

WHAT A FRIEND

The beautiful hymn “What a Friend We Have In Jesus” was written by Joseph Scriven. He was born in Ireland in 1819 and seemed to have more than his share of problems in life. This, however, never kept him from serving Christ. He emigrated to Canada after his family disowned him because of his faith and his fiancée drowned the night before their wedding. In spite of these hardships, however, he never doubted that Jesus was his friend.

Scriven took the words of Jesus so literally that he was considered eccentric. For example, when a man saw him carrying a saw he wanted to hire him. He was told, however, “You cannot get that man; he saws wood only for poor widows and sick people who cannot pay”.

When Scriven heard that his mother was sick back in Dublin, he wrote her a letter and included the famous poem he had just written. Later when a friend asked who wrote it, Scriven replied: “The Lord and I did it between us”. Oddly, Scriven, also by accidental drowning as did his fiancée. After his death the citizens of Port Hope, Ontario erected a monument in his honor and on it mentioned his famous poem which they called a “great masterpiece”. The composer of the music to the hymn was Charles C. Converse. Ira Sankey discovered it in 1875 and included it in his book of Gospel Hymns. It became one of his favorites.

The hymn, What a Friend We Have In Jesus, assumes a special significance in my life because of a lecture I heard by the late John Noble. It was sometime in the early 1960s when I heard him speak in San Jose, California. John related his own experience in Soviet Gulags and said that members of the underground church in Russia sang this song as they would come and go from their secret meetings. John speaks with authority about the persecuted believers as he was imprisoned for almost ten years by the Soviets. After his release he authored at least three books: “*I Was a Slave in Russia*”, “*I Found God in Soviet Russia*”, and “*Banished and Vanished*”.

John and his father, Charles, were both U.S. citizens when they took over a camera business in Germany in 1938. In 1939 their company developed the first single lens reflex camera. Because of the strategic nature of their work they were allowed to continue operating throughout W.W. II. After the war the Soviets confiscated the business and imprisoned both father and son in Dresden for 15 months. John was only 22 at the time. When he was charged with espionage and asked to sign a confession, he refused. His interpreter said it really didn't matter, because someone else would merely sign it for him. Thus John Noble was unjustly sentenced to 15 years at hard labor.

After Dresden John was taken to the infamous death camp, Buchenwald. Later he was taken to several Soviet Gulags, ending up so far north that temperatures routinely plunged to over 50 degrees below zero. John witnessed the deaths of hundreds of prisoners.

While the Soviets denied any knowledge about him, after years of confinement he was finally able to smuggle out a post card to friends in Germany. Having proof that he was alive, family members appealed to President Eisenhower which ultimately resulted in his release in 1955. Noble insisted that there were hundreds of other U.S. citizens also held by the Soviets.

During the 1960's Noble went on tour denouncing the evils of Communism and encouraging believers to remember our brethren around the world who suffer persecution. The Scriptures put it like this: **“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.”** (Hebrews 13:3-5 KJV) How beautiful! We have a great High Priest Who is also our friend. He was tempted in all points like we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:14 - 16). Yes! We do have a friend in Jesus!