

The Life Of Joseph Hart 4

Thomas Wright | Added: Jul 07, 2026 | Category: Biography

The week before Easter, 1757, Hart says, ‘I had such an amazing view of the agony of Christ in the garden as I know not well how to describe. I was lost in wonder and adoration, and the impression it made was too deep, I believe, ever to be obliterated. I shall say no more of this, but only remark that, notwithstanding all that is talked about the sufferings of Jesus, none can know anything of them but by the Holy Ghost; and I believe he that knows most knows but very little.’

The vision led Hart to resume his pen, and within a day or two he wrote the first part of the impassioned ode, ‘Come, all ye chosen Saints of God’, Which appears as hymn one in his collection. He says he afterwards ‘mutilated and altered it’. The original, if superior to the present version, must have been powerful indeed. Here, as in everything else that he wrote, poetical embellishment is religiously avoided. ‘All he aimed at was to enter into the deep mysteries of Gethsemane, and the intense reality of the sufferings of Christ.’ Even the name Gethsemane, ‘the olive press’, had a deep significance for Hart. Stupendous are the lines in which he represents our Lord as bearing all that Incarnate God could bear,

With strength enough, and none to spare;

and what a picture of desolation is there in:

Soon as the Chief to battle led,

That moment every soldier fled!

The black polluted Kidron is represented as rolling its torrent of sin, and the lyric ends with a stanza that connects sweetly the two surpassing earthly gardens – Eden and Gethsemane. Forked lightnings play over this hectic hymn; and none but a soul fluctuating between mortal agony and divine rapture could possibly have penned it. Gethsemane had for Hart an ever-abiding fascination. He returns to the theme again and again.

In the midst of the poetic ecstasy attendant on the composition of these passionate lines, Hart left his home and paced the adjoining London streets. On his way, as he passed one of the theatres, his eye caught the words on a bill, 'All for Love', the title of a play by Dryden. With its story, which hinges on the crass infatuation of Mark Antony for Cleopatra, and the fact that Europe, Africa, Asia were

... put in balance,

And all weighed down by one light,

worthless woman.

Hart, as a student of English literature and as a play-goer in his graceless days, must have been thoroughly familiar, for the piece had often been on the boards. The words, impinging upon him at a time when his soul was so sensitive, had the effect of suggesting a parallel which at a calmer moment might not have presented itself; and, hastening home, he wrote what now forms the second part of his first hymn – the melting lines commencing,

And why, dear saviour, tell me why

Thou thus would'st suffer, bleed and die?

What mighty motive could Thee move?

The motive's plain – 'twas all for love!

The agony of Part I. has given place in Part II. to moving pathos – one tender verse sweetly following another, and all straining towards the final vividly impressive:

For love of me, the son of God

Drained every drop of vital blood;

Long time I after idols ran,

But now my God's a martyr'd man.

A little later he wrote hymn 2, in which the influence of the play is still discernible;

Tortured with bliss, I cry, 'Remove

That killing sight! I die with love!

Further examples might be given of the influence of passing events on

Hart's hymns. For instance, the first line of verse 11, in hymn 75,

Poor disciples, tell me now,

is evidently an echo, intentional or unintentional, of the popular song of the day,

Gentle shepherd, tell me where.

These moments of exultation and tension were naturally followed by a period of dejection. Even from his Bible he obtained little comfort. One text in particular distracted him: 'And cast ye the unprofitable servant'. 'Despair', he says, 'began to make dreadful head against me: hopes grew fainter, and terrors stronger; which latter were increased by a faithful letter I received from a friend, who had also run great lengths of impiety with me formerly, but was now reclaimed. The convictions I now laboured under were not like those legal convictions I had formerly felt, but far worse, horrible beyond expression. I looked upon myself as a gospel sinner; one that had trampled under-foot the blood of Jesus, and for whom there remained no more sacrifice for sin ... So deep was my despair that I found in me a kind of wish that I might only be damned with the common damnation of transgressors of God's law. But, oh! I thought the hottest place in hell must be my portion.' It was while he was in this piteous state that he composed hymn 3, 'The Doubting Christian'.

Then followed an illness. 'One morning', he says, 'I was waked with intolerable pain, as if balls of fire were burning my reins. Amidst this excruciating torture, which lasted near an hour, one of the first things I thought on was the pierced side of Jesus, and what pain of body as well as soul He underwent. Soon after this fiery stroke I was seized in the evening with a cold shivering, which I concluded to be the icy damp of death, and that after that must come everlasting damnation.' He feared to close his eyes lest he 'should awake in hell'. 'While these horrors remained', he continues, 'I used to run backwards and forwards to places of religious worship, especially to the Tabernacle, in Moorfields, and the Chapel in Tottenham Court Road; where, indeed, I received some comfort; but in the general almost everything served only to condemn me, to make me rue my own backslidings, and envy those children of God who had continued to walk honestly ever since their first conversion.'

About this time he became personally acquainted with Whitefield, and a friendship ensued between them which was severed only by death.

On Whit-Sunday afternoon (that is on May 29th), 1757, He went to the chapel, in Fetter Lane, belonging to the Moravians, or United Brethren, where he had attended several times before. 'The minister', he says, 'preached on these words, 'Because thou hast kept the word of My patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth' (Revelation

3:10). Though the text, and most of what was said on it, seemed to make greatly against me, yet I listened with much attention, and felt myself deeply interested by it. When it was over, I thought of hastening to Tottenham Court Chapel; but presently, altering my mind, returned to my own house.

‘I was hardly got home when I felt myself melting away into a strange softness of affection, which made me fling myself on my knees before God. My horrors were immediately dispelled, and such light and comfort flowed into my heart as no words can paint. The Lord, by his Spirit of love, came not in a visionary manner into my brain, but with such divine power and energy into my soul that I was lost in blissful amazement.’

Nevertheless, when he considered his past life, he could scarcely believe there was mercy for him.

‘What, for me, Lord!’ he cried.

‘Yes, for thee’, replied a voice.

‘But I have been so unspeakably vile and wicked’, moaned poor Hart.

‘I pardon thee’, followed the voice, ‘fully and freely. Thy own goodness cannot save thee, nor shall thy wickedness damn thee. I undertake to work all the works in thee and for thee; and to bring the safe through all.’

‘The alteration’, says Hart, ‘I then felt in my soul was as sudden and palpable as that which is experienced by a person staggering and almost sinking under a burden when it is immediately taken from his shoulders. Tears ran in streams from my eyes. I threw my soul willingly into my Saviour’s hands; lay weeping at His feet, wholly resigned to His will, and only begging that I might, if He was graciously pleased to permit it, be of some service to His church and people.’

As the Easter vision had led Hart to write the hymn on the Passion, so the Fetter Lane sermon inspired him to write the three Whitsuntide hymns, 4, 5, and 6, two of which ‘Come, Holy Spirit, come’, and ‘Descend from heaven, celestial Dove’, are among the finest in our language. The fourth verse of hymn 6 concludes with a line that is eminently characteristic of Hart. The Earls of Nottingham may proudly cite their motto, Nil conscire sibi (To be conscious of no guilt); but none, to use Hart’s expression, save those arrayed in covering not their own, will be able to cry on the Great Day:

We’re clean, just God, we’re clean.

We must here notice the statement made by Hart that his hymns are arranged in the order in which they were written. This fact seems to have escaped the eye of others, but it is of first importance, seeing that it enables

us to fix the date, or approximate date, when every hymn was composed. When dealing with the subject of 'Holy Days', he says:

Some Christians to the Lord regard the day

And others to the Lord regard it not.

Now Hart himself was a punctilious observer of days, and it is probable that he wrote this hymn in answer to some excellent friend who remonstrated with him for making so much of Good Friday and the festivals. His affectionate argument is, My dear brother, the shell is certainly not the meat; but, all the same, commemoration is no sin. You have your reasons for not observing these days, I have mine for observing them. Our condescending Lord will approve both of us.

Let each pursue the way that likes him best;

He cannot walk amiss, that walks in love.

So as each 'Holy Day' came round Hart kept it as seemed fit to him, and it was usually provocative of a hymn. This will explain how it is that the Easter hymns and the hymns congenial to the festivals are scattered throughout his book instead of being grouped together, and the fact is additionally welcome in that it enables us to compile the invaluable table opposite.

Hymns 7 to 15 were written between May and December, 1757. 'A Man there is, a real Man', savours of Watts's 'With joy we meditate the grace'. Hart, indeed, like his saintly predecessor, loves to dwell on the consoling thought that Christ can fully sympathise with the sorrows of His people, seeing that He Himself experienced trial and temptation; and we find him over and over again, when in deep waters, extracting comfort from the recollection that our Lord was not only the Son of God but also 'a real Man'. In hymns 8 to 11 he endeavours to push home the cardinal truth that there is salvation by Christ alone, the most arresting verse being the last in the autobiographical hymn, 10:

Then sinners black as hell

May hence for hope have ground;

For who of mercy needs despair,

Since I have mercy found?

The four hymns produced at Christmastide, 1757, breathe, every one, a holy joy, that has lifted the hearts and spirits of thousands who have sung or read them. The weakness of the Infant Jesus – a little Child born in little Bethlehem – appealed to Hart persistently; and the world's harsh treatment

of its Lord and King was never for long absent from his devout meditations:

But see what different thoughts arise

In ours and angel's breasts:

To hail His birth they left the skies

We lodged Him with the beasts.

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