

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #15:
OBSERVATIONS ON SOME OF OUR SONGS, PART 3
By John Temples

In this final installment of comments on some of the songs we sing in worship, I want to discuss a song that is very popular but in my view has some real problems: “In the Garden” (also known as “I Come to the Garden Alone”). Here are its lyrics:

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

Refrain:

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

I'd stay in the garden with Him,
Though the night around me be falling,
But He bids me go; through the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling.

This song is beloved by millions and sung, I suppose, every Sunday in the churches of Christ. Truly, the melody is beautiful and the sentiment grand; but I believe there are significant problems with this song. (1) It is worded awkwardly. (2) It is inconsistent with the Biblical record of events. (3) It is self-contradictory. (4) It describes an almost mystical encounter and relationship with Jesus that “none other has ever known.”

The song was written by C. Austin Miles. Here is his own account of how the song came to be: “One day in March, 1912, I was seated in the dark room, where I kept my photographic equipment and organ. I drew my Bible toward me; it opened at my favorite chapter, John 20--whether by chance or inspiration let each reader decide. That meeting of Jesus and Mary had lost none of its power to charm. As I read it that day, I seemed to be part of the scene. I became a silent witness to that dramatic moment in Mary's life, when she knelt before her Lord, and cried, ‘Rabboni!’ My hands were resting on the Bible while I stared at the light blue wall. As the light faded, I seemed to be standing at the entrance of a garden, looking down a gently winding path, shaded by olive branches. A woman in white, with head bowed, hand clasping her throat, as if to choke back her sobs, walked slowly into the shadows. It was Mary. As she came to the tomb, upon which she place [sic] her hand, she bent over to look in, and hurried away. John, in flowing robe, appeared, looking at the tomb; then came Peter, who entered the tomb, followed slowly by John. As they departed, Mary reappeared; leaning her head upon her arm at the tomb, she wept. Turning herself, she saw Jesus standing, so did I. I knew it was He. She knelt before Him, with arms outstretched and looking into His face cried ‘Rabboni!’ I awakened in full light, gripping the Bible, with muscles tense and nerves vibrating. Under the inspiration of this vision I wrote as quickly as the words could be formed the poem exactly as it has since appeared. That same evening I wrote the music.” (<www.joyfulministry.com/inthegarf.htm>, accessed 21 July 2010.) (Note: I rechecked this link in April 2019 and it is no longer valid. I found an abbreviated version at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-i-come-to-the-garden-alone>.)

By his own account, the author based the song on Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane after the resurrection. We'll look at that in a moment. But first, note that Miles says, “I wrote as quickly as the words could be formed the poem exactly as it has since appeared.” In other words, he wrote only one draft; he made no revisions. The awkward wording of the song supports the truthfulness of his account. Even the best of writers seldom publish their first drafts; editing and revision are almost always necessary and beneficial.

Here are some examples of Miles' awkward wording: In the first verse, we read, "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses." The word *disclose* means "to open to view, make known, explain, or reveal." It doesn't fit. Miles used it because he had to make the verse rhyme, but it's awkward. There's also a contradiction involving verse 1 and verse 3. In verse 1, it is morning ("the dew is still on the roses"). Yet in verse 3, the night is "falling" (coming on). Did Mary stay with Jesus all day in the garden? The wording suggests that she did (which would be at the least strange, and at the most inaccurate).

Another awkward reading is found in verse 3: "I'd stay in the garden with Him, though the night around me be falling; but He bids me go; through the voice of woe, His voice to me is calling." The word "calling" suggests inviting or requesting a person to come into one's presence. The Lord bids her depart, yet He "calls" to (for) her. The language makes it sound like the Lord was reluctant to let her go. It almost sounds like Jesus needed Mary's presence to make His joy complete.

And speaking of joy, if this is the resurrection morning, why is Jesus calling "through the voice of woe"? The woe was past! There was only joy that morning.

So the song is at variance with the Biblical record in several respects:

- (1) It has Mary coming to the garden in the morning (verse 1) and staying until "the night is falling" (verse 3)--suggesting that Mary spent the entire day in the garden with Jesus. But the Bible says no such thing. In fact, John 20:18 implies that after the brief encounter with Jesus in the early morning, the Lord having told her to go and announce His resurrection to the disciples, Mary promptly obeyed and left. I don't believe Miles meant to imply that Mary and Jesus were together all day, but his wording suggests it.
- (2) The song depicts a woeful, sad, effeminate Jesus, not a powerful and self-assured risen Lord.
- (3) The song has Jesus and Mary meeting before dawn in the garden and "tarrying" there, walking and talking together, and sharing an intimate song

or melody (verse 2). Several commentators have pointed out that it almost sounds like they had a date!

- (4) The song speaks of a mystical meeting in which one disciple (Mary) experiences a joy that “none other has ever known.” That may have been true for a brief time, probably less than an hour; but it is no longer true; otherwise, Jesus is a respecter of persons.

The writer of the www.umcdisciplumcdiscipleship.org article referenced above draws similar conclusions: “The final line of the refrain begs reflection: ‘And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.’ Donald Hustad interprets this line in the following way: ‘Mary’s joy was unique; she was first to know that Christ had risen and would ever live with us’ (Hustad, 1983, 245). This is a fair interpretation **if** the singer understands that the song implies Mary’s presence in the dialogue with the risen Christ and that the ‘I’ of this hymn is a first-person account told by Mary Magdalene. Since she is not mentioned by name in the hymn, the tendency may be for the singer unwittingly to take Mary’s place. If this is the case, then we have a theological problem. The idea that Easter is concerned primarily with any one person’s individual walk with Jesus, as important as that is, flies in the face of the Resurrection as an event of cosmic proportions where the risen Christ restores creation and redeems humanity.”

Richard Mouw writes, “‘I Come to the Garden Alone,’ highly popular with previous generations of evangelicals, uses much popular “love song” imagery: ‘He speaks, and the sound of His voice / Is so sweet that the birds hush their singing,’ and “He walks with me and He talks with me, / And He tells me I am His own.’ And then the line that Mark Noll and other hymnody buffs have found especially offensive: “And the joy we share as we tarry there, / None other has ever known.’ **The objection is a compelling one.** [Emphasis mine, JT] Can I really sing about a relationship with the Lord that is so joyous that no other person has ever experienced it? Doesn’t this go beyond the bounds of hyperbolic spiritual enthusiasm?”

So in my view, “In the Garden” does not deserve its elevated status in our song services. Its theology is questionable; it is awkwardly written; it is self-contradictory; it speaks of a meeting between Jesus and Mary that is at

variance with the Biblical account; and it implies that Jesus gives some people blessings that He does not give others. We are told to “teach and admonish” one another in our songs (Colossians 3:16). Should we be teaching each other the assertions this song makes? --John Temples