

I Know Whom I Have Believed

Words by Daniel Whittle (1840–1901), Music by James McGranahan (1840–1907)

Daniel Webster Whittle was born in 1840 in New England, but moved to Chicago to work. He joined the Union Army in 1861. He lost his right arm at the Battle of Vicksburg and was taken to a prisoner of war camp. One day, when looking for reading material, he came across a New Testament. He appreciated what he read, but he was not ready to make any commitment to God.

However, God was at work in the heart of Whittle. A hospital orderly had seen him reading the Bible. Whittle was asleep one night when the orderly woke him. Another soldier was dying and wanted Whittle to pray with him. He hesitated, and the orderly protested, "But I thought you were a Christian; I have seen you reading your Bible." What else could Whittle do? He went to the dying boy. Whittle described the scene at his bedside:

"I dropped on my knee and held the boy's hand in mine. In a few broken words I confessed my sins and asked Christ to forgive me. I believed right there that He did forgive me. I then prayed earnestly for the boy. He became quiet and pressed my hand as I prayed and pleaded God's promises. When I arose from my knees, he was dead. A look of peace had come over his troubled face, and I cannot but believe that God who used him to bring me to the Savior, used me to lead him to trust Christ's precious blood and final pardon. I hope to meet him in heaven."

Whittle returned to Chicago after the war and became treasurer for the Elgin Watch Company. He became acquainted with D. L. Moody, who urged him to leave his position and enter full-time Christian ministry. Whittle did so in 1873. He preached, and Philip Bliss (see hymn No. 72) led music for his meetings. Bliss died in a tragic train accident just three years into their partnership in 1876.

God was working even through Bliss's unexpected death. Shortly before Christmas of 1876, Bliss wrote a letter to James McGranahan, a young man whom God had placed on his heart. McGranahan was a talented tenor who had had years of voice lessons and was good enough to pursue a career in opera. He was a believer, but he had ambitions for his life. Bliss knew that McGranahan had to make a decision about how he would use his musical talent, and this reminded Bliss of his own struggle in this area a few years earlier. Despite the busyness of the holiday season and his preparations for an upcoming train trip, Bliss took time to write to McGranahan to encourage him to use his musical talents for God. He prayed that God would lead him to write the right words, and he ran the letter by Whittle before he sent it.

McGranahan received the letter, in which Bliss likened McGranahan's many years of musical training to a harvester sharpening his scythe. Bliss wrote, "Stop whetting the scythe and strike into the grain to reap for the Master!" The words burned themselves into McGranahan's mind. Days later, Philip Bliss died. McGranahan rushed to Ashtabula, Ohio, where the train wreck that took Bliss's life had occurred. There he met Whittle, who sensed immediately that Bliss had chosen McGranahan to be his successor. Whittle and McGranahan returned to Chicago on the same train, and as they rode, McGranahan yielded his life to God's service. He and Whittle would campaign together for years to come and wrote a number of songs together.

Whittle and McGranahan wrote the words and music to “I Know Whom I Have Believed” sometime in the early 1880s, and it was published in 1883 (Whittle used the pseudonym “El Nathan.”) The words echo Paul’s words to Timothy: “For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Timothy 1:12 KJV).

In the book of 1 John, the word ‘know’ is used over thirty times. God graciously provides a certain assurance to His children. “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” (1 John 5:20)