

History of Hymns: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

by [C. Michael Hawn](#)

"Precious Lord, Take My Hand"
by Thomas Andrew Dorsey
The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 474

*Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light:
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*



Many hymns are conceived in the throes of tragedy. ^{Thomas Andrew Dorsey} "Precious Lord" was written in Chicago in 1932 following the death of Thomas Dorsey's wife Nettie and infant son during childbirth.

Dorsey (1899-1993) was born in Georgia. His father was a Baptist preacher, and his mother a piano teacher. Known as the "Father of Black Gospel Music," Dorsey combined African American church hymns such as those by Methodist minister, Charles A. Tindley (1851-1933), with blues and jazz. This "worldly" combination was not without controversy at first, but set the tone for gospel music for decades to come.

Born in Villa Rica, Georgia, Dorsey was reared in Atlanta from the age of five, where he came in contact with the musical sounds of the blues. He moved to Chicago in 1915 and studied at the Chicago College of Composition and Arranging and began playing in nightclubs under a variety of names as a young man, including, "Georgia Tom," "Texas Tommy" and "Barrelhouse Tom." Dorsey started to play rent parties — house parties in which tenants would hire a musician or band to play for a party and pass the hat to raise money to pay their rent. The rent party played a major role in the development of jazz and blues music.

Dorsey put together the "Wild Cats Jazz Band" to play for Ma Rainey in 1925. His wife, Nettie, was Rainey's wardrobe mistress. After suffering a severe illness in 1926, Dorsey was converted in 1928 and became active in Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago. Beginning in 1932, he served as the church's choir director for forty years. Of his 1,000 musical works, at least 200 were gospel songs. He promoted the gospel song through the formation of the National Association of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, serving as the organization's president. Black musicians during the pre-Civil Rights era often formed their own publishing companies in order to make their music available. He began the Thomas A. Dorsey Gospel Song Music Publishing Company, a publisher of inexpensive gospel blues music.

Even though he had hundreds of jazz and blues songs to his credit, he turned to gospel music, one of the first to

use that term, following the tragic death of Nettie and their infant son in 1932. Dorsey provides an account of the circumstances surrounding the composition of this famous song:

"Back in 1932 I was 32 years old and a fairly new husband. My wife, Nettie and I were living in a little apartment on Chicago's Southside. One hot August afternoon I had to go to St. Louis, where I was to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting. I didn't want to go. Nettie was in the last month of pregnancy with our first child. But a lot of people were expecting me in St. Louis. . . .

". . . In the steaming St. Louis heat, the crowd called on me to sing again and again. When I finally sat down, a messenger boy ran up with a Western Union telegram. I ripped open the envelope. Pasted on the yellow sheet were the words: YOUR WIFE JUST DIED. . . .

"When I got back, I learned that Nettie had given birth to a boy. I swung between grief and joy. Yet that night, the baby died. I buried Nettie and our little boy together, in the same casket. Then I fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him any more or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well. . . .

"But still I was lost in grief. Everyone was kind to me, especially a friend, Professor Frye, who seemed to know what I needed. On the following Saturday evening he took me up to Malone's Poro College, a neighborhood music school. It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows. I sat down at the piano, and my hands began to browse over the keys."

Dorsey remembered an old pentatonic (five-note) melody from his Sunday School days, MAITLAND (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 424) by George Allen (1812-1877), paired with the text "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone." Arranging this tune and adding his own words, "Precious Lord" became the most famous of his many gospel songs. He gave the song to Frye who introduced it to the choir at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church the next Sunday, an event that, Dorsey later remarked, "tore up the church." Martin Luther King, Sr. was the pastor of Ebenezer at this time, beginning his ministry there in 1931.

The three stanzas capture the grief not only of Dorsey, but also of any who have suffered significant loss. The incipit or opening line of stanza one, "Precious Lord, take my hand. . . ." indicates a suffering soul that is reaching out. The singer acknowledges that they are at the end of their rope: "I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm worn." Perhaps Dorsey was referring to Matthew 28:23-27, the narrative where Christ stills the storm, when he penned, "Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light."

Stanza two draws upon the imagery of a journey, one in which the "way grows drear." The traveler cries out, and once again reaches for the hand of Christ. The third stanza begins, "When the darkness appears," reminiscent of Psalm 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ." By the time we reach the third stanza, the terrain has changed from a stormy sea (stanza one), a long road (stanza two), to a river of hope (stanza three). Upon singing, "at the river I stand," the singer reaches at last the final destination, the symbolic Jordan River. Each stanza concludes effectively with the refrain, "Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home," perhaps an image of the Good Shepherd in the Gospel of John.

"Precious Lord" has been recorded by many famous singers including Elvis Presley, Mahalia Jackson, Roy Rogers, and Tennessee Ernie Ford. Martin Luther King Jr. drew inspiration from this, his favorite song. It was sung at the rally in Memphis the night before the civil-rights leader's assassination. President Lyndon B. Johnson requested that "Precious Lord" be sung at his funeral.

Dorsey was the first African American elected to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Gospel Music Association's Living Hall of Fame. Fisk University houses his archives as well as those of noted musicians W.C. Handy and George Gershwin.

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