

Rejoice, the Lord is King

Words by Charles Wesley (1707-1788), Music by John Darwall (1731-1789) and Other Composers

The year 1744 was another full year of preaching for Charles Wesley. By this time, he was speaking in outdoor services as well as in meeting halls. It was a grueling life, and the Methodists faced persecution. They taught justification by faith and the necessity of being reborn spiritually. In addition, their enthusiastic sermons challenged the apathy of the Church of England, and many disliked their message and their manner. Wesley was regularly chased by angry yells and mobs with stones. After one February 1744 sermon, Wesley wrote in his journal, “They rang the bells, threw dirt and stones all the time. None struck me, till I had finished my discourse.”

That same year, England faced French invasion as a result of the obscure War of Austrian Succession. Fortunately, France called off the invasion, but these events weighed heavily on Wesley. He and those around him prayed earnestly for their king and for their nation. “At the time of intercession,” Wesley journaled in late March of that year, “we were enabled to wrestle for the nation with strong cries and tears.”

Wesley had a solid Bible model for what to do when persecuted and suffering. The apostle Paul had faced cruelty and uncertainty when he preached truth. He was in prison when he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). Those words held true for Wesley in his difficulties. So in the midst of the events of 1744, Wesley penned another hymn: “Rejoice, the Lord is King”—to encourage himself, his followers, or both.

The theme is joy in God’s triumph and sovereign reign. Two additional stanzas continue the confidence of the ones with which we are familiar:

He sits at God’s right hand,
Till all his foes submit,
And bow to his command
And fall beneath his feet.
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice,
Rejoice, again, I say, rejoice.

He all his foes shall quell,
Shall all our sins destroy,
And every bosom swell
With pure seraphic joy;
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice
Rejoice, again, I say, rejoice.

John Darwall, a young English clergyman in Wesley’s day, wrote the bright tune we sing with this song for Psalm 148, a psalm of exuberant praise to God. A mutual acquaintance of Wesley and George Frideric Handel introduced them and asked Handel to compose a tune for this and two other Wesley’s hymns. Handel agreed and wrote a majestic tune, yet Darwall’s tune—the only one we know him for—is the one that fit and endured best.

This inspired hymn has long been a personal favorite of mine. When I am tempted to be depressed or am spiritually under attack, singing this song aloud clears the spiritual atmosphere and affirms the eternal truth that God is indeed King of Kings and Lord of Lords. With this knowledge, I can thus confidently rejoice and give praise to God who sits on His throne and reigns.

“I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. . . . From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” (Revelation 19:11-13, 15-16)