

“Ivory Palaces”

Intro: Last year we spent one Sunday evening service each month looking at some of our songs, focusing on their background and message. Several people have mentioned that these lessons helped them understand our songs better and made them more meaningful in worship. With that in mind, I’d like to continue to share with you some additional song stories this year.

Our gospel songs are born out of varied circumstances as we’ve seen in past studies. Sometimes they are inspired by a message the poet has heard. So it was with the song we are thinking about tonight. It was written by Henry Barraclough, who was born in Yorkshire, England, on Dec. 14, 1891. He studied music as a child; and became an accomplished piano and organ player. As a young man in his twenties he came in contact with two Americans who had come to England to conduct preaching services among the English--Presbyterian evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman and his song director, Charles M. Alexander. They invited Barraclough join them in their work and he returned with them back to the States.

On a Sunday evening in 1915, Barraclough listened as evangelist Chapman was preaching in a Bible conference in Montreat, NC. He had taken his text from Psalm 45:8 which reads, *“All Thy garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia; Out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have made Thee glad.”* (Psalm 45:8)

Chapman regarded that psalm as Messianic and associated the three spices mentioned in the text with three events in Jesus’ life—the myrrh with the joy of His heavenly existence, the aloes with the sorrow of His earthly suffering, and cassia with the power of His healing touch. The sermon made quite an impression upon the young Henry. And on his ride back to the place he was staying, he began to formulate the words for a refrain to a song; at a small market on the way, he jotted the words on a visitor’s card he had in his pocket from the conference meeting. He wrote, *“Out of the ivory palaces into a world of woe, only His great eternal love made my Savior go.”* And when he returned to the conference hotel for the night, he wrote three verses of a hymn based on the three points in Chapman’s sermon that night and added the music to them. The next day Barraclough and Alexander sang them in the conference meeting as a duet. They were well-received; and Chapman, who was also hymn-writer, suggested a fourth verse that would focus on the Lord’s return. That hymn entitled “Ivory Palaces” was first published in an English hymnal, but eventually was included in numerous American hymnals as well. As a result Christians have sung it for over a hundred years.

The Scriptural Basis of the song

Now that you know how the hymn came into being, it might be helpful to briefly consider the text upon which the song is based—Psalm 45. A couple

of years ago we studied this psalm together in our evening series, “Jesus in the Psalms.”

Psalm 45 appears to have been written as a wedding song for a king and his bride. The psalm has four main sections.

The poet’s message to the Groom

The poet’s message to the Bride

The poet’s description of the beauty of the wedding

The poet’s description of their glorious future together.

In the message to the groom the poet describes the king with three important features.

He acknowledges the King’s excelling handsomeness and character.

He acknowledges the King’s excelling skill in battle.

He acknowledges the King’s excelling justice in ruling.

He acknowledges the King’s excelling royal glory.

As the poet describes the King’s excelling royal glory he wrote:

“All Thy garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia; Out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have made Thee glad.” (Psalm 45:8)

The NT church regarded this psalm as Messianic; and the Hebrew writer quotes v. 6-7 and applies it to Jesus:

“But of the Son He says, “THY THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM. “THOU HAST LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS; THEREFORE GOD, THY GOD, HATH ANOINTED THEE WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE THY COMPANIONS.”” (Hebrews 1:8–9)

Although it would appear that the psalm attaches no particular symbolism to the spices that fragrancd the king’s garments other than to describe his glory as king, Chapman used the three with some poetic license as symbols of three features of the Messiah’s coming.

Since myrrh which was often viewed as a symbol of joy, Chapman associated it with Jesus’ abode in the presence of the Father in the “ivory palaces” of heaven.

Since aloes was used in burials, he associated it with the sorrow of Jesus’ sacrifice and His death on the cross.

Since cassia was used in healing, he associated it with Jesus’ healing power on earth.

Now that we know a little about the sermon Chapman preached we can appreciate a little more the hymn it motivated Barraclough to write.

The Message of the Hymn

“Ivory Palaces” tells the story of Jesus through the use of the symbolism of the spices that fragrancd His garments.

In the first verse the poet describes the joy of Jesus in His heavenly abode.

"My Lord has garments so wondrous fine, and myrrh their texture fills; its fragrance reached to this heart of mine, With joy my being thrills."

In the ancient world ivory was often used to beautify the palaces of the kings of Israel. Chapman considered it a fitting symbol for the beauty and joy of the heavenly palace in which Jesus dwelt before coming to earth.

The aroma of myrrh in His garments symbolized the joy that Jesus experienced in His heavenly abode.

“And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.” (John 17:5)

And in this coming to earth, He brought the joy of heaven down to man. Its fragrance reaches to the heart of man so that he too can experience heaven’s joy.

Certainly we can see that Jesus coming has brought joy to those who believe in Him.

“and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,” (1 Peter 1:8)

In the second verse the poet describes the suffering of Jesus that led to His death upon the cross.

“His life had also its sorrows sore, for aloes had a part; and when I think of the cross He bore, My eyes with teardrops start.”

Jesus had to experience in coming to the earth all the sorrows of our earthly existence.

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

That suffering would include the suffering of death itself; and in keeping with Jewish burial custom he was wrapped in clothes layered with spices including “aloes.”

“And Nicodemus came also, who had first come to Him by night; bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.” (John 19:39)

The poet acknowledges the deep sorrow we feel in know that Jesus experienced those painful horrors of crucifixion for our sake.

In the third verse the poet describes the healing touch of Jesus in His ministry.

“His garments too were in cassia dipped, With healing in a touch; Each time my feet in some sin have slipped, He took me from its clutch.”

This verse is usually omitted in most modern publications; yet in keeping with Chapman’s usage of the spices, it conveys Jesus healing touch while on earth.

We can see it fulfilled physically:

“And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.” (Matthew 4:23)

We can see it fulfilled spiritually:

“and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)

In the fourth verse the poet describes the final coming of the Lord for His kingdom.

*“In garments glorious He will come To open wide the door;
And I shall enter my heavenly home, To dwell forevermore.”*

Certainly the NT reveals that Jesus will come in glory.

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.” (Matthew 25:31)

His coming will be to deliver His kingdom up to the Father; thus to fulfill the promise of Jn. 14:

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:3)

The poet personalizes this great truth by affirming that he also will enter that heavenly home to dwell there forever.

The refrain summarizes the great sacrifice that Jesus made in coming to earth

*“Out of the ivory palaces, Into a world of woe;
Only His great eternal love Made my Savior go.”*

In the chorus we are reminded of the love that motivated Jesus to leave heaven’s glory and come to this “world of woe.” It is often expressed in terms of the love He had for us.

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10)

“and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.” (Ephesians 5:2)

Conclusion: And so this song beautifully portrays in highly symbolic language that Jesus is indeed the promised King of OT prophecy and that He is the groom of a spiritual bride, the church, for which He died and for which He will someday return that they might be Him forever.

Let us sing this hymn together.