

I Will Sing With Understanding

One aspect of our worshiping God in spirit and in truth is to do so through our mutual singing, and one of the aspects of our singing is in order to teach. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:15, ***“What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.”***

With this in mind I would ask that you keep your songbooks handy, for I would like to explain the meaning behind some of the words and phrases found in some of our hymns. After talking briefly about them, we will then sing the song in which the word or phrase occurs. You will find in the sermon highlights section of your bulletin the number of each song we will be singing so you can be ready.

O Thou Fount of Every Blessing

There's a peculiar line in the classic hymn *O Thou Fount of Every Blessing* that many of us probably never even realized was there. It's in the second stanza; and it says, *“Here I raise my Ebenezer.”* Many have seen this phrase in this song and have no idea what it means. I confess, when I was younger thoughts of the ghost of Christmas past and a tight-fisted, greedy old man came to my mind whenever our congregation sang this song when I was a child. I had no idea what Bible lesson was being taught or implied with the word Ebenezer.

A gentleman named Robert Robinson, however, apparently understood its meaning and importance, for it was he who penned those words into this beautiful and timeless hymn. It is based upon a story found in 1 Samuel 7:12 (NLT). We are told,

“Samuel took a large stone and placed it between the towns of Mizpah and Jeshanah. He named it Ebenezer – ‘the stone of help’ – for he said, ‘Up to this point the Lord has helped us!’”

That stone was named Ebenezer and it was a reminder to the Israelites of God's faithfulness and His might. It was set up so that no matter what situation in which they found themselves, they would be able to harken back to their defeat of the Philistines in which God was faithful to deliver them as their Helper. Samuel did this in order to restore the nation of Israel back to a right relationship with God, and Samuel publicly dedicated it as a monument to God's help, God's faithfulness, and God's eternal covenant. The Ebenezer stone represented a fresh beginning, a reversal of course and fortune for God's people. It also said something important about God: His mercies are everlasting; His covenant is forever. And as the people got on with their lives, the stone stood there, visible to all who passed by that way, a constant reminder of judgment and repentance, mercy and restoration.

In 1 Peter 2 Jesus is referred to as the Living Stone, and we are told that we also are living stones and are called later in the chapter to “. . . **live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**” (1 Peter 2:12) I was reminded of the many times in the Old Testament where God instructed His people to raise massive stones, referred to as standing stones, to mark where He delivered His people and demonstrated His power. In generations to come, as children would ask their parents what the stones (sometimes 40+ feet high) signified, they would pass on these stories of God’s faithfulness and deliverance. However, the meaning of the stones would be lost once the chain of testimony was broken. The purpose and meaning of most standing stones remaining today has been lost over the years.

In the same way, as living standing stones, we are called not only to live lives that are set apart, but also to live these lives “**among the pagans,**” or among people who do not yet know Jesus.

What reminders do you have of God’s faithfulness in your life? For some it may be a picture, a song, or maybe a powerful verse that really spoke to your heart during a difficult time. Whatever it is, keep it close at hand, make it your own, personal Ebenezer, so that when you are discouraged you can not only use it to recall how God has blessed and helped you, but you can also look forward to His future faithfulness as well!

So now if you would please open your songbooks to number 165 we will sing *O Thou Fount of Every Blessing*.

O Thou fount of ev’ry blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of sweetest praise.

Teach me ever to adore Thee; may I still Thy goodness prove, while the hope of endless glory fills my heart with joy and love.

Here I raise my Ebenezer hither by Thy help I’ve come; and I hope by Thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home.

Jesus sought me when a stranger, wand’ring from the fold of God. He to rescue me from danger interposed His precious blood.

O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be! Let Thy goodness like a fetter bind my wand’ring heart to Thee.

Never let me wander from Thee, never leave the God I love; here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it with Thy courts above.

Paradise Valley

“Sharon’s perfect sweet rose” is another line from a favorite hymn called *Paradise Valley*. Once again, I must confess that when I was little I loved to sing this hymn, but I had no idea who Sharon was, and why her flowers were being mentioned in this song as being in paradise.

Sharon, however, is not a girl in this case, it is a place. It is mentioned once in the Song of Solomon as well as twice in the Book of Isaiah.

“I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys” is what we find in Song of Solomon 2:1.

Isaiah 35:2 and Isaiah 65:10 say,

“It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing; the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon: they shall see the glory of Jehovah, the excellency of our God. And Sharon shall be a fold of flocks, and the valley of Achor a place for herds to lie down in, for My people that have sought Me.”

Sharon is a plain. It is one of the largest valley plains in all of Palestine. During the time of Solomon it was considered a wild, fertile plain that had a lot of beautiful flowers in it. Sharon was supposed to have been known for its beauty and majesty at that time.

Many people believe that *“Sharon’s perfect sweet rose”* and *“the wonderful flower we love”* are references to Jesus. That may be the case, and there really is nothing wrong with believing that. The rose is considered by most people to be the most perfect of all flowers. Therefore, the rose represents Jesus Christ, Who is perfection. Through Him we are perfected. Additionally, some view the rose as symbolic of Jesus due to its natural color from whence it gets its name. The rose color is very nearly identical to that of the color of blood, so the rose became the symbol of the blood of Jesus as it was shed on the cross for our sins. Also, some traditions claim that it was from a rose bush that the crown of thorns was made that the Roman soldiers placed upon Jesus’ head when they crucified Him, once again tying the rose symbolically to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

As I said, I do not object to this view as the meaning of the phrase in *Paradise Valley*, but I think an alternative explanation can be offered, and that is that *“Sharon’s perfect sweet rose”* and *“the wonderful flower we love”* represent the **church**, and here is why.

In the passage from the Song of Solomon, the individual speaking who calls herself the ***“rose of Sharon”*** is a Shulamite **woman** who apparently was Solomon’s **bride**. The Song of Solomon is symbolic of the love Christ has for His

bride, which is the **church**. Paul says in Ephesians 5:25-27, **“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself up for it; that He might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that He might present the church to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”** We also have in John’s revelation the following description given: **“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven of God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And there came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, who were laden with the seven last plagues; and he spoke with me, saying, ‘Come hither, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’”** (Revelation 21:2; 9) So when we sing *“In the midst of it grows Sharon’s perfect sweet rose ‘tis the wonderful flower we love,”* I believe we are singing about the **church**, the **bride** of Christ. The Shulamite woman was a bride of King Solomon, and the church is the bride of King Jesus. And as Paul says in Ephesians 5:27, the church is holy and without blemish. It is perfect because it has been washed in the blood of the Lamb. It is the flower we love, Sharon’s perfect sweet rose. We should love the church as Christ loved the church, and we should be willing to sacrifice our lives for Christ and His church, just as Christ was willing to give Himself to the church, His bride. To me, this is a most appropriate and scriptural interpretation of the meaning of this song.

Please open your songbooks now to number 463, where we will sing *Paradise Valley*.

As I travel thru life, with its trouble and strife, I’ve a glorious hope to give cheer on the way;

Soon my toil will be o’er and I’ll rest on that shore where the night has been turned into day.

Up in the beautiful paradise valley by the side of the river of life.

Up in the valley the wonderful valley we’ll be free from all pain and all strife.

There we shall live in the rose-tinted garden by the shade of the evergreen tree.

How I long for the paradise valley where the beauty of Heaven I’ll see.

As I roam the hillside, or I list to the tide, as I pluck the sweet flowers that grow in the dale;

A faint picture is there of a land bright and fair where perennial flowers ne’er fail.

Up in the beautiful paradise valley by the side of the river of life.

Up in the valley the wonderful valley we'll be free from all pain and all strife.

There we shall live in the rose-tinted garden by the shade of the evergreen tree.

How I long for the paradise valley where the beauty of Heaven I'll see.

Tho' your garden is rare it is naught to compare with the flowers that bloom in the garden above

In the midst of it grows Sharon's perfect sweet rose 'tis the wonderful flower we love

Up in the beautiful paradise valley by the side of the river of life.

Up in the valley the wonderful valley we'll be free from all pain and all strife.

There we shall live in the rose-tinted garden by the shade of the evergreen tree.

How I long for the paradise valley where the beauty of Heaven I'll see.

There Is a Balm in Gilead

There Is a Balm in Gilead is a song that really confused me as a small child, for I thought we were singing about a **bomb** going off in some place called Gilead, not a **balm**. So what is the meaning of this song, anyway?

It starts in Genesis 37. *Balm* is used for a number of natural, aromatic substances that are utilized for healing and soothing. They are obtained from certain resinous plants. During Bible history, the area of Gilead was rich in spices and aromatic gums that provided balm, which was exported to Egypt and Tyre – and the land of Israel. Gilead was a well-known exporter of balm from the earliest of times. The Israelite patriarch Joseph was sold by his jealous brothers to a caravan of Ishmaelite traders who were transporting a cargo that included balm:

"So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers heeded him. Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the

Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt.
(Genesis 37:23-28 RSV)

Embalming took its name from the use of balm as a supposed preservative in earlier times. Both Jacob/Israel (who died in Egypt but was buried in the land of Israel at Machpelah) and Joseph were embalmed by the Egyptian method:

"And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel; forty days were required for it, for so many are required for embalming." (Genesis 50:2-3 RSV)

"And Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' Then Joseph took an oath of the sons of Israel, saying, 'God will visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.' So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt." (Genesis 50:24-26 RSV)

The Egyptians believed their embalming methods using the salves and oils and balms from Gilead would lead to eternal life. Therefore, it becomes clear as to the reference to the balm in Gilead that the Prophet Jeremiah makes in Jeremiah 8:22, ***"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of My people recovered?"*** Jesus is the Great Physician that makes the wounded whole. He it is Who heals the sin-sick soul, and only He can provide everlasting life. And that is the meaning behind this song. So if you would please turn to song number 669, we will now sing *There Is a Balm in Gilead*.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

If you cannot sing like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.