

Down to the River

As I went down in the river to pray
Studyin' about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown
Good Lord show me the way

O siblings let's go down; Let's go down, Come on down
O siblings let's go down; Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studyin' about that good ol way
And who shall wear the starry crown
Good lord show me the way

O parents let's go down; Let's go down, Come on down
O parents let's go down; Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studin' about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way

O sinners let's go down; Let's go down, Come on down
O sinners let's go down; Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studyin' about that good ol way
And who shall wear the robe and crown
Good Lord show me the way

How Sweet The Sound

Hymn Study Series #2: *Down to the River to Pray*
April 28- May 1, 2022

Scripture Passages

Acts 10: 34-38 (CEB) “**34** Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. **35** Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. **36** This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! **37** You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. **38** You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him.”

Acts 2: 22-24 (CEB) “**22** “Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. **23** In accordance with God’s established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. **24** God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him. ”

That Starry Crown

- Stars throughout the Bible, crowns throughout the Bible, very few Starry Crowns
- Jesus’s leadership

The Good Ol’ Way

- Jesus’s lessons
- What did it mean to be a “gentile” in the Biblical era?
- God doesn’t show partiality

Moving Forward

- What do we do with all this information
- Is there relevance moving forward?

Questions for Reflection

1. Who do we consider “gentiles” in today’s world? Do our differences matter?
2. Jesus’s lessons were quite clear, where do they get foggy now? How can we combat that fog?
3. This hymn asked for God’s guidance in seeing the way for our lives. We seek God when we are lost. Where are you searching in your life right now

Welcome to Week 2 of our Hymn Series! Feel free to scan the QR code with your phone to follow along on the study guide. If you didn't catch week 1 last week, go check out the service from Sunday at 10:30 online. I heard the preacher was quite wonderful! (it was me)... Anyway! This is a 6 week series that we are looking through different hymns, spirituals, and songs and looking into the theology and scripture behind them. This week's hymn is Down to the River to Pray! I hope you weren't too thrown off by only having three verses, and the words being a little different. It was about to get real repetitive in here... so, we shortened it to siblings, parents, and kept the last as sinners. Please rest assured that we covered all the original bases of the spirit of the song. And truly, it was a song that originated (most likely) from the slaves in fields. They were dreaming of escape and freedom and being lead out of slavery. These songs developed through word of mouth. They were stories that wrapped through time and space and were passed by word of mouth and held maps for others to follow. We need to recognize the history of these songs and spirituals and the importance that they held and still hold for communities that have that history of being held captive. They were singing of being invited down to the river to pray for safety and a life free of captivity.

This week, I was going to preach a whole sermon on the rivers of the bible. We were going to look at the baptisms of Jesus, and of an Ethiopian eunuch, and Pharaoh's daughter pulling Moses out of the water of the Nile. It was going to be great! Then, I sat in front of my computer for 2 days. I don't know if you've ever preached, or even taught on a subject that was a little bit free form, it didn't have to be exact, you were the only one who had to look at what you were reading or teaching from... but as you sat there, and as I sat there until even this morning... and it just WASN'T coming to me. The Spirit can be a little tricky like that. I mentioned last week that I often equate the person of the Holy Spirit with the personification of Wisdom in the Bible. **[SLIDE: Status Update]** And yall... trust me when I say... she was NOT having it with that sermon track. Everything about water, rivers, baptism... all those fun facts and cool things I've ever learned about them- completely gone from my brain. Instead, this morning, I went back to the text... sometimes, Spirit just really has a different sermon that she needs you to preach. So, if this is the one for you- you're welcome! If you really needed a Water Sermon, there was a lovely one on Easter and it is up online... that preacher was quite wonderful as well (it was Scott).

Our hymn this evening said "As I went down in the river to pray, Studyin' about that good ol' way, And who shall wear the starry crown, Good Lord show me the way" This line, sung over and over, sometimes in a round, sometimes hummed while on a hike, sometimes brought to mind when rivers are nearby, this line always brings me back to a specific memory. **[SLIDE: Camp Photo 1]** We are sitting at camp, in the middle of a hot, humid, June night in South Carolina. At the side of the lake, during a campfire worship. I don't know how old I am because this specific memory happened so many times between the ages of 10 and 21 that I have lost count of each individual moment. This particular picture is of "skit time" during one of those nights in 2014... that's me in the green shirt, purple shorts... The point is this song brings me to the side of a lake, or river, or any body of water immediately. **[SLIDE: Camp Photo 2]**

I contemplate what the words mean... are we wearing the crown, is it Jesus wearing the crown, and how often the way forward seemed so dark, so unknown, that last line often turned into an exasperated prayer “Good Lord, show me the way...”

There are many times that stars are mentioned throughout the Bible. [SLIDE: Stars] There is the creation of the stars, tiny lights to help the Moon reign over the night, the promise that Abraham’s descendents would outnumber the stars, the tribes of Israel were always represented by stars in visions and dreams, there was the star that the magi followed to find Jesus, there were visions in Revelation that the stars would fall from heaven when Jesus returned, Jesus himself is referred to as the Bright Morning Star... My point is that there are a LOT of stars mentioned all the way through the pages.

[SLIDE: Crowns] Crowns in the Bible are equally as present. There are, of course, all the kings mentioned, there are 5 types of crowns mentioned that you can receive-

1. Crown of righteousness
2. Incorruptible crown
3. Crown of life
4. Crown of glory
5. Crown of rejoicing

We crown God, God crowns us, wives crown their husbands, kings crown queens... you get the picture. There are a lot of crowns.

There are very very few crowns of stars though. [SLIDE: Crown of Stars] In fact, the only references I could find of a true, starry crown was an illustration of the end times in the book of Revelation. She’s named “Woman of the Apocalypse” and she appeared in the sky through a vision, she has a crown of 12 stars. Usually imagery like this is explained by the 12 tribes of Israel, and she is probably representing the 12 tribes being exalted. So, who shall wear the starry crown seems, indeed to be the question because it doesn’t appear to be a direct point to scripture. We have to look back at what this hymn meant to the people singing it. It wasn’t just words. It wasn’t just a pretty tune. People who sang this hymn were being held as slaves. They were looking for the crown of stars to lead them through the night to safety and security outside of slavery. Often, this leadership came from people who saw God’s call out of a way of slavery and helped people escape.

Christ called for his leadership to be for people who weren’t perfect, weren’t trying to do it all the “correct” way. He was calling for people to love others and in many ways, fight the systems that were set up in opposition to love and freedom. We’ll finally look at one of our scriptures for this week, this is [SLIDE: Acts 10: 34-38 (CEB)] “**34** Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. **35** Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. **36** This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! **37** You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. **38** You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone

oppressed by the devil because God was with him.” *[this is the word of God]*

I love this translation because it feels much more natural for our way of speaking. I can hear Peter trying to reassure the people who were trying to understand this new way of leading and living. He starts with “I really am learning...!” I imagine he is excited to share this new found truth that God has loved and freed everyone, not just the Jews, not just the “good ones”, not just the ones who know the right thing to say... all of the people proclaiming the good news, the gospel, of Christ are loved and welcomed.

So, we know that Christ is the leader of the way of gaining all those sought-after crowns. That the stars will lead people to the freedom they are seeking both literally the freedom of being a not-enslaved human, and figuratively of being free through Christ. So, we look into the Good Ol’ Way that we sing about.

[SLIDE: Verse] If Jesus’s leadership was for everyone, not just the perfect ones, and not just the ones who knew all of the answers (which were the religious leaders of the time), then Jesus’s lessons were for the people who thought they knew everything. Who thought they were the ones who had all the answers and knew exactly how to live “righteously”. Jesus brought the ultimate plot twist to each of those people... You have no idea. You aren’t doing it right yet. You aren’t even listening. At Jesus’s “sermon on the mount” after he lists thing after thing that “blessed” or “happy” people will inherit, all of which are counter intuitive, he says this “**19** Therefore, whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the lowest in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps these commands and teaches people to keep them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

[SLIDE: Matthew 5] **20** I say to you that unless your righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” That is from Matthew 5, 19 and 20. Jesus explicitly explains that he isn’t there to overthrow the Law, he is there to fulfill the Law. He is there to show everyone that loving each other is the answer to so many of the questions being asked. It isn’t condemnation. It isn’t casting out people for their lifestyles, it isn’t the perfect people who know exactly how to pray and who already have it all figured out. It is to love the tax collectors, to welcome the prostitutes to the table, to wash the feet of the people you are leading, to sincerely care about other people.

The “gentiles” of the era were the people who weren’t Jewish, and there were so many rules about following Judaism, how to be clean, how to act and worship, all these things that people were teaching that ended up being different from what Jesus was saying. How did people know that Jesus was telling the truth? That there was a new set of rules? Now, we have our second official scripture this week, this is **[SLIDE: Acts 2: 22-24 (CEB)]** “**22** “Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. **23** In accordance with God’s established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. **24** God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him. ” *[this is the word of God]*

[SLIDE: Verse] Jesus had the resume to back up his work by this point. He didn't even lie about his ability to use Excel correctly- which I am convinced is an impossible task- but Jesus didn't even spice up his resume to convince people to follow him. Peter told people in our first scripture, which happens a few chapters after this passage, "God shows no partiality... Rather, in every nation, whoever worships God and does what is right is acceptable to God." I looked up the word "partiality" because I wanted to make sure I knew what I was telling you lovely humans... partiality means: "unfair bias in favor of one thing or person compared with another; favoritism" how wonderful is it that God doesn't show favoritism!? To be honest, from the looks of the list of people that were definitely invited to God's Table- I'm not sure we would have made it! But God doesn't show unfair bias. God doesn't show partiality.

I was listening to a podcast this week, which is a sentence that everyone in my life is tired of me saying, but I love my podcasts okay?! So, the one I was listening to is two cousins who both have ADHD, God bless them it's literally called Ladies and Tangents because they just know they aren't going to stay on script. This week, though, was some of the most focused podcasting I've heard from them! They were talking about faith. They were reading listener stories about different experiences that they have had in religion over their lives. Now, the two hosts are both women who currently don't identify as particularly religious but used to. Then they both had different experiences that turned them away from the Church. These stories were really difficult for me to listen to. One after another was a story about how hurt the listener was by the Church. I really struggled listening to the end because I just wanted to jump on the facebook page dedicated to this podcast and tell them all about how awesome our church is... that we don't turn people away... that we welcome you in with all your perfect imperfections, all your history and all your religious trauma in every form... that we welcome you into this space without having to have all the answers. But then a listener story came up that explained she had just recently found a new church to attend, and how wonderful it was. The hosts talked about how awesome it was to experience welcome and love at a church and in a religious community. Then they said something that really stuck with me, and has continued to stick all week, [SLIDE: Just because...] "Just because your church is a great community doesn't mean that people haven't been hurt by others. There are loud enough Christians, and they are big enough in number that it still doesn't feel safe." I'm going to say that quote again. So you can really sit with it: "Just because your church is a great community doesn't mean that people haven't been hurt by others. There are loud enough Christians, and they are big enough in number that it still doesn't feel safe." (Pause)

OOF. They got me. The moment I was about to tell them how safe they are *here*. Just get *here*... I was so quickly reminded- that isn't the point. The point is that there are so many other Christians explaining (loudly at times) they aren't safe, they aren't welcome. It's like the Kelts said on Easter, there is still Trauma there. It may not be safe yet, it may not just be a solution of welcoming someone to our services. I want to reiterate. That is okay. [SLIDE: I really am learning...] God shows no partiality. God isn't showing favoritism toward the ones who are sitting here every Sunday, or here 3 times a week, or serving on every single committee... God is

welcoming every single person to God's table. THAT is the Good Ol' Way. THAT is God's call of love and welcome. We have to be able to sit with people and love them even when we aren't inside this building. Even outside the doors, we have to SHOW that love and welcome. Louder than the haters.

[SLIDE: Verse] What do we do with all of this Moving Forward? What do we do with all this information? Is there even relevance moving forward? You could be sitting there asking those exact questions, if you're following along on the study guide, they are written right there. We are called to ask God to show us the way. I started this sermon by explaining that often, when singing this hymn, the way forward seemed so dark, so unknown, that the last line often turned into an exasperated prayer "Good Lord, show me the way..." At this point, I invite you into that prayer. Good Lord, show me, show us, the way. We don't know how to move forward often. If anyone here has the spiritual gift of seeing the future, please see me after- I will be in the lobby! But if you're like me, cursed to wait it out, and get the Plan (capital P) one step at a time from God- we have to ask God each step of the way to show us. To show us the people that need a little extra love, a little extra welcome, and a little extra time. We are asking God to remind us of, and show us the Good Ol' Way. God knows who needs it most. We aren't in charge of that part. We are called to love. To welcome. To sit with the people Jesus would have sat with. To welcome everyone to the Table, to pull up a seat and listen to the teachings of Jesus.

Here are your three points, are you ready? If you've totally spaced out this whole time- find time to relisten later in the week- but here are your three points to hang your hat on. [SLIDE: three points]

The literal Starry Crown isn't the point. Jesus is. The stars lead out of a way of slavery and helped people escape. Be the people who help lead in that way. Be a person that others can look to for safety.

God doesn't care how perfect you are. And thank God for that! We aren't called to be perfect people. We aren't in charge of making sure everyone is saved and in church every week. We aren't able to fix all the problems of the world. What God does care deeply, so deeply, about is how loving and welcoming we are. Show God's love, boldly and loudly.

Move forward in love and welcome. Those have to be loud and bold because so many other voices are loud and bold toward hate. Toward casting people out and proving that the table is a closed space. This is against the teaching of God. All are welcome. All are Loved.

Please pray with me.

Loving God. You are the maker of the Universe and the maker of all of us. Bless us with your constant presence and the reminder that you are here and doing real and needed work in the world. We aren't in charge of solving any of these problems in the world. We are in charge of loving and welcoming others. Bring us to the people who need that love and welcome most right now. Give us the words to speak that people's ears need to hear. Help us be your hands and feet in the world.

Amen.