

# And Can It Be

## by Rev Allister Lane

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## Hebrews 2:10-18

What stands out to you in the words of this hymn ([‘And Can It Be’](#))?

Perhaps you know this hymn well – it’s an old favourite for many. But even if this isn’t the case, it has rich meaning to offer us, as an expression of the faith we have, and perhaps the faith we want to have.

And so let me pick up some things that stand out to me, and make some connections with the Hebrews reading.

Background to the hymn: The hymn was written by Charles Wesley shortly after he experienced a significant pivotal moment in his faith journey on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1738. This was just three days before his brother John Wesley felt his heart ‘strangely warmed’... (founder of the Methodist Church)

1. Wesley (Charles, that is) begins the hymn unusually with the word ‘And’. What a way to start a song, ...or story or poem or any writing!

However, it makes sense as an opening question, in evoking a sense of ‘backstory’.

*And can it be that I should gain  
an interest in the Saviour’s blood?*

It suggests this hymn is a response to some revealed information and an awareness of the significance of that.

Of course the response is to the particular revelation of God’s ‘Amazing love’ displayed in the death of God’s Son.

The rhetorical question, “*Died he for me, who caused his pain – for me?*” acknowledges, not just the amazing love, but the amazing grace of God (to reference another great hymn).

This truth is what we hear in the Hebrews reading:

Jesus makes of himself “a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.” (v17)

*how can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me!*

2. The second verse probes the mystery of Jesus’ sacrificial death: “*’Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies*”.

It is a paradox that the divine Son of God, who existed before time comes as one of us, into the human experience and submits himself to human death (for the sake of human redemption).

The Hebrews reading describes “God, for whom and through whom all things exist” giving Jesus his impeccable divine credentials in order to achieve human redemption.

This move of the Creator into his creation is also expressed in a Christmas carol: (that's right we're starting to think about Christmas carols!)

Low within a manger lies  
He who built the starry skies  
He who throned in height sublime  
Reigns above the cherubim ('See Amid the Winters Snow')

3. In the third verse there is a description of the move of the Creator into his creation following the pattern of Philippians chapter 2 (which we heard in today's Call to Worship).

*He left his Father's throne above,  
(so free, so infinite his grace!)  
emptied himself of all but love,*

It marvels at the love and humility of Christ's incarnation and death in solidarity with all humanity.

4. I have to admit that the fourth verse is my favourite. So I'm wanting us to linger around here a bit longer.

Wesley describes the human spirit as being in slavery – slavery to sin:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's night:*

It's the same image used in the Hebrews reading: "their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (v15)

This image reminds us of the story of Israel being liberated from slavery in Egypt – a defining story of God's action with his people.

...but wait there's more...

The imagery moves away from the Exodus of the Old Testament ... to the New Testament account of Peter's miraculous release from prison (Acts 12:6-9):

*I woke; the dungeon flamed with light!  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.*

The Hebrews reading identifies how Jesus death is understood as our freedom. This is possible because Jesus is both fully divine, and fully human.

Verse 17 describes Jesus as 'merciful and faithful...in the service of God' as well as... having 'become like his brothers and sisters in every respect'.

<sup>18</sup>'Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.'

Jesus' unique identity as fully divine and fully human,  
(and how he is able to achieve salvation through his suffering)  
is described in the letter to the Hebrews as the 'pioneer of salvation'.

One way to imagine Jesus as our 'pioneer of salvation' is that he is leading the way for us to follow.

Like an explorer hacking through the jungle where there is no path and no signage.

Some explorers may make such a perilous journey for fame, wealth,...or even curiosity – why does Jesus do it? For love.

Hacking through the difficult way that is the jungle of human life – the jungle of pain, suffering, sin and death.

Nobody has ever gone through the jungle of human life and come out alive.

Jesus has the motivation and the divine ability to make his way through, and emerges into a sunny clearing that is life with God – the perfect reality that awaits.

5. In the final verse of the hymn, Charles Wesley describes what the pioneer of our salvation achieves.

*No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head,  
and clothed in righteousness divine*

Jesus has taken on what is ours – and in a wonderful exchange<sup>1</sup> has given us what is his. We are not condemned, but are alive in Him. We are not seen by God in our stained and shabby sinfulness, but are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus.

Overall pattern of the hymn: response with a question of faith, describes salvation through Christ, concludes with the life we have in relationship with God now and forever.

So having dipped into some of the wonderful depth of the hymn and Hebrews, how does this relate to our experience?

How does God's revelation of amazing love and grace in the saving death of Jesus mean freedom and salvation for us?

What does it mean to us to follow this pioneer of our salvation where he leads?

Both the Hymn and Hebrews express the truth of what God has done for us.

What God does is decisive – for all humanity.  
AND for us our faith is a daily experience.

Each day our faith is found in and shaped by our relationship to Jesus as followers. Remember what Jesus said to those he first called? "Follow me."

Jesus is our pioneer – that means he leads and we follow.

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<sup>1</sup> The substance of this exchange is best seen in Calvin's own words in discussing the fruits of the Lord's Supper: "This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness."

[Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, Institutes IV, xvii, 2–3. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.](#)

This is the wonderful exchange that the believer enjoys as part of being an adopted child of God.  
<http://www.calvin500.com/the-wonderful-exchange-through-christ/>

Living in Dunedin, felt obliged to join in winter sports...  
When I learned to ski, I had to learn to do something very counter-intuitive.

In trepidation of hurtling 100kms/hr down a mountain, I would lean backward (away from the hard, cold, deadly snow).  
Every time I fell down. ("Skiing is so stupid!")

After persistent encouragement by the instructor (and being poked with a ski pole) I gently tried leaning my weight forward. And what do you know...? Everything came together and I was able to stay standing and go where I needed to.

And to follow Jesus is like leaning our weight away from where we instinctively feel in control, into trusting ourselves with Jesus.

To follow Jesus is to trust ourselves into his control,  
trusting that he knows the way (where we are going),  
trusting that he makes the way [like through a difficult jungle]  
trusting that he makes it possible for us to join him, by sharing with us what we need,  
trusting that Jesus gives the effort, and achieves the outcome – where we can remain with him.

Summarising what God has done and is doing through Jesus,  
N.T. Wright says:

"There is nothing we face, today, tomorrow or the next day, in which Jesus cannot sympathise, help and rescue us; and through which he cannot forge a way to God's new world." (HEBREWS, p21)

Perhaps it has been a while since you made an intentional commitment to follow Jesus.  
Maybe you have never expressed this to God.  
It's making a personal response to the call of Jesus "Follow me".

I want to lead us in a prayer of response, to allow you the time and space (if you want to) to talk to God in your heart and make it clear to God and to yourself that you are willing and ready to follow him today...