

Podcast 266 Brighten the Corner Where You Are

Scott: I am reminded me of a story that I've never told on here before. Back in the day, when I was in full time college ministry, we were on a staff retreat at somebody's hunting lodge in Michigan. I was leading a worship session with the small group.

I said, "Hey, why don't we do, as the deer pants for the water song?" The whole place started cracking up. It took me a second to realize that there were about 10 or 12 deer staring down at us from the walls of the hunting lodge.

Steve: Your story will be a good introduction for our episode, since I'm going to talk about a hymn today. It is #21 in our "Hymns for Family Worship" book, which is online for free if you want to read it as a PDF. The song is called, "Brighten the corner where you are." <http://www.buildingfaithfamilies.org/familyworship/>

It's a wonderful hymn, very simplistic in some ways. It doesn't have the rich majesty of "Praise Ye the Lord the Almighty" or "A Mighty Fortress is our God." However in the 19th century, it was a very popular hymn.

Let's pray. "Father, thank You for all the different ways that You have ministered to us and through us. Thank You for encouraging us all along the way. I pray that as we consider the story of this young woman who wrote this hymn today that you will talk to each of our hearts in Jesus' name, amen."

Ina Ogden was the daughter of a farmer who fought in the American Civil War, and spent the rest of his life with a musket ball in his knee. When she was 11, she lived briefly in a 160 acre claim in Dakota Territory, and went to school in a sod shanty. She began college at about 16 and at 20, she became a schoolteacher, a job she would hold for the next eight years. That same year, she published her first hymn, "Open Wide the Windows," which was prompted by a story in which a mother lost her only child. She wrote her next hymn for her brother, when he had a prolonged hospital stay after a train accident.

At 24, Ina married James Weston Ogdon, who became the editor of the Toledo Times. When their only son, William, was born in 1901, Ina gave up her job as a schoolteacher, but continued to write almost daily. In fact, she wore a silver pencil around her neck, so she could jot down her thoughts as she did housework. Her 25-year career as a Sunday school teacher inspired her to write poems for her students. Ina sensed her ability came from God to share His word.

To a woman who longed to work in the inner city or in foreign missions, Ina's sphere of influence seemed much too small. She became interested in the Chautauqua Circuit, which began as a summer school for Sunday school teachers and grew into an educational movement which President Teddy Roosevelt called "the most American thing in America." In 1912, Ina was invited to be a Chautauqua speaker, but when her father was paralyzed by a stroke, she stayed home to care for him instead.

I am going to pause for a moment and set the stage for the rest of the hymn history. There's a town near me called Mount Gretna (I live in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania) which was a site for these Chautauqua meetings. These meetings began as summer training for Sunday School teachers.

It later grew to be an educational movement, and spread all over the country. One of the first ones was at Lake Chautauqua up in New York, which is on Western New York. My wife's grandfather used to sell Chautauqua desks, which came from this movement.

The Chautauqua movement was a big thing. For Ina Ogden to be invited as a speaker on the Chautauqua circuit would give her a wide range of influence. She already had 25 years' experience as a Sunday school teacher herself, she was gifted, she could write hymns, and she wrote poetry. Perhaps she was thinking that her ship had finally come in and she would now have a wide sphere of influence.

Instead, her father has a stroke, and she stays home to care for him. This story resonates with my heart because I can tell that she has a passion to be something special like a missionary, inner-city worker, or a speaker on the Chautauqua circuit. Instead, she finds herself caring for one man in her home who is paralyzed.

I'll continue reading.

One day, when a neighbor remarked that the brightest spots in her life came from time at home, Ina began wondering whether the people in her own life could say the same. Shut up in the upstairs corner bedroom, she wrote the words to "Brighten the Corner Where You Are" because she wanted "to be cheerful and have a wholesome attitude" and to plant seeds of God's love, rather than spreading anxiety through the home. Perhaps she was thinking of Philippians 2:14-15, which tells us, "Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world."

I'm going to stop in the history and sing the first verse if you've never heard this tune.

1. Do not wait until some deed of greatness you may do,
Do not wait to shed your light afar;
To the many duties ever near you now be true,
Brighten the corner where you are.

Brighten the corner where you are!
Brighten the corner where you are!
Someone far from harbor you may guide across the bar;
Brighten the corner where you are!

2. Just above are clouded skies that you may help to clear,
Let not narrow self your way debar;
Though into one heart alone may fall your song of cheer,
Brighten the corner where you are.

3. Here for all your talent you may surely find a need,
Here reflect the bright and Morning Star;
Even from your humble hand the Bread of Life may feed,
Brighten the corner where you are.

Knowing the history, as I sing that song, my mind pictures this dear woman who has special gifts and talents with a desire to bless the world. Instead, she finds herself in a bedroom caring for her father who has been paralyzed by a stroke. But there is more to the story that will encourage us. I am reading more from the history.

I need to talk about Billy Sunday first. Billy Sunday was the first evangelist who spoke to over a million people. He was a baseball player who preached the gospel. He was one of the first professional athletes to become converted and use his platform as a well known athlete to attract crowds of people.

Historians estimate that he had preached 42,000 sermons. He would preach 40 times a week. He was a forerunner of men like D.L. Moody and later Billy Graham. Billy Sunday had a musical director named Homer Rodeheaver. I'll continue to read now.

God did let Ina's light shine throughout the world from her small corner caring for her father. Billy Sunday's musical director, Homer Rodeheaver, would often use the song "Brighten the Corner Where You Are" at his evangelistic meetings. Sunday had it sung by the Massachusetts Legislature—and once got a crowd of 16,000 to whistle it. "Brighten the Corner" was known as the most-often performed and printed, and perhaps even the most popular American song of the 20th century. Teddy Roosevelt used it in his political rallies.

Visitors to the Billy Sunday Tabernacle told stories of what the song meant to them. A Chinese immigrant realized his recovery from drug addiction would begin by removing the darkness in his soul. A factory manager recognized she didn't know the names of the girls who worked for her, and began looking out for their physical and spiritual welfare. A woman who had nearly stopped speaking to her husband was convicted by the words "Do not let narrow self your way debar," and after weeks of showing kindness to him, they were reconciled. A single mother realized in her struggle to support her four children, she'd forgotten tenderness—and their home life was transformed.

"One who is faithful in a very little thing is also faithful in much" (Luke 16:10).

I think this message is something that we all need to remember. I know in this season of COVID, I didn't get to go on the road this year. I didn't get to travel and speak to audiences and stand at my booth and talk to people. I've been home. However as I have reflected, it's been a wonderful opportunity for me to practice this song, and brighten the corner where I am.

I've deepened my relationship with my granddaughters because I got to homeschool them for several months. My wife and I have had wonderful times. Johnny and I have had neat times. I feel more connected to my family than I have in a long time.

I've flourished in this time of quarantine. For many people it's been a trial, but to me, it's been a chance to brighten the corner where I am. Yesterday, one of my boys took in four foster children. This weekend, I met them for the first time.

I thought of Ina Ogden. My son and his wife are wonderfully gifted. They have lots of talents and energies. She's worked with refugees and tutored many children in music. He is actively engaged in the political arena. Now these two gifted individuals have an opportunity to brighten the lives of four little peanuts. That's what I call young kids.

I look at them and I think, "Wow. These four precious children are going to have a stable home. They're going to have two loving, caring, safe adults to be with." God places us in situations where we might not be affecting the world as we know it, but

we can brighten the corner where we are, and shine the light of Christ in our day-to-day routines. Amen.

May God help us to focus on those around us, and have our eyes open to opportunities to minister, whether it's to our own family, or our neighbors, or people that we meet as we do our daily business rounds.

Lets pray.

Father help us to brighten the corner where we are. Thank You for corners that need Your light. Thank You for opportunities to shed Your light to those that are close to us. I pray that You'll help us to do that, help us to see opportunities, and help us to be faithful in little things. If You want to expand them that will be wonderful. But if not, help us to be faithful nonetheless, for You are faithful. In Jesus' name, Amen.