



Francis Ridley Havergal

**T**HERE is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. <sup>s</sup>God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early. (Psalm 46:4-5)

It may surprise the readers of this devotion, knowing that I am married to a lovely lady, to learn that I love another woman – in fact, many other women, both LIVING and (in the eyes of the world, dead). But I do not love them as my spouse, but rather as my dearly beloved, bosom sisters in Christ. Miss Francis Ridley Havergal is one such lady whose relation I am in no wise worthy to claim, but I claim it nonetheless in Christ. Though I am unworthy of such a friend and sister, the same Lord and Savior that she claimed and served is also my own Lord and Savior, and He will MAKE me worthy of such communion with His saints in glory. Unlike the wonderful lady, Fanny Crosby, who lived to the age of 95, Miss Havergal lived for only a short space of 42 years, but not before blessing the Church with some of the most inspiring and exquisite prose and hymns that have ever graced the pages of the hymnal. She also authored many books and hymns for children. She was conversant in many languages including Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

Miss Francis Ridley Havergal was born 14 December 1836, at Worcestershire, England, and died on 3 June 1879, at Swansea, Wales (at least I can claim her day of going to glory as coincidental with my own birthday). Her father was a minister and hymnist. The inscription on her tombstone is a witness of her living testimony in her writings and her hymns: *The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.* (1 John 1:7) She was reading at the age of four and writing verse by the age of seven. She memorized the entire books of the Psalms, Isaiah, and most all of the New Testament. She literally hid God's Word in her loving heart. If you will know this great hymn which we study today, I believe you, too, will love Miss Havergal. To quote the fitting words of the Hymnal 1940 Companion (PECUSA): Her singular gift of simply and sweetly singing the love of God and His way of salvation is well summarized in the lines of her hymn: *Take my life, and let it be, Consecrated, Lord, to thee.*

## Like a River Glorious

The subject of our last devotion on hymns was On Jordan's Stormy Banks. It is a beautiful story of the crossing into glory, beyond Jordan Waters, of all the saints of God. The River Jordan, itself, being a river of fewer than 105 miles in length, is analogous to the life of Christ which was also brief and gave life wherever He went. Moreover, the Jordan died in the wilderness waste of the Dead Sea which is quite like the Lord's dying in a sinful world wilderness for our sins. The River that seems most like that described in today's hymn seems to me to be the great Nile River – the longest river in the world (more than 4,000 miles long). This mightiest river might be compared to God the Father whose origin is on high (just as the River Nile has its origin in the pure and melting snows of Kilimanjaro – the highest peak on the continent of Africa) and descends to bless all in the lowest parts of the earth (just as the flood plain of the Nile deposits rich nutrients and sediments it has collected on the rocks and gullies down which it cascades to the fertile crescent – overflowing its banks there and making Egypt a land of plenty even during years of famine).

## Like a River Glorious

*by Francis Havergal*

Like a river glorious, is God's perfect peace,  
Over all victorious, in its bright increase;  
Perfect, yet it floweth, fuller every day,  
Perfect, yet it groweth, deeper all the way.

*Refrain*

Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest  
Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.

Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,  
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;  
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,  
Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.

*Refrain*

Every joy or trial falleth from above,  
Traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love;  
We may trust Him fully all for us to do.  
They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.

*Refrain*

Let us examine the words of this hymn in the order of their appearance: *Like a river glorious, is God's perfect peace.* The Nile River is perfect in its dependable flow and the peace of mind it brings to the people of its lowest point in Egypt of plenty at harvest. *Over all victorious, in its bright increase;* Though there are a number of tributaries that feed into the Nile on its great journey, they lose their identity in the Nile just as the Christian loses his old identity in Christ when he comes to Him. *Perfect, yet it floweth, fuller every day,* It is true that the Nile increases more and more fuller every day as it plunges down, and down, to sea level. *Perfect, yet it groweth, deeper all the way.* The nearer to a man that God comes to him, the more glorious, perfect, and meaningful in-depth He becomes to him.

The remainder of the song simply is an exposition of the meaning of those healing and plentiful waters that descend from the Highest Heaven to the lowest flood plains of the world and blesses us. *Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,* We, like Francis Havergal, the writer of the hymn, can be hidden in the hollow of the Hand of God and, if we are in the midst of the River's current, *Never foe can follow, never traitor*

*stand.* The enemy shall neither follow in nor stand-in, the River of God. The mighty Nile is constant. It is a large river not subject to variations in current. *Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care.* The heart can rest content in the River of God for it is steady and is not of a nature to have white water surges. Safely in the center of this great River of God, we rest content in knowing that the cares of the world are helpless to break our joy.

The Nile flows silently just as every great river, such as the Mississippi, does. It is not shallow to cause the rushing waters of the rapids. *Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.* This is like the River of God that never hurries or changes its smooth flow. It is the spirit that reposes in consolation and comfort in the midst of that River of God.

A few years ago, we paid a visit to our churches in Kenya. As our plane banked to enter the traffic pattern at Nairobi Airfield, Mount Kilimanjaro could be seen in its majestic splendor many miles to the south (just across the border of Tanzania). Its snowcapped mantle appeared as a Table spread for the Supper of the Lord. It was flat on top and the snow-draped all sides of this beautiful 14,000 ft. + mountain. The pure waters fed by the melting snow cascade down its slopes and feed, eventually, into Lake Victoria from which the headwaters of the Nile plunge down to Egypt thousands of miles distant. *Every joy or trial falleth from above.* These waters come from the highest point in Africa and descend to the lowest part. This is much like God's mercies and grace originating in the highest Heaven and descending to the lowest of all men – us. *Traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love;* The summer sun melts the snows that feed the Nile. God melts our spirits and warms our hearts to His Beloved only Begotten Son in the same way. It is a pure love that generates the heat of devotion. *We may trust Him fully all for us to do.* Since the waters of the Nile have never failed to flow into the Nile River Basin in Egypt, overflowing its banks and depositing rich nutrients on the hungry soil, it is much like the certain mercies of God that descend to all who seek His Face. *They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.* The farmers who have lived on the banks of the Nile for centuries have no reason to doubt the River's supply. It has always blessed these farmers and they have no reason to seek greener pastures elsewhere for they know they do not exist.

Though the Waters of the Nile River have never failed to give their rich blessings, the day will come when the Nile will be no more. Her enriching waters will evaporate with fervent heat when the elements melt from the same. But the River of God's Love shall never cease its abundant flowing.

Lastly, we will consider the words of the refrain to this beautiful hymn. The most important feature of a great artist is that he must be focused on the object of his art. Leonardo DaVinci was focused on the central figure of Christ in his Last Supper. All others in the painting were of supporting and secondary meaning. So he employed point perspective to draw the attention of the viewer directly to Christ at the center. All of the great works of JS Bach were focused on the glory of God. In fact, Bach made the first notation on every manuscript claiming it to be (in Gloria Deo) to the Glory of God. He was stayed upon the source of his inspiration just as DaVinci was. *Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest.* In the very midst of the flood of waters of the River of God, we have no fear while our eyes are stayed upon the source of the Waters. Like Peter, we shall stay afloat unless we take our eyes off God and focus on the swirling flood. *Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.* We do not only remain stayed upon the great power and Person of God but also on His wonderful Promises, that cannot fail, made to us in Abraham and consummated in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is my hope that you will now have a more appreciable view of this hymn when it is sung, and thank God for the wonderful saint whose heart of love was the agent whereby God gave us the words to it.