraway places, and his worldwide missions vision was born. He started holding weekly evangelistic meetings which grew to become camp and revival meetings. These meetings eventually developed into The Christian and Missionary Alliance, a group dedicated to living the “deeper life” in Christ and evangelizing the world.

Simpson was still pastoring in Kentucky when he realized the impact a good Gospel song could have in touching people’s hearts. In 1874, Simpson invited Daniel Whittle and Philip Bliss to hold evangelistic services in Louisville, where Bliss’s powerful singing stirred his heart. Albert Simpson started writing his own songs around this time. He wasn’t particularly musical, having failed at learning violin when he was younger and having learned only enough piano to pick out a one-fingered melody. Yet he wrote tunes to accompany many of his songs. He would sometimes call on his daughter’s help, telling her, “I have a message for you for my sermon tomorrow. Meet me at the piano soon.” So the essence of his sermons were also put in song form again and again. Songs and sermons were Simpson’s own duet.

April and May of 1890 found Albert Simpson preaching a series of messages on the life of Christ. On July 18, 1890, The Christian Alliance and Missionary Weekly published the poem “Yesterday, To-day and Forever,” which had seventeen stanzas with a chorus. (In our current hymnals, two stanzas are sung together before each chorus.) Each stanza is a vignette of the Savior’s life. It is likely that the vignettes sprang from the truths Simpson gleaned while preparing his April and May sermons. Three of the stanzas refer to Jesus healing people. Around that time God was showing Simpson that Jesus is a current-day healer, as well.

That same year, Simpson published a little booklet of song lyrics titled Hymns and Songs of the Four-fold Gospel and the Fulness of Jesus. It’s possible that is was published in time for his annual Gospel meetings at Old Orchard Missionary Convention held at Old Orchard Beach in Maine. Simpson often introduced his later hymnals at these August conventions. The first hymnal with music, Hymns of the Christian Life, was published in 1891, and it included “Yesterday, Today, and Forever.” Its tune was written by the music director of the Gospel Tabernacle at the time, James Burke.