

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder
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This summer's sermon series is called 'Psalms for Turbulent Times.' We're looking at twelve spiritual songs from the Old Testament which speak truth and wisdom for the times in which we live. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul directed the Ephesian Christians to *be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord* (Eph. 5.18-19). Singing psalms – or hymns – has been a hallmark of the people of God from ancient times.

One feature of psalms or hymns is that they often grow out of trials. David cried to the Lord for help in difficult times, and expressed his trust in God when there was nowhere else to turn. His psalms of praise extolled God's goodness and faithfulness. In the same way, many famous hymn-writers had tragic or poignant experiences that led them to write their songs.

One such hymn-writer was James Milton Black, who died 80 years ago this year. Black became a musician and choir leader, but in his mid-twenties, his passion was working with youth. He taught Sunday school and helped lead a youth group. One day he met a fourteen year-old girl who had a difficult life. Her father was an alcoholic, and as a result she had little – she was dressed in rags. Black invited her to Sunday school, and she came, and joined the youth group as well. Here she heard of the God who loved her, and the Savior who died for her.



Some time later, the youth were having a 'consecration meeting' – professing faith and dedicating themselves to the Lord. Black called on each one to share a verse or two of Scripture. When he called the girl's name, there was no response. He didn't know where she was, but used it as a teaching moment: "I spoke of what a sad thing it would be when our names are called from the Lamb's Book of Life, if one of us should be absent."

After the meeting was over, Black kept thinking about his devotion, and wished there was a song focusing on being ready for that final day. Then a thought came to him: *Why don't you write a song?* He dismissed the idea, thinking he could never do it justice. It kept bothering him. His wife saw something was troubling him, but he said nothing to her about it. Then, in the quietness of his heart, the words of the first stanza came to him:

*When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more
And the morning breaks, eternal, bright and fair
When the saved of Earth shall gather over on the other shore
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there*

No more than fifteen minutes later, two more verses flowed from his pen:

*On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise,
And the glory of his resurrection share;
When his chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*

*Let us labor for the Master from the dawn till setting sun
Let us talk of all His wondrous love and care
Then when all of life is over, and our work on Earth is done
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there*

He went to the piano and played the tune that is found in hymnals to this day, note for note. He later wrote, "I have never dared to change a single word or note of the music since." There's more to the story, however.

It turned out that the girl who was absent that night had contracted pneumonia, and just ten days later, she died. At her funeral, Black shared how her absence had inspired him to write a hymn, and it was there the song was sung for the first time.

Countless times since, the words Black was convinced God gave him that night have been a declaration of faith for Christians – that through faith in Jesus Christ, ‘when the morning breaks eternal, bright and fair... and His chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies...I’ll be there!’ Will you?