

CFBC Hymns Class 23

William Cowper (1731-1800)

“William Cowper’s life seems to be one long accumulation of pain.”

“For 13 years Newton was Cowper’s pastor and counselor and friend. Cowper said ‘A sincerer or more affectionate friend no man ever had’ ”

John Piper on the life of William Cowper

“When providences are dark it is difficult to read them”

John J Murray

“God Moves In A Mysterious Way”

“What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter” (Jn. 13.7)

INTRO.: A hymn which reminds us that we do not always know exactly what the Lord is doing is "God Moves In A Mysterious Way." The text was written by William Cowper (1731-1800). It was first published anonymously in the 1774 *Twenty-six Letters on Religious Subjects, to which are added Hymns, by Omicron*, published by John Newton. Its first use in a hymnbook was in the 1779 *Olney Hymns* (Book III), compiled by Newton and Cowper, where it is ascribed to Cowper.

This is reported to be the last hymn by Cowper and is believed to have been produced in memory of a time when Cowper had decided to commit suicide by drowning himself. He called a carriage and told the driver to take him to the Thames River. Stories as to what happened vary. Some say that a thick fog arose which prevented them from finding the river. Others say that the driver pretended to be lost and drove around until Cowper fell asleep. In any event, the driver finally let Cowper off back at his home, and Cowper decided that God had moved in a mysterious way to prevent him from killing himself.

The tune (Dundee French) most commonly used is attributed to Guillaume Franc, who was born somewhere around 1505 to 1520 in Rouen, France. In 1537, reformer John Calvin proposed the singing of Psalms by the whole congregation, and in 1539 published his first *Psalter* with adaptations by himself and Clement Marot. This was expanded in 1542, and with the help of Theodore Beza again in 1551...The final version of this *Psalter* was published in 1562 at Geneva...

The hymn is a powerful statement of the providence of God.

I. Stanza 1 centers upon God's ways...

"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm."

A. God moves in a mysterious way because no man can know what is in the mind of God except the Spirit reveals it: 1 Cor. 2.11

B. Therefore, apart from what God has revealed, we cannot know precisely how He performs His wonders: Ps. 77.14

II. Stanza 2 centers upon God's designs...

"Deep in unfathomable mines Of never failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs, And works His gracious will."

A. To mere humans, the ways of the Lord are unfathomable or unsearchable: Rom. 11.33

B. Yet, they show to us His never failing skill: Isa. 42.16

III. Stanza 3 centers upon God's blessings...

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head."

A. There are many times when God's people need fresh courage: Josh. 1.6-7

B. Sometimes the clouds seem to obscure the Lord from us and bring gloom into our lives: Job 3.1-5

IV. Stanza 4 centers upon God's grace...

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face."

A. We cannot judge the Lord by the feeble senses of our frail, human minds. Rather, we must trust Him for His grace: Ps. 103.8-14

B. The events of life may cause us to think that He is frowning, but behind them He hides a smiling face: 2 Chron. 30.9

V. Stanza 5 centers upon God's purposes...

"His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste, But sweet will be the flower."

A. God has eternal purposes which He works out to His own glory: Eph. 1.11

B. Sometimes the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower... because we are not always able to see how that the end of thing is better than the beginning: Eccl. 7.8

VI. Stanza 6 centers upon God's work...

"Blind unbelief is sure to err And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, And He will make it plain."

A. Unbelief is sure to err. Therefore, they will scan His work in vain because they in their rebellion they forget God's works: Ps. 78.7-8

B. Rather, we must remember that God is His own interpreter and that He will make all things plain in His good time, which is what living by faith is all about: Hab. 2.1-4

Our finite human minds cannot fully comprehend exactly how an infinite God works providentially in nature to watch over and care for His people and provide for all their needs. Therefore, we rest in His goodness, wisdom and power as He executes His holy purposes.

<https://hymnstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2008/06/02/quotgod-moves-in-a-mysterious-wayquot/>

Excerpts from a Discussion by Ligon Duncan, Bill Wymond and Derek Thomas on “God Moves In A Mysterious Way”

This tune shows up in the Scottish Psalter by 1615, and William Cowper, the author of this wonderful hymn text, is from the late eighteenth century...He was a contemporary of John Newton, and they collaborated on hymnals. They were involved in the production of the *Olney Hymnbook*, which is a very famous hymnbook from that time.

Dr. Thomas: For about a period of twenty or thirty years or so, Cowper (who was wholly dependent, I think, on Newton for the latter half of his life in an unusual way) and Newton collaborated together on producing some of the great hymns that we still sing.

Dr. Duncan: “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” has long been one of my favorite hymns...

Dr. Thomas: It’s also one of my very favorite hymns because I’ve done so much thinking on the doctrine of providence, writing my dissertation on providence, or aspects of providence...

“God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.”

We’re not sure just the exact circumstances behind the hymn; there could be many, of course, in Cowper’s extraordinary life. It’s an example of how God uses broken vessels, and Cowper was a very broken vessel.

Dr. Duncan: Cowper was suicidal; he struggled with deep, deep depression. They would have called it *melancholia*.

We would have no doubt diagnosed it as some form of depression today and he would have been medicated, no doubt. He went through swings on several occasions; attempted to take his own life, unsuccessfully; struggled with doubts about his own salvation from time to time; and yet, Cowper had his bright periods...the poetry of this hymn is exceedingly powerful. It is simple, it is beautiful, but it is crystal clear in its declarations...Cowper wrote a number of outstanding texts, and this one is typical of the quality that he was able to produce.

Dr. Thomas: Cowper, of course, was a poet and is known as a poet, and is studied by English literature majors as a poet. He was born in the manse, or the rectory, in Berkhamsted, in November of 1731. That's just before the outbreak of the so-called Great Awakening. One thinks of the ministries of George Whitefield (and here, Jonathan Edwards) as beginning a few years after he was born.

He was a lawyer...a solicitor is what we would call him in Britain. He was called to the bar in 1754. By the age of 30, he was declared to be...in the terms of the eighteenth century, he was declared to be mad. It was not a good time to suffer from depression, and I think all of your worst sort of thoughts about treating folk in that condition. He had a wretched school experience in his early life. His experience at school was awful...I think he was always a very fragile...but he was a poet...although in school apparently he excelled for a period in cricket and football (what we would call soccer) just for a short time. But I don't think of William Cowper as athletic. He was always a fragile creature. And then he fell in love with his cousin, whose name was Theodora Cowper. And although it was within the rules of consanguinity, as we say, technically speaking, it was still borderline to marry your first cousin. And in any case, her father forbade the marriage. And I think that was probably the beginning of the slide into melancholy. He was probably predisposed to it. He never recovered from it. And she, I believe, never married, and secretly attended to him in his latter years when he needed some nursing care. But he fell headlong — as you can imagine someone with a poetic disposition — fell headlong into love with this girl, and the marriage was forbidden. And from there, by the time he was thirty, he was declared to be mad.

He attempted to take his life on at least three — and some biographers recount, I think, four or five incidents. The most famous one was on the River Thames. He hired a cab (horse and buggy, I might imagine) and was about three or four miles away. And he went to the river...it was night, it was dark. And he jumped into the river with the intention of killing himself, and the river was only a foot or so deep at that point. And he stood there weeping, just with the waters around his ankles. He tried an overdose on several occasions, at least two occasions we know of.

These things can be in the life and heart of somebody who was truly a believer, and a fragile broken believer...it was in God's providence that John Newton came into Cowper's life. You could not imagine a greater contrast between the fragile Cowper and this very masculine figure of John Newton. And they struck up an incredible friendship.

Dr. Duncan: And yet, don't you think that Newton's own recognition of his sin in his past made him such the perfect friend and pastor to this man, who was struggling with his own inner demons?

Dr. Thomas: Cowper and Newton were Calvinists, and I mean Calvinists with a capital "C"! Cowper was a sensitive soul and felt sin deeply. And it would take a Calvinistic view of a sovereign God who is yet gracious and effectual in His grace, I think, to meet Cowper's need for assurance. I think Newton was exactly the man for him.

Newton had a parish church there, but it was very rural and very English.

As an aside, John Owen wrote in one of his treatises that the best size for a congregation was around 300, and he said anything more and you couldn't pastor them properly.

Dr. Duncan: If you look over the course of Christianity since the Reformation in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland...over and over amongst Presbyterians, amongst Congregationalists, amongst Church of England folk, amongst Baptists...some of the most remarkable ministries and some of the most remarkable products of ministry, whether it be in terms of sermons that are in print or hymns that have been written or other written products, have been created precisely in this kind of environment in what is a relatively obscure parish. You think of Thomas Boston in Ettrick, south of Edinburgh. Even today if you go through Ettrick, there is nothing there! It's just a tiny little village. That's where he did his work, and he had a tremendous effect on the whole of the nation and subsequent history. But, being faithful in what was not a prominent, prestigious, large, affluent, "important" congregational situation....

Dr. Wymond: Someone told me that a lot of these works that they put together were done for mid-week services, not for Sunday. So that's even more interesting to me, that it was not the most important (as many would think) service of the church, but it was for mid-week services.

Dr. Duncan: Well, I know Newton was given to writing texts to be sung to go along with the sermons or messages that he was preaching.

This presumably would have been a relatively common practice amongst those ministers so gifted in that kind of poetic composition. I think that's good for us to remember, because these people were...themselves creatively composing material for the sung praise of the church all along....

Dr. Wymond: That is an interesting thought to me because the tunes, as you say, and the texts that we now revere the most were sifted out of literally thousands upon thousands of hymns, and so we think that we have the cream of the crop in them; not that we don't want to continue to write, but only time and the church working through new creations can decide what should remain and what should be tossed.

Dr. Duncan: And it really...it's taken generations to get to this particular collection of hymns that have survived out of even these great writers... Derek, it really is extraordinary. It's a confession of faith in God's mysterious providence.

“God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.”

If that is not a graphic image...I mean, that pulls up so many things in your mind and your heart when you hear it. Then the metaphor changes...

Dr. Thomas: Well, the point of course of planting your footsteps in the sea is you can't see them. And riding in the storm, you can't see Him for the storm. And it's part of Cowper's experience. You know, right at the very end of his life he lost the lady who had cared for him, and he plunged once again into deep melancholy, wasn't sure that God loved him, and lacked all assurance.

And then there's this marvelous description of him when he died. Someone is looking at him. He has just died, and there is this look ... and the quotation is, “There was this look of holy surprise on his face.” Just before William Cowper died, he uttered some remarkable words: “I am not shut out of heaven after all.” There is that extraordinary sense, that right at the gates of heaven Satan gets hold of him once again and robs him of his assurance, and then as the gates open, this look of holy surprise is on his face.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. The image, the metaphor changes in the second stanza from this stormy scene of invisible footsteps; now we're down in a mine...

“Deep in unfathomable mines
of never failing skill
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.”

Dr. Thomas: I think he’s alluding to Job 38 — you know, when God hasn’t spoken to Job in his trial and tribulation. And eventually when God does speak, “Prepare for action like a man...where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?”—and then it plunges into the depths of the sea and into the mines where no man had ever been. But God had been there..that is the point. And I imagine this is probably the source for “deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill.”

Dr. Duncan: Then from these two images there comes this exhortation. And it’s an exhortation to fellow saints, but you can also tell that for Cowper it’s a self-exhortation, pointed in on himself: “Ye fearful saints... “

“Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.”

So there again, another picture. Now we’ve gone from storm to mines to rain clouds, and this is his way of saying so much of a profounder thing than “behind every cloud there is a silver lining.” Much better than that, these clouds which look like storm clouds of judgment are actually going to break big with mercy and blessings.

And then the exhortation continues:
“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.”

That may be one of the most famous lines from the hymn: “...behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.”

The fifth stanza
is very famous as well, but I love the sixth stanza:

“Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.”

And there again, resigning yourself to awaiting God’s own interpretation, which may not come, Derek, in this life.

Dr. Thomas: And may never come. We will always be finite, even in glory. It’s a matter in this life of faith, isn’t it? We have to trust Him, that’s the point. And God isn’t obligated to give us the reasons. We must trust Him that the reasons are good ones.

<https://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/radio-lectures/hymns-of-the-faith-god-moves-in-a-mysterious-way/>

Samuel Rutherford on “Submitting To God’s Will In Dark Providences”

Introduction...Dark Providences are those events that not only cast a deep shadow but seem inexplicable. They seem to overwhelm us and turn our thoughts upside down in bewilderment. We are lost in trying to find out a purpose in them (Psalm 77:19). “When providences are dark it is difficult to read them” (John J Murray). If they are difficult to comprehend, how much more challenging is it to submit to God’s will that it should be so? It may seem virtually impossible. Perhaps God does not even seem to be near (Job 23:8-10). Yet it may be that in the confused noise of such dark trials we can discover more of what it is to trust an infinite God through submission. The darkness then becomes to us “the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalm 91:1).

Samuel Rutherford looks at the best response to the darkest providence: Christ submitting to the Father’s will in accepting the cup of suffering. The time of Christ’s soul trouble in the Garden of Gethsemane has much to teach us. We must learn to say with Him: “nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). What follows is an updated extract from his book *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself*.

We must also bear in mind what ***Rutherford said elsewhere, that “the Providence of God has two sides; one black and sad, another white and joyful”***. “Christ scourged; Christ in a condition, that He cannot command a cup of water; Christ dying, shamed, forsaken, is black: but Christ, in that same work redeeming the captives of hell, opening to sinners their once forfeited paradise, that is lovely and glorious...”

Joseph, weeping in the prison for no fault, is foul and sad; but Joseph brought out to reign as half a king, to keep alive the Church of God in great famine, is joyful and glorious”.

1. SUBMISSION LOOKS TO GOD’S WILL AS ULTIMATE...

Submission must be grounded on looking higher to the will of God, this is what Christ did. Every wheel in a great mechanism moves according to the motion of the highest and first wheel that moves all the rest. Rivers regulate the flow of lesser brooks by their motion. The principle of motions and ways in all mortals begins at the highest mover, the just and wise will of God. ***All must say, “nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done”.***

2. SUBMISSION LOOKS TO GOD’S WILL AS HOLY AND WISE...

Submission in adverse providence must look to the Lord’s wise and holy will as Christ did. David said that Shimei cursed him because the Lord had bidden him do it. Job acknowledged that the Lord had taken away and said: “Blessed be the name of the Lord”. ***Anyone can say “Blessed be the name of the Lord” when He gives. Most men look to second causes but never rise up to God as the first Mover.***

3. SUBMISSION APPROVES OF GOD’S WILL BEING DONE...

Hezekiah said “good is the word of the Lord” (Isaiah 39:8). It was hard, all in his house would be carried away to Babylon and his sons would be captives. Yet the will of the Lord was good and just, even when the thing willed and decreed of God was bad for him.

4. SUBMISSION WILL NOT HINDER GOD FROM DOING WHAT HE THINKS GOOD...

Christ will not hinder God from doing what He thinks good. ***Murmuring is a stone in God’s way. Murmuring is an anti-providence, a little god, setting itself against the true God that causes everything in His wisdom. The murmurer does what he can to stop up God’s way.*** Old Eli, when he heard sad news, says, “It is the Lord, let him do (I will not hinder Him from doing) what is good in his eyes” (1 Samuel 3:18). ***Christ says that He came to do God’s will (Psalm 40:7).***

5. SUBMISSION DOES NOT ABOLISH OUR OWN WILL...

Christ did not give away His natural will; rather He submitted in the act of willing. He kept for Himself a submitted will. ***It is not intended that our will be abolished in hard providences, but that it submits.*** We must not quarrel with Justice. Lamentations 3:28-29 gives many sweet signs of a broken will: (a) solitary sadness; (b) silence, the soul not daring to quarrel with God...

(c) stooping to the dust, and putting clay in the mouth, for fear it speaks against God's dispensation (see Job 40:4-5); (d) willingly accepting blows on the cheeks and reproach (Micah 7:9) the man like a well-nurtured child kisses God's rod. Only a bad soldier follows his captain sighing and weeping. ***Faith sings at tears and rejoices under hope in the day of adversity.***

6. SUBMISSION IS OUR HAPPINESS...

It's the child's happiness that the wise father's will is his rule and not his own. Our own will is our hell (Ezekiel 18:31): Christ's will is heaven. Christ thinks it is best that His Father's will should stand... "For even Christ pleased not himself" (Romans 15:3). ***All God's works of providence are as good as his works of creation. If God would direct my way to heaven through fire, tortures, blood, poverty – though He should trail me through hell – He cannot err in leading (though I may err in following).***

7. SUBMISSION PRESCRIBES NOTHING EXCEPT THAT GOD'S WILL BE DONE...

Christ prescribes no way to His Father but in general "The Lord's will be done on me" (He says). "Be what it may, if it is the will of my Father so be it. Welcome black cross, welcome pale death, welcome curses, and all the curses of God that the just law could lay on all my children (and they are a fair number), welcome wrath of God, welcome shame and the cold grave". ***The submission of faith subscribes a blank sheet of paper, let the Lord write on it what He pleases. "Though he slay me, yet I will trust in Him", said Job (Job 13:15). To resign ourselves without exception to Christ is a rare grace of God, and not of ordinary capacity.***

8. SUBMISSION TAKES GOD'S REVEALED WILL FOR OUR RULE...

In submitting His will Christ makes the prophecies and the revealed gospel His rule. He is willing to be ruled by God's revealed will in His duty. He is willing that the Lord's will stand for a law in His suffering. He willingly submits and will in no way quarrel with everlasting decrees. To be ruled by the one is holiness; to submit to the other is patience. Patience is higher than any ordinary grace.... It was a grace which was a most eminent in Christ the Lamb of God, silent, meek and silent before His shearers. ***The meekest in earth and in heaven, He only never resisted the revealed will of God, but never had any thought, motion or any hint of a desire in Him against the secret, eternal decree and counsel of God.***

9. SUBMISSION SUBJECTS NATURAL REASON TO GOD'S WILL...

...It seems strange: God has many sons but none like Christ. He was an only Son, He never had a brother by eternal generation. He was the only heir of the house, but there never was a son so afflicted as He.

It seems against all reason. But Christ says the Father's will must be done. It's against submission to put absolute questions on the Lord. We love to have God account for His providence to us and often contend that our reason is the final court of appeal in the ways of the Lord. ***Though we do not see why, yet there is a cause why He does all He does.***

10. SUBMISSION ACKNOWLEDGES GOD'S INFINITE WISDOM...

The Lord takes many different ways at once in providence. In this very act [Christ's suffering] He redeems the world, judges Satan, satisfies the law and justice, glorifies Christ, destroys sin, fulfils His own eternal will and counsel. ***There is a manifold wisdom in Providence as in the work of redemption. In every work that God does He leaves wonder behind Him. None can come after the Almighty, and say, "I could have done better than He". It is natural to blame God in His working, but impossible to mend His work.***

11. SUBMISSION IS NOT LOSS BUT GAIN...

Christ is no loser by losing His will for the Lord's; rather His will is fulfilled in that which he feared (Hebrews 5:7). ***Submitting to providence brings us a hundred fold in this life*** (Matthew 19:29). ***He is able to do above (more than abundantly above) all we can ask or think*** (Ephesians 3:20)....

12. SUBMISSION REVERENCES A HIGHER PROVIDENCE...

Christ is not intent and heart-bent on freedom from death and this black and sad hour but He reverences a higher providence, that Gods will be done. Thus, ***we are also to look to providence and not stumble at outward strokes in sad occurrences*** (Job 9:22; Ezekiel 21:3).

13. SUBMISSION APPROVES GOD'S WILL AS GOOD EVEN WHEN THINGS ARE WORST...

Christ declares that even when matters are worst, there is good will for Him in God's will being done.

Christ says (as it were), "I have (God knows) a heavy soul, my strength is dried up like a potsherd. This cup tastes of hell and fiery indignation, the sight of it would kill a man. Yet I'll drink it. The good and just will of my Father be done. Here I stand, I go no further. ***To stand still, silence our tumultuous thoughts (since we have a body of sin) and be satisfied with the will of the Lord, is safest.*** The friends of Paul heard what he must suffer and urged him but "when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:14). To cease and say nothing more when we see the Lord declare His mind to us is grace. A holy heart will not go one hair's breadth beyond the Lord's revealed will.

14. SUBMISSION EVEN ACCEPTS GOD'S FELT ABSENCE...

Christ submits His will to the will of God in soul-desertions: so should we...He is willing to lay his soul-comforts in the free-will of His Father. In this He judges the Lord's will, better than His own will... We idolise spiritual comfort...When we are thirsting for Christ, it is His comforts, the rings, jewels and bracelets the Bridegroom gives that we seek after, rather than Himself. We desire a never-interrupted sense of God's presence, whereas Christ submitted to go without it for a time when He saw this was God's will. Though we do not and cannot always have an edge of actual hunger, yet we can be submissive to going without, when we see that this is His will.

<https://www.reformationscotland.org/2017/03/10/submitting-to-gods-will-in-dark-providences/>

William Cowper's Hymn for the Midweek Prayer Service... "Jesus, Where'er Thy People Meet"

1 Jesus, where'er your people meet,
there they behold your mercy seat;
where'er they seek you, you are found,
and ev'ry place is hallowed ground.

2 For you, within no walls confined,
are dwelling in the humble mind;
such ever bring you where they come,
and going, take you to their home.

3 Dear Shepherd of your chosen few,
your former mercies here renew;
here to our waiting hearts proclaim
the sweetness of your saving name.

4 Here may we prove the pow'r of pray'r
to strengthen faith and sweeten care,
to teach our faint desires to rise,
and bring all heav'n before our eyes.

5 Lord, we are few, but you are near;
nor short your arm, nor deaf your ear;
O rend the heav'ns, come quickly down,
and make a thousand hearts your own.

It's sad that this wonderful Prayer Meeting hymn is omitted from so many hymnals. In the village of Olney, England, over two centuries ago, lived John Newton, a hymn writer (of, most famously, *Amazing Grace*). Newton was also the pastor of the local church. In the same village, and next door to the pastor, lived William Cowper, who was recognized as one of England's greatest poets.

Together, these two men produced a historic hymnal in 1779 called *Olney Hymns*. John Newton wrote 280 hymns for the book, and his friend William Cowper added another 68. Cowper struggled with emotional depression, but through his work with the good pastor Newton, he was encouraged and helped. His hymn *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* is perhaps our greatest on the subject of divine providence.

Some years prior to the publication of their hymn book, Pastor Newton decided to move their mid-week prayer meeting out of the church and into homes. That may not sound too revolutionary to us today, but it certainly was back then. Many of the hymns that were later included in *Olney Hymns* were written for these spiritually rich meetings.

John Newton had about a thousand people in his wider parish, and he held two or three prayer meetings a week, to minister to them from the Word of God and unite them in prayer. William Cowper attended every one of these, however his shyness held him back from praying audibly. But eventually his love for the Lord conquered his unwillingness to draw attention to himself. He frequently had trouble beginning, but once started he seemed to pray with fervency, as though he was seeing the Lord, face to face.

“We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16).

As numbers attending the meetings grew, it became clear that the small village homes couldn't contain all the people who wanted to attend. But there was in town a house that was currently unoccupied. It was popularly called “The Great House,” because of its size. Newton looked it over, and calculated that they could fit over a hundred people in the huge parlor. When the date was set for prayer meetings to begin there, the pastor felt the need for a new hymn to be written in honour of the occasion. This is that hymn, which asks the Lord, in Stanza 5

O rend the heav'ns, come quickly down,
and make a thousand hearts your own.

“Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25).

Stanza 1

Jesus, where'er Thy people meet,
There they behold Thy mercy seat;
Where'er they seek Thee Thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.

Some, no doubt, wondered whether it was the right thing to do, to hold church meetings in another place. After all, shouldn't God's people meet in the house of God, set aside for that purpose? But Cowper's hymn reassures them with these words:

Stanza 2

For Thou, within no walls confined,
Inhabitest the humble mind;
Such ever bring Thee, where they come,
And, going, take Thee to their home.

Notice the understanding of the hymn writer as to what can be accomplished through prayer in Stanza 4. The power of God unleashed by faith-filled prayers can (among other things) strengthen our faith, encouraging us to depend on the Lord for still more and more. It can “sweeten care,” meaning it can bring peace and contentment, in the midst of our trials.

It can also realign our priorities and “teach our faint desires [for spiritual and eternal things] to rise.” And it can “bring all heaven before our eyes, as we see with new joy the future of our heavenly home in the presence of Christ.

Stanza 4

Here may we prove the power of prayer
To strengthen faith and sweeten care;
To teach our faint desires to rise,
And bring all heav'n before our eyes.

<https://wordwisehymns.com/2014/03/05/jesus-whereer-thy-people-meet/>