

Fanny Crosby



Biography

I am told that Fanny Crosby is in the Guinness Book of Records for writing the largest number of hymns - nearly 9,000. This remarkable lady was born in New England in 1820 and lived to one month short of her 95th birthday in 1915. When she was six weeks old, the doctor was called to attend to an eye infection. He arranged for hot poultices to be put on both eyes. These burnt the corneas, scar tissue formed, and as a result, she was blinded. Yet at no point in her life did she ever complain or hold a grudge. In fact, she saw it as the means God used to make her life's work possible.

Her parents called themselves Puritans and were in fact psalm-singing Calvinistic Presbyterians. The church was too poor to provide every worshipper with a psalm book, so a man stood at the front and sang a line which the congregation then repeated. Her absolute confidence in the Bible as the Word of God derives from those early years at home when she learned a large number of Bible books by heart.

She had a sweet soprano voice and mastered the guitar. But even this turned out to be a blow, because she strummed the guitar so much that she made the ends of her fingers permanently insensitive to Braille. In the days before cassettes and Talking Books, this was yet another handicap.

The blind poetess

When she was nearly 15, she was accepted as a student at the New York Institution For The Blind. On hearing she could go, the response was: 'Thank God, he has answered my prayers.' The mature Fanny Crosby was 4' 9" tall and never weighed more than seven stone in her life. For eight years, she was a student at the Institution, and for another 15 she was a teacher.

The New York Herald had a poetry column and her poetic gifts started to gain wider recognition. Four books of her poetry were published in her lifetime, but mainly she contributed hymns to tunes sent to her by music publishers. She was beginning to enjoy being well-known as The Blind Poetess. She even claimed, with some justification, that she was the first woman to speak to members of the US Congress.

When she was 30, she became spiritually troubled. She had never denied the faith of her upbringing yet, as she put it, she 'was holding God in one hand and the world in another'. A friend took her to some fiery Methodist meetings. As with Billy Graham today, they used the system of coming forward from your seat. On the third time that she went forward it is claimed that she was converted. Whether it was a Christian conversion or a deepening of an already existing spiritual life we will never know precisely, even though the word 'conversion' is copied from book to book.

Significantly, Fanny Crosby's way of life did not change and she referred to what happened to her as her 'November Experience'.

Marriage

In 1858, she resigned from the Institution to be married. She was 38 and Mr. Alexander Van Alstyne was 27. That is why our hymnbooks always refer to her as Frances Jane Van Alstyne. He too was blind and struggled to make a living as a music teacher and church organist. The marriage lasted 44 years when 'Van', as she called him, died.

When she was 38, she became a mother, but the child did not live. Her own words on the matter are: '... the angels came down and took our infant to God and his throne.'

The evangelists Moody and Sankey popularised many of her hymns, and people who had been touched by their sentiments always wanted to talk to her. Frances Ridley Havergal was her friend by correspondence. Fanny Crosby freely admitted that her hymns were second-rate by comparison.

In fact, everybody who has studied her life has been critical of many of her hymns, but everybody who actually knew her also admitted that she possessed an irresistible charm and unassuming holiness. Whenever she wrote a hymn, she prayed that the Holy Spirit would use it to the glory of Christ.

Whereas Moody and Sankey both owned two houses in pleasant places, Fanny Crosby lived in a rented room in the worst slums of New York. She was a familiar figure on the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn. She could have been rich; but she chose to be poor. No doubt prodded by conscience, Sankey tried to send her regular gifts, but it was hopeless, because she soon found somebody worse off than herself and gave her money away.

Life in the slums

Descriptions of the slums of New York at this time are horrifying. Utter degradation was everywhere. In 100 years, there has been no change for the better in the worst parts. If we could have asked her what her main work was, she would have told us about working in the rescue mission halls. She gave talks and lectures in prisons and a thousand and one other places. Even after she was 80, she never rested. That was for old people, she said. And still the hymns were written year after year.

Bent double and ruined by the ravages of extreme old age, she never stopped to give in to self-pity and never lost her charming smile.

Her 25 years working in missions to derelicts were now more important to her than the hymn-writing. Yet it was the hymns which made her internationally famous; the hymns which led to friendship with a whole succession of American presidents and other important people who were baffled as to why she lived among the down-and-outs. And there is enormous documentary evidence that God used her simple hymns to bless many thousands of people in bringing them to Christ and in glorifying the God she loved so unshakeably across so many years.

Perhaps the most enduring include:

'Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine'

'All the way my Saviour leads me'

'To God be the glory! Great things He hath done'

'Praise him, praise him! Jesus our Blessed Redeemer'

'Jesus keep me near the cross'

She made prior arrangements for her funeral because she heard people wanted to put up a huge monument to her. No, if anything, she wanted a Home for Aged People, particularly those without families. And that is what was built: The Fanny Crosby Memorial Home.

Don Stephens