

Hymns By Hers

The Supremacy of God Over the Disabilities in the Life of Fanny Crosby

August 17, 2025, 6 PM

Introduction.

You know my custom of using these occasions out on the lawn to reflect on some of the great hymns and songs God has given us to worship Him, and the people behind them. I didn't do it last year because some guy named Zac Harrison was preaching.

This evening I want to reflect of "Hymns by Hers." Ever since Moses' sister Miriam sang to the Lord after the great exodus across the Red Sea, women have been writing and singing hymns to the Lord. After her came Deborah, Hannah, and Mary's "Magnificat."

Since then countless women have joined men in taking to heart Paul's admonition in Ephesians:

Ephesians 5:18-19 ... be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,

Our hymnals are filled with hymns written by women whose lives demonstrated great faith in a God who comforted, sustained, and cherished them.

The first hymn we sang this evening, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" was written by Anna Bartlett Warner (1824-1915) in 1859.

The Church today would be immeasurably poorer had women failed to make use of their God-given gifts to enhance our worship.

I want to focus on just one woman this evening, one of the most prolific hymn writers in all of history. The story of Fanny Crosby is a remarkable story of faith, faithfulness and courage in the face of her blindness.

To tell her story I start with John's Gospel.

John 9:1-5 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me

while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Why questions are as old as time. Why do bad things happen? Why was this man born blind? And the human answers are as worn out as time. Chance, fate, bad karma, payback, sin, Satan.

There is suffering, so there must be sin. The only question is whose sin, who is to blame?

Of all the physical suffering a person can experience, few are greater than loss of sight. It cuts us off from so many of the greatest enjoyments in life. It makes us painfully helpless and dependent on others. It can lead to great depression and spiritual darkness.

This man was blind for decades. So many questions without answers. God’s purposes were silent for so long.

One old saint reflecting on this passage commented: “The sentences in the book of God’s providence are sometimes long, and you must read a great way before you understand the meaning of them” (Matthew Henry).

Sometimes we have to live a long time, or maybe even die before we know the purposes and glory of God. There is that phrase, the glory of God. Jesus says suffering can glorify God.

The first remarkable thing about our text is that *Jesus saw a man born blind*. Jesus saw him, Jesus noticed him and looked at him. See people with disabilities. See those who are made in the image of God, but different than us.

Christ first saw us, first loved us, first died for us, first raised us up. Jesus sees you and me. Jesus doesn’t pass us by or overlook us. He sees and knows our infirmities and our iniquities.

And be more compassionate than the disciples who asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” They want to know the cause, who or what to blame, but Jesus answers with the purpose.

In the case of the man in John 9 the display of God’s glory would be through his healing. In the case of Paul’s thorn in the flesh in II Corinthians 9 it would be

revealed in his non-healing. In either case is God's glory more valuable to us than our own health and healing and life?

Fanny Crosby:

Fanny Crosby is a modern illustration of the God-glorifying purposes behind suffering and affliction.

Fanny was born in 1820 in Brewster, NY. At the age of 6 weeks she developed an eye infection. An unqualified, traveling physician attempt to cure the infection resulted in her permanent blindness. Five months later her father died, and she was raised by her mother and grandmother who said, "I will be her eyes." Over the years she would take Fanny on hikes and describe what she saw in intimate detail. The beauty of sunsets, clouds, trees, flowers, birds, and the beauty of nature. Lots of word pictures. She taught her to pray and taught her the Bible. Fanny credits her blindness to her great memory, enabling her to commit to memory the first four books of the OT, the four Gospels, the book of Proverbs and many Psalms.

At the age of 15 she started attending the New York Institution for the Blind in New York City. There that she developed an incredible talent for writing poetry. After her graduation, Crosby remained as a teacher of English grammar and rhetoric and ancient history until 1858. That year she married a former student, Alexander Van Alstyne, was also a teacher at the school.

Around 1864 Fanny began writing hymns. At one time she was under contract to write three hymns a week. She would sometimes write a hymn a day. She would often go to her room about 10 PM, pray and then the thoughts would come into her mind. She would memorize her songs and then dictate them the next day for someone to write down. She could keep dozens of songs in her head until morning.

In all, she wrote over 8,000 hymns, the exact count is obscured by the numerous pseudonyms (as many as 200, according to some sources) that she used to preserve her modesty and to get more published. She receive a few dollars for each hymn published.

At the age of 60 she became a missionary in the slums of NYC. She became a light to others.

Fanny Crosby received her full sight one month before her ninety-fifth birthday in 1915, when her eyes opened in heaven. On her tombstone is written a verse from her much loved hymn Blessed Assurance.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

Fanny Crosby had the following encounter with a well-intentioned minister. The minister said to her, “I think it is a great pity that the Master, when he showered so many gifts upon you, did not give you sight.” Mrs. Crosby replied, “Do you know that if at birth I had been able to make one petition to my Creator, that it would have been that I should be born blind?” Surprisingly, the minister asked “Why?” She replied, “Because, when I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior.”

“If I had a choice, I would still choose to be blind...
for when I die, the first face I will ever see
will be the face of my blessed Savior.” (Fanny J. Crosby)

“I know it was no mistake of God’s. I verily believe it was His intention that I should live my days in physical darkness, so as to be better prepared to sing His praises and incite others so to do. I could not have written thousands of hymns if I had been hindered by the distractions of seeing all the interesting and beautiful objects all around me.”

She did not consider herself handicapped. She refused to let her blindness be anything other than a blessing from God. She used her darkness to give light to the world through her hymns. Even when we lose something precious, we can still be used of God to be a blessing.

When we surrender our lives to God’s sovereign goodness and providence, the tragedies that threaten our souls become sources of deeper understanding and intimacy with our suffering Savior.

In your long watches in the dark nights, in the dark nights of our souls, when sleep escapes us, reflect on the great things God has done, has taught us and will do. Let that awaken your praise.

Great things he hath taught us, great things he hath done, and great our rejoicing
thru Jesus the Son; but purer, and higher and greater will be our wonder, our
transport when Jesus we see.

“Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine; Oh what a foretaste of glory divine! This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior, all the day long!”

What incredible wisdom and counsel she received from her mother and grandmother to understand her suffering as deeply and well as she did. What incredible faith and maturity.

How many times did the blind man in John’s Gospel as a child ask his parents why? He could not have known the privilege that was his to be used of God in the way he was. His suffering and God’s glory in it are forever recorded in God’s Word.

Embrace a Christ-centered perspective, recognizing that suffering can be an opportunity for God's glory to be revealed and for people to respond with compassion and obedience to His call to action.

Her hymns include those Nancy played in her prelude:

I Am Thine, O Lord
Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Tell Me the Story of Jesus
Jesus Is Calling
Close to Thee
He Hideth My Soul
All the Way, My Savior Leads Me
Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross
Jesus Is Tenderly Calling
Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It!

She said her favorite was, “Safe in the Arms of Jesus.”

Her two best known are Blessed Assurance and To God Be The Glory. Both hymns exemplify the attitude of contentment and joy that characterized her life from an early age.

This jubilant, celebratory hymn joyously recounts the deeds of the Lord. Uplifting in both melody and tone, the verses extol the work of redemption.

To God be the glory.

Over every sorrow and every disability and every loss embraced in faith for the glory of God will be written in blood:

II Corinthians 4:17–18 This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

May God give you eyes to see that the display of his works in his Son's suffering and your suffering and your child's suffering are all expressions of his love. (John Piper).

Revelation 21:4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.