

Fanny Crosby: The 19th Century Wonder Woman

I admit that I have not seen the new Wonder Woman movie yet, but I have seen a viral video in which it inspired a brave young lass to dress up...as something...and attempt all manner of swordplay with a toy sword and awkward acrobatics. I have also read lots of reviews of Wonder Woman; you can read Phill Lytle's excellent review right [here](#). While I fully intend to see Wonder Wonder, all the hubbub has put me in mind of an actual and probably far greater Wonder Woman of days gone by. While Wonder Woman herself is a daughter of Zeus, I am referring to a daughter of the one true God in heaven. I refer to no other than one of the greatest hymnists who has ever lived: Fanny Crosby. Fanny is mainly known by history as a great blind hymnist, but it might be that she would not want to be remembered for only her hymn writing. She regarded this as only part of her life and ministry, but certainly not all of it. And she was right to think that; her life and ministry included much more. During her life in addition to her status as The Queen of Gospel Music, she would serve as a teacher of the blind, a much in demand public speaker, and a full time minister among the homeless.

The Early Years

Crosby was born on March 24, 1820 in Southeast Putnam County, New York, in a small community called Gayville. About six weeks after she was born Crosby caught a bad cold. In the absence of the community doctor, a well-meaning neighbor stepped in claiming to have medical knowledge and know-how. He applied hot poultices (wet washcloths) to Fanny's eyes in a misguided attempt to draw out the infection. The man succeeded only in permanently blinding her. (At this time her parents didn't know it was permanent and fully believed her sight would return after a time.)

When Fanny was almost one her father John Crosby died. That is when Fanny and her mother Mercy moved in with Fanny's grandmother, Eunice Crosby. Eunice Crosby would do much of the mothering of Fanny until she was five. During this time she did everything she could to strengthen her granddaughter's powers of memory and to help her see the world without eyes. As an adult, Fanny would recall how "Grandma...brought the Bible to me, and me to the Bible. The stories of the Holy Book came from her lips and entered my heart and took deep root there" (This is My Story, This is My Song, Fanny Crosby).

The Formative Years

When Fanny was about five her mother took her to New York to see Dr. Valentine Mott, a famous eye doctor. After inspecting Fanny, he informed Mrs. Crosby her daughter would never see again. This devastated Mrs. Crosby. However, Fanny herself was secretly relieved. She would never be able to see her blindness as anything but a gift from God.

Shortly after this disappointing visit Fanny's mother acquired a job in North Salem, Westchester County just south of Gayville. They still lived close enough to Gayville that Eunice Crosby was able to visit several times a week, but when Fanny was eight or nine they moved again after her mother landed a job in Ridgefield, Connecticut. This was much too far away for her grandmother to come visit all the time.

During these years, God had another kind caretaker took Eunice Crosby's place in Fanny's spiritual and mental education. We know this goodly individual only as Mrs. Hawley. Under Mrs. Hawley's care by ten years of age Fanny could recite by memory the Pentateuch, Proverbs, the four Gospels, numerous poems, and portions of a number of books. Her mental library would only grow as she got older. Eventually, she did not have to have someone read the Bible to her; she could just recite any passage she wanted. Fanny never thought this an extraordinary feat. She sincerely believed that a blind person could do

everything a person with sight could do—and sometimes even better. In one of her autobiographies she says, “It has always been my favorite theory that the blind can accomplish nearly everything that may be done by those who can see. Do not think that those deprived of physical vision are shut out from the best that earth has to offer her children” (Fanny Crosby, *Memories of Eighty Years*).

From an early age she was developing an extraordinarily descriptive mind and a keen writing ability. She wrote her very first poem when she was eight. When she was in her teens she submitted works of poetry to a nearby paper. This paper was published by the soon to be famous P.T. Barnum. It was also during these formative Ridgefield years that Fanny’s desire for formal education began to grow.

The Student Years

In 1834 Fanny and her mom left Ridgefield and returned to Westchester County. In November of that same year they first saw an advertisement for the New York Institution for the Blind. On March 3, 1835, Fanny set off for New York with a traveling companion to enter the institute. After enrolling in and beginning attendance of the school, Crosby quickly became known among the faculty, staff, and student body for her poetry. It was during these early student years that she first became well respected among the literary community of New York and in demand for her poetry skills.

A superintendent of the school named Mr. Jones foresaw the danger of this still young student being ruined by vanity from all the high praise. He therefore cautioned her against letting this vanity get the best of her. At the same time he commanded her to not write poetry for the next three months. He did this partly to temper her growing vanity and partly to test her commitment to writing poetry. After proving herself (and learning to temper her vanity) she was encouraged to write to her heart’s content. This is when a literary mentor

named Hamilton Murray stepped in. Murray was a member of the Board of Managers of the institution who had great writing sensibilities and skill. He took her under his wing and taught her to write better. With his guidance, Crosby was able to branch out into other areas of writing. For instance, with his help she put her mind to writing poetry for campaigns and other political events.

The Teaching Years

In 1843, Fanny graduated from the institute. During that same year she became a teacher there. It was also during that same year that her health began to decline somewhat. Nevertheless, she still took a number of students to on planned trip to Washington D.C. While there, she recited some of her poetry to the politicians. This trip to Washington was such a success that Crosby would later take a second group of students to the U.S. capitol.

By 1845, she was gradually getting more and more into song lyric writing. During that year a man named George F. Roots came to the school to teach music. In 1853, the two composed a cantata called "The Flower Queen."

Fanny was also began publishing books of poetry during these teaching years. In 1844 she published her first official book of poems: "The Blind Girl and Other Poems." This book also contained her very first hymn which she called "An Evening Hymn." In 1851, she would publish another book of poetry called "Monterey and Other Poems."

Some really big events happened in Fanny's life in between these two books, in 1848 and 1849, the land was stricken by cholera. Like thousands throughout the country, many of the students died. It was so bad that during August of 1848, Crosby was ordered to retire to the country so she too would not get sick. This was not an uncommon practice at this time; many city dwellers were departing the city to avoid the close quarters that fostered the disease. She did retire to the

country, and it was not only a salvation for her physical self; it was a life changer for her spiritual self as well. During her time away from the institution, she received a full knowledge of Jesus Christ. This was not something that had just happened all of a sudden. Several years earlier in 1845 she had first met her spiritual mentor, Theodore Camp. He was instrumental in bringing her to Jesus on November 20, 1850 at a revival at the Broadway Methodist Tabernacle.

The Latter Years

Fanny met her future husband, Alexander Van Alstyne when he was a student at the institution in 1855. (He was 11 years younger than her.) After he graduated from school, he became a teacher and became engaged to Fanny. Three years later the couple resigned and very shortly thereafter got married.

Little is known regarding their married life, but there are three facts that are pretty clear: First, although very amicable and still doing some things together, they lived apart and had separate lives for the majority of their married life. Second, a few years after they were married they had a daughter who only lived for less than a day. Third, they would remain married until he died on July 18, 1902.

In 1858, the year she had resigned from teaching and gotten married, the stage of her hymnist career was set. During this year Fanny published "A Wreath of Columbia's Flowers." This would be her final book of poems before starting to write hymns. This next phase of her writing career was instigated in December 1863 after she was asked to write a hymn for the Dutch Reformed Church. She did so well on this project that an arrangement was made for her to meet the famous hymnist William B. Bradbury on February 2 of the next year. A historic years-long collaboration ensued. It was not long afterward that she became known to evangelists and pastors on both sides of the Atlantic as Aunt Fanny and the Queen of Gospel Music. Many of these ministers commonly used her work in altar calls.

The world famous evangelistic team Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey utilized her songs in this way throughout the 1870s and onward. The greatness of Fanny's hymns comes from their ability to be understood and to touch the lives of ordinary people.

By the time she died in 1915, Fanny would pen at least 9,000 hymns. Although she mostly signed them with her given name, she wrote a lot using pseudonyms. She is believed to have used almost 200.

It was also during these years of growing worldwide fame that Fanny became a much in demand public speaker at churches and charitable organizations. It is said that she was exceptionally gifted at this role.

The Last Years

By the 1880s, Fanny was both living and working in the slums. Her work in the missions here gave her the opportunity to evangelize common people on a personal basis.

At the same time she kept busy with her writing life. During these last years, she would write two autobiographies: "Fanny Crosby's Life-Story, By Herself" in 1903 (out of print) and "Memories of Eighty Years" (retitled Fanny J. Crosby: An Autobiography) in 1906.

Fanny died at the age of 95 sometime during the night between February 11 and 12, 1915. On her tombstone are the words, "She hath done what she could" (from Mark 14:8). Of the thousands of hymns Fanny penned, most have been forgotten, but those used in churches around the globe throughout the decades have been priceless tools in touching lives for Jesus and continue to be so. Fanny Crosby was a true Wonder Woman for the cause of Christ—a Wonder Woman for the ages.

“Cry, Baby, Cry! Make Your Mother Sigh!”

I am such a sap. There are days when almost every song I hear makes me emotional. Not every song, mind you, just the majority of them. And to further clarify, these are songs I am choosing to listen to, not songs that I just happen to hear on the radio, though those will sometimes hit me right in the feels as well. My daytime work routine is pretty simple: while I labor away over various things that do not interest me in the least, I listen to music. I listen to music in the car, to and from work. I listen to music at home, as often as I can. Sometimes it's difficult to listen to music when I want to because it's just one more level of noise competing against three energetic boys. Nevertheless, I persist.

Back to me crying. I see that I never actually said that music makes me cry, so I should probably clarify. I don't usually cry while listening to music. I get a little misty eyed and my eyes might even well up with tears. This is not an everyday sort of thing, but on the days it happens, I try to evaluate my response. “Why am I getting emotional listening to the Thor soundtrack?” “Did I really just cry listening to “Africa” by Toto?”

When the first song hits me hard, I figure I just really need to hear that particular song at that particular point in time – that happens every now and then to me. But then, the next song gets me even more worked up, and it's not one of the usual suspects that consistently break me down. It's some random song that I enjoy, but never respond to in an emotional way. (Case in point: “Africa” by Toto.)

So, on the days when music is turning me into a big man baby, what does it mean? Is there a deeper significance to it? I have no idea. Perhaps I am just really tired and everything is going to hit me harder on those days. Perhaps I am more attuned to the emotional truth of each song and that is causing me to have a stronger reaction. Perhaps I should try to spiritualize this as much as possible and find out what it is about those songs that is causing me to act like all the women I know that watch *This Is Us*.

More than likely, this is all pretty easy to figure out. I am a sap. I cry at movies and TV shows that don't even cause my wife to blink. I cried the other night watching *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Leave me alone! If you don't cry when Groot sacrifices himself, you have no soul! I remember watching *Bridge to Terabithia* with my boys years ago and I was a mess at the end. I was so worked up by the film, that it sort of embarrassed me. I didn't want my boys to see me ugly crying over a kid's film. So yes, I am a sap and I cry. Maybe it's just that simple. I'm not sure though.

By now, you are probably asking yourself, "Why did he write this?" And more importantly, "Why did he decide to share this?" Two very good questions and I don't have very good answers for either of them. My gut reaction to all this is simple: On those days when what I listen to is provoking a strong emotional response, I think it's because sometimes, I need to feel things deeply. Most days I just coast through life. Not in a bad way. I'm not disengaged or anything. I think most people have very ordinary days most of the time. We don't get emotionally worked up most days. At least I don't, even though I am more apt to do that than others. I think on the days of strong emotion, I am being gently prodded to keep my heart open and a bit broken. Not just for my own good either. I think it's on days like these that if I allow song to do what they are capable of doing; I become more in tune with things of a spiritual nature. Maybe my emotional spells

will allow me to be more empathetic with a friend or coworker, simply because my heart has already been laid bare. Perhaps, this is God's way of telling me to stop being so careful with my feelings – to stop building walls around me. If my defenses are down and my heart is open, I am more likely to notice the needs of others. I am more likely to feel the needs of others and respond in a God-honoring way.[2. Galatians 6:2 and Philippians 2:4] Maybe these days are meant to stretch me – to grow me.

Or maybe I'm just a sap.

[Listen Now! A Rambling Ever On Spotify Playlist](#)

Regular readers know that our previous published playlists have been based around a particular theme. Check out our [water](#) and [color](#) playlists. For this playlist we are doing something a little bit different. Instead of theme this playlist is based on a musical instrument. Each song prominently features what is perhaps the greatest of all musical instruments – the piano. Since its invention a little over 300 years ago the piano has made its way into virtually every style of music. Over time the number of musical genres has exploded, but the piano has been a constant. Equally at home in both secular and sacred music these 88 keys produce some of the most beautiful sounds heard this side of heaven. As you listen to this playlist try not to dwell on the fact that if you had paid more attention during piano lessons as a kid you too could have made it on an REO playlist!

For this list we had seven contributors that picked four songs

each. Enjoy.

<https://open.spotify.com/user/mlytle/playlist/6pArCbFEXTfPz2xbIoS0vW>

[Five Petra Songs That Taught Me the Truth](#)

To be perfectly clear up front – this is not a joke. This is not some sarcastic, ironic, wink-at-the-audience type of article. This is real. I am sure there are many out there that either do not know who *Petra* was or many that do know and wish they did not. For any number of reasons, though *Petra* was one of the most popular and well-loved rock bands in the Christian music scene, there is a level of indifference, or worse, disdain directed towards them and towards that entire era of “Christian rock.” Someday, I hope to further explore the peculiar myopia of the Christian music world. In no other genre of music are the historical roots ignored like Christian music. It is as if any artist, band, or song that did not come out in the past few years does not even exist. However, as I said, that is an article for another day. Today, I do want to shine a light on a band that paved the way for so many others. A band that sold millions of records, won dozens of Dove and Grammy Awards, and most importantly, gave kids like me some absolutely great music to listen to. Music that was not only cool but that imparted great truth to a young, impressionable mind. So here are five, of the many, truths in *Petra* songs that spoke to me in my youth and helped me see God, the church, and spirituality in a much clearer way. I have included a Spotify playlist with the Five songs at the end of the article.

Petra taught me to be more outwardly focused.

Song: Rose Colored Stained Glass Windows

Album: More Power to Ya (1982)

Scriptural Support: Matthew 25:35-48, John 13:34-35, Luke 6:27-36.



Key Lyric:

Out on the doorstep lay the masses in decay

Ignore them long enough, maybe they'll go away

When you have so much you think, you have so much to lose

You think you have no lack, when you're really destitute

This album came out when I was four years old, so it took me some time to discover it and truly appreciate what I was hearing. This song in particular worked slowly on me. I responded immediately to the opening of the song – with an organ churning out “Showers of Blessing” and then transitioning to the acoustic guitar melody. When the truth behind the song finally broke through for me, it was a lightning bolt type moment. So many times our churches are insulated things. We build walls in so many ways to keep out the ugliness and messiness of the world. As believers, we are no different. This song challenges me every time I hear it. It pushes and prods me to reach out more, to care more, and to love more.

Petra taught me that prayer is a vital part of the Christian life.

Song: Stand In the Gap

Album: On Fire (1988)

Scriptural Support: 1 Chronicles 16:11,
James 5:16, Ezekiel 22:30, 2 Corinthians
1:11, 1 Timothy 2:1.



Key lyric:

Stand in the gap

Coming boldly to His throne of grace

Stand in the gap

He will hear you when you seek His face

Too often, prayer can feel like a last resort. When someone we love is hurting, we look for any numbers of ways to help. We exhaust ourselves trying to “fix” the problem, usually to poor result. Scripture makes it clear that we should seek the face of God first and often. While this was a truth taught to me at home and in church, this song brought the truth home in a way I had not understood before. Our lives are a battlefield and when one of us is wounded, our job is to stand in the gap, defending and upholding them with our powerful and effective prayers.

Petra taught me that my eyes are closed to the suffering in the world.

Song: Hollow Eyes

Album: Beat the System (1984)

Scriptural Support: Matthew 25:35-48,
Psalm 9:9; 10:14; 12:5, 7; 34:18;
37:18-19.



Key Lyric:

The least of these is hungry.

The least of these is sick.

The least of these needs clothing.

The least of these needs drink.

The least of these knows sorrow.

The least of these knows grief.

The least of these has suffered pain, and Jesus is His name.

I am not sure how old I was when I first heard this song. I do remember being very young. I also remember a long drive from the interior of Panama, back to our home in Panama City, when I listened to this song. This might have been around the same time I first heard it, or it could have been a short time later. I was one of those kids that would latch on to new music like it was essential to my continued existence. I soaked it in completely. I have a distinct memory of hearing this song at night while on the road. I remember hearing the haunting words and melody. I remember being shaken by it, down to my very bones. All at once, this song widened my perspective of the world, showed me the truth of worldwide suffering, and made it perfectly clear that to ignore all of it, was to ignore Jesus Himself.

Petra taught me that God is my Rock.

Song: You Are My Rock

Album: This Means War (1987)

Scriptural Support: Psalm 18:1-6, Psalm 31



Key Lyric:

You are my rock, my fortress, my shield

You are my rock, let Your strength be revealed

*My rock, my comfort, my peace
My salvation, my refuge, my God
You are my Rock*

While this album came out when I was 9 or 10 years old, I truly hit my music obsession stride around my early teens. This Means War! was a landmark moment. It hit me at a time when I was struggling with assurance of my faith. With the gentle wisdom and patience of my parents and albums like this, I was able to nail things down in a permanent way. This song in particular was a huge help. There were times, in my head, when things felt out of control. My spirit felt like it was being tossed and turned, this way and that, with fear and doubt. This song became an anchor point, a rallying cry to me. When I felt surrounded by the darkness, God's inescapable light would break through. I was never standing alone.

Petra taught me that God has conquered death forever.

Song: Grave Robber

Album: Not of This World (1983)

Scriptural Support: Hebrews 9:27, John 4:14, 1 Peter 1:24, Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:26, 51-55, Revelation 7:17



Key Lyric:

*Where is the sting, tell me where is the bite
When the grave robber comes like a thief in the night
Where is the victory, where is the prize
When the grave robber comes
And death finally dies*

This is a song that has encouraged me for the majority of my life. For one, it is full of Scripture, with verses and

passages woven in and out of the lyrics. It is a bold and full statement of faith that our God is stronger than death. He is the grave robber and the killer of death. Secondly, the song itself is upbeat; building to a powerful bridge and final restatement of the chorus. The band chose to make the song triumphant and victorious, instead of contemplative and reserved. The melody and style do much in imparting the true power behind the lyrics. Our hearts might still ache for those who have gone before, but we are promised a reunion of joy where we will witness death being swallowed by the giver of life.

I could probably write about another dozen songs by *Petra* that spoke to me just as powerfully. I could talk about *Godpleaser* or *Adonai*. I could go on and on about *Creed*, *He Came, He Saw, He Conquered*, or *Hey World*. I could spend hours discussing the songs, the words, and the integral role music has played in my life. I won't. This is enough for now. I am eternally grateful for the way God has used music to teach me, mold me, and help me see Him more clearly. *Petra* was a big part of that.

<https://open.spotify.com/user/1226908113/playlist/05371QlsvHr1FRd1XqqziJ>

[“I’m Offended!” What Biblical Offense Is \(And Isn’t\) In 21st Century America](#)

Be careful, there are some people out there who are ‘professional weaker brethren.’

[Chuck Swindoll]

Language is not like math.

That's what I tell my ESL students often when they ask me about translation and pronunciation rules. Not much we learn in this realm is quite like "2+2=4". For example, if you ask me how to say "lose" in Spanish, I'd need to hear it in a sentence. I know of at least five ways to translate it and having a limited knowledge of the language, there are probably many I'm not aware of.

Very few words mean only one thing. "Offensive" and all of its forms is a very good example. Something can "offend" me in the sense that it annoys me. It can offend me in the sense that it hurts me. Even in the Bible it can mean that someone is aware of their sin because of Jesus Christ, and angry as a result. And many nuances exist within each of these meanings.

But there is one special meaning of the word in the Bible I think gets confused with other definitions and causes confusion and even at times misuse of the Bible as a result. In 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15, the discussion of what Christians are free to do should cause us to think of "offense" being at times the idea of causing another Christian to stumble morally and fall back into a sin with which they used to struggle.

The concept is not that difficult to get. Paul says it is understandable to have convictions in the sense that you are "fully convinced in your own mind" that you should avoid certain things or that you should do certain things. The examples he gives are things like not eating certain foods or believing that some days should be observed to worship and not others. Convictions often are formed based on weaknesses in our faith, based on temptations that can easily cause us to sin.

He is absolutely clear that you should not force your convictions on other people. One person believes they should not eat meat, since during that time it could lead to struggling with a former life of idolatry. Another believes all food is okay to eat because he has no struggle. Both can be right if they are fully convinced in their own minds what is best for them. Convictions are not absolute truths, which are true for all people everywhere and for all time. The Bible has many of those (Jesus is the only way to God, etc.), but much of Christianity is figuring out how to live in the way that is most pleasing to God and that will not look the same for all people.

But Paul also goes as far to say that if your liberty to do certain things causes offense to other Christians, you should avoid doing them. An example that is easy to think of in our culture today is that if I'm with a Christian friend who used to struggle with alcohol and I do not struggle with it, then I would not be acting in love if I drank in front of him or her. (For the record, I choose not to drink for a variety of reasons.)

Sadly, this is the starting point for the aforementioned confusion and misuse of the Bible. In my opinion, based on my lifetime experience dealing with churches and Christians, that people often try to say "this offends me" as if to say you shouldn't do it because of what taught about not casting a stumbling block. But in reality, they are not offended in that way. They are not really even harmed. They are merely annoyed. Which is a totally different type of offense. Many Christians would not be even a little tempted to drink if another Christian drank in their presence. So are they "offended"? Not in a 1 Corinthians 8-10 or Romans 14-15 manner.

I'll be frank—I am not overly concerned most of the time with annoying people. I am not acting in love if I annoy people on purpose, generally speaking. But if the fact that I watch a movie or TV show or do something similar that merely annoys

people, then I do not have a biblical mandate to not do it based on causing anyone to stumble.

To really practice what Paul was talking about with 21st century American entertainment, I could easily envision a scenario where a friend of mine watches a TV show with more sexual content that I can handle and even though he is not tempted to lust by it, he chooses not to watch or discuss it around me. My conviction is to avoid the show.

Much of entertainment does not cause me any offense. I can certainly make it into something harmful by taking in so much it wastes my time I could doing other things that are better for the kingdom of God. But generally speaking, this isn't about that. It's about me being fully convinced in my own mind that I am free to do things others may feel they cannot. And far more often than not, the word "offense" comes up in these discussions meaning "I'm annoyed" and not "I may fall back into sin".

I recognize this treatment of the issue doesn't deal with parenting. As a non-Parent I'll let others speak to that aspect of it. But in my personal life, I want to be careful how I use words, especially words in the Bible, and how I teach them. "I'm offended" may be something serious or it may be something not all that significant. May God grant us the wisdom to know the difference.

[Listen Now! A Rambling Ever On Spotify Playlist](#)

Spring is in the air. Personally I hate spring due to my lifelong struggle with seasonal allergies. Fortunately I have

medication for this affliction so don't weep for me. Many people love this time of year though. According to a Gallup poll that I spent about 5 seconds researching, spring is the most popular season, with 36% of Americans voting for it. For many, spring brings to mind renewal and of course vibrant colors. That is what this playlist is all about. Color.

Each song has a color as part of the title or mentions a color or multiple colors prominently in its lyrics. Like our [water playlist](#) this was put together by a group of friends who picked songs that they enjoyed and wanted to share. It was not intended to be an article when we originally put it together, but the host of Celebrity Apprentice is our president now so crazier things have happened.

While I won't pretend to love every song on here I do love the variety. So many styles are represented. There are songs from the 1960s all the way to the current decade and every decade in between. We had eight people contribute 3-4 songs each to this list which is what helped with the eclectic nature of the selections.

Come and celebrate all the colors of the rainbow with us!

God Gave Rock and Roll To You

(An edited version of this article originally appeared in [The Brink Magazine](#), published by [Randall House Publications](#).)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. – Philippians 4:8

When I was in my early twenties, back in my college days, I was confident, sure of myself, and completely convinced I had all the big and important things in life figured out. I've known a lot of people that have gone down that road. I had all the answers. Or at least all the answers that really mattered in my life. I knew what I believed and nothing would dissuade me from my convictions. Those were simpler times.

One of the main areas of my life where I was resolute in my beliefs was in regards to the music I listened to. Through much study, prayer, and fasting (I'm using poetic license here) I decided that I would only listen to Christian music. No more of that terrible secular music that was birthed in the very pits of hell. That music was causing me to sin, backslide, and abandon the faith (once again – speaking poetically). No more would I listen to the likes of Nirvana, Collective Soul, Pearl Jam, and most definitely not The Beatles. These bands were comprised of sinners and that meant that nothing they could say would help me in my spiritual journey. In fact, what they said would have the opposite effect. From my superior vantage point, secular bands had nothing to offer Christians. They were devoid of all honesty and truth. And even though their music was really good and a lot of fun to listen to, I would turn my back on them so that I could continue down the straight and the narrow. I had convinced myself that unless the songs I listened to were clearly and without prevarication speaking about or to God, then they were useless to me. What benefit could songs like The Beatles' All You Need Is Love offer me? I had fallen prey to the faulty thinking that has trapped so many Christians throughout time: God is too small to operate outside of the creativity and the machinations of believers. Perhaps even

more significantly I had failed to comprehend true worship and it was in that failing that my mind and my motives went astray.

Worship goes beyond words and catch phrases. It does not need a quota of religious terminology and expressions. Real worship does not come about if we say "Holy" or "Jesus" or "Praise" enough times. Worship is the very nuts and bolts of our lives. It comes from the most basic and elemental parts of our souls. True worship is uncomplicated and many times unremarkable. God lives in the mundane; in the boring details. He excels in working with the everyday and the commonplace. Scripture tells us that if mankind fails to praise Him like we should then nature itself will cry out. God's glory is proclaimed by the sun and stars, their unspoken truth is being revealed to the world. If God is capable of eliciting praise from inanimate objects, then why are we so convinced that He can't be glorified by the tongues of sinners; whether they intend it or not. Why do we recoil at the thought that God could communicate His truth through the creativity and the talents of unbelievers? That was my error, and perhaps the error of many. I was limiting God. I had confined Him to a little corner of my world. He could live, move, and act in that space, but nowhere else. He could speak through my Christian songs. But He was incapable of receiving praise or communicating truth through the thoughts, words, and music of an unbeliever. Simply put, my God was not so big or so strong or so mighty and there were some things that my God could not do.

When this realization hit me, I'll admit, it hurt. It shamed me. I was so arrogant in my ignorance. I was master of my universe and to be frank, my universe sucked. I had heard the phrase, "All truth is God's truth" since childhood and I thought I believed it. Sadly, I had learned to compartmentalize my life. Well intentioned, I had constructed separate spaces for the sacred and the secular. God was

allowed to speak to me and to receive my praise through the unambiguously Christian. God was overlooked, or even worse, not welcome, in the secular. I could enjoy sports, food, television, and even movies as long as those areas of my life were separate from my hearing and understanding of God's voice. For some reason I had no problem with those areas in their unbaptized form. Music on the other hand was different. Secular music was dangerous, frightening and decidedly not Christian. The line must be drawn here and no further! I would remain safe and comfortable surrounded by songs that didn't offend or question me. Songs that played it safe; using the appropriate language and ideas.

After the aforementioned epiphany, I realized how narrow my thinking had been. God was at work in ways that my mind could not fathom. His truth was being proclaimed and communicated by the most unlikely people imaginable. But isn't that just like Him? Scripture is full of examples of God using damaged and even unbelieving spokespersons. Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed:

Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God...no other god can save in this way.

He was in no way a "believer" but he spoke the truth: There is no other God that can save in that way. King Darius wrote a decree extolling God's power after Daniel had been saved from the lion's den:

For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.

Wow! That's a praise song right there. We have no evidence that Darius was a believer yet he wrote those words for the entire nation to read and hear. The truth was crafted and penned by a sinner and it was heard by most of the civilized world.

Perhaps the most amazing example in Scripture is the time when God used Balaam's donkey to save his life by speaking. Yes, a donkey spoke to protect it's master who was disobeying God. If God can speak the truth through an animal then I have no problem believing that He can use the likes of John Lennon or Mick Jagger.

So what does this all mean? I think there are a few things that we should keep in mind when considering these ideas. Most importantly: Use wisdom. I'm not advocating jumping in head first into all the world offers us. Much of it is garbage and should be treated as such. Much of it is dangerous and deadly; flee from temptation and all that. But that is where discernment and wisdom come into play. Know your strengths and your inclinations and make good choices on what you will entertain and what will entertain you. Secondly, look closer, listen more carefully, and examine more fully. The real stuff, the things that really count are not always easy to spot or easy to ingest. Those things have to be tested carefully and completely. Your search will lead you down some unforeseen roads, and that is okay. As Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message* would put it, "*God plays in ten thousand places.*" Don't underestimate God's ability to make His truth known. Finally, don't be afraid of the difficult questions. When you listen to secular artists you are going to be challenged. They don't see the world through our eyes. Many times they are going to confront God directly and perhaps even have a few negative things to say about Him or his children. Guess what? God doesn't mind. In fact, I think he appreciates the honesty much more than the shallow spiritualized rhetoric that is found in so much of our modern Christian music. To prove that

He doesn't mind He made sure His revealed Word was full of questions. There are plenty of examples in Scripture of this. If you spend enough time with the secular, your faith will be questioned. Rest assured of that. Embrace that. These people are searching and are simply expressing that search in the only way they know how; through their talents. Mankind has questions, even Christians have questions, and it is much healthier to accept that and figure out ways to confront those questions than it is to close our eyes, ears, and minds to the very things that could be a catalyst for growth.

At this point you might be wondering what the passage from Philippians has to do with any of this. Simple: Truth, nobility, purity, loveliness, and excellence can and will be found in a thousand different places. Don't be afraid to think without limits when searching for them because contrary to popular opinion, God is limitless and He is looking forward to taking your hand and revealing His truth and His glory to you in ways that are beyond your imagining. God has made everything beautiful in its time and he created humanity with an innate ability to appreciate truth and beauty. He did this so that we could and would recognize the Originator of that Truth and Beauty. God is at work in the sublime, in the transcendent, in the fallen, and in the broken. God is drawing all men unto Himself and He uses more than His Words or His people to accomplish this. He even uses those things that entertain us. Just one thing: Be sure to recognize when God is making Himself known through these broken vessels. If you don't, it would be a waste of a really great song.

The things we enjoy are channels through which the divine glory strikes us, and those who love and delight in any good thing may yet learn to love God. – Gilbert Meilaender

Listen Now! A Rambling Ever On Spotify Playlist

Water is a theme that shows up often in music. It is a running joke that water clichés are way too prevalent in Christian music. While this is true, Christian music is certainly not the only genre of music that offends in this area. At times these water references really are only tired clichés and don't say much, but we should not throw the baby out with the bath water (pun intended). Water imagery can be used in beautiful and poetic ways as well and it makes sense that water shows up so much in the lyrics of popular music. The earth is 70% water after all and the average human body is 60% water. Some of us may even be carrying a little extra water weight and get closer to the 65% mark!

A couple years ago the REO staff put together a playlist of songs with water as the theme. We did this as a way to share songs with each other and because we enjoyed the collaboration. It wasn't done with the intent to make it public, but some of you may enjoy these songs as well so we thought we would share. Sometimes we connected with the emotion of a song and other time we may have just liked the music and it happened to have lyrics about water, either way we hope you enjoy. Let us know in the comments what other "water" songs you would add and if they meet our strict four step approval process you may see them show up on this playlist.

How Gladiator, Andy Dufresne, 80s Rock, and Fantasy Literature Helped Me Understand Heaven

As far back as I can remember, heaven and hell have captivated my imagination. I was born into the home of Baptist missionaries, grew up in church and was lovingly raised with the ever-present awareness of life's brevity and eternity's endlessness. My impressionable mind quickened at mentions of life after death. I was mesmerized, overwhelmed and confused. I was well trained – my parents and my church made sure of that – so these uncertainties had no basis in poor discipleship. I received a firm foundation and accepted the truth I had been taught. I still know and accept that truth.

Throughout my childhood, I wrestled to understand what Scripture says about our eternal destination. To this day, my mind and soul battle over the concept and theological implications of eternal punishment. That, as they say, is a story for another time. (If you need more clarity on that to be sure you are not reading the words of a heathen, be assured that I accept the traditional theology on hell.)

My internal struggle with heaven has been a completely different fight. I have never doubted the existence of a literal heaven. My belief in a good and loving God makes heaven more than a reality. It makes it an absolute certainty. How could a perfectly loving and kind God not create an eternal home for his children? Belief was not my issue. My confusion resided entirely in the tangible specifics that are detailed in Scripture.

I am going to open myself up to criticism, but when I was a

child, I thought as a child, and heaven sounded a little boring to me. Bowing before the throne and singing for all eternity did not appeal to my young heart the way I knew it should. That bothered me. It made me feel less spiritual – less saved – even though I knew that was impossible. As I matured, I slowly began to understand that much of the language used in Scripture to describe heaven is both figurative **and** literal. (Revelation 21:10-27) I became convinced that there will be an eternity of singing and worship. (Rev 4:8-11) I became convinced that there will be streets of gold and all the rest. I also became convinced that our words and language and ideas and paintings and songs were barely scratching the surface. That also bothered me. If heaven was meant to be the believer's eternal home (John 14:2-4), surely it should be a home I longed for – a home I ached for.

Instead, my view of heaven felt subdued and anti-climactic. All the talk in Scripture of eternal singing, precious gemstone architecture, mansions, "Holy, Holy, Holy" chanting, and all the rest sounded so alien to me. Those things bore little resemblance to the best things in my life. It made me feel that all the things I loved in life: family, home, the beauty of creation, music, and friends were not good enough. It made me feel that those things were going to be replaced by things that were more important and spiritual, but that did not have the same deep, emotional pull on my heart.

I have always needed both mind and emotion working in tandem for the deepest truths to engage my faith fully. My early understanding of heaven did not connect to my heart, my emotions. I hasten to add that even at a young age, I realized my understanding of heaven was limited. I knew that in death, entering the very presence of Jesus would erase all misgivings I had. I knew heaven would not disappoint in the least, but I felt it was wrong of me if I did not try to gain a fuller understanding of heaven while still on earth. So, my journey

to a deeper, fuller, and more resonate connection to heaven began in earnest.

Bill and Ted's Heavenly Instruction



In the spiritual masterpiece of the 1980s, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, our heroes, the aforementioned Bill and Ted,

travel through time in a phone booth. (Don't ask.) They do so to prepare for the final exam in their high school history class. At the beginning of the film, they are visited by a man from the future who tells them that they have to pass their history class or they will be split up and their band, Wyld Stallyns, will never exist. If Wyld Stallyns does not exist, the music they create will never exist, and that music is destined to bring an end to war, hunger, and all sorts of other bad things. (Seriously, it does not matter. It is a very dumb movie.) About midway through the film, they accidentally travel to the future. In typical 80s fashion, the film's picture of the future is full of pastels, lasers, ambient smoke, and sunglasses. The future also has a song playing in the background that hit me like a bolt of lightning – "In Time" by Robbie Robb. You have probably never heard of it or the singer. And if you heard it now, you would probably shake your head and stop reading. Yet, for a kid that loved 80s rock like it was a part of his soul and responded to power ballads like an addict to his drug of choice, that song, in that

moment in the film, felt like poetry, inspiration, and theology. This scene was the film's view of utopia. It was a picture of the world as it could be, if Bill and Ted could graduate high school, form their band, and create their world changing music. In the film's vernacular, it was heaven.

My first connection was made: **Worship in heaven will be spiritually satisfying in ways we cannot grasp.** As silly as it might sound, the song "In Time" playing in that specific scene gave me a picture of heaven I responded to on a purely emotional level. It challenged my immature view of heavenly worship – something that seemed dry, stuffy, and boring – and told me that if I could enjoy and respond to music on earth like this, I had nothing to worry about when it came to music created and conceived by the Lord of every good thing.

Zihuatanejo



Zihuatanejo opened my eyes a little more. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne is unjustly imprisoned. He is surrounded by inmates and prison officials that abuse him at every turn. Over time, he becomes close with one fellow inmate, a man named Red. It is to Red that Andy shares his dream: to escape prison and make his way to the coastal town of Zihuatanejo, Mexico. From all appearances, it is a hopeless

dream. Red listens to Andy but sees the dream for the fantasy that it is. To Andy, Zihuatanejo is heaven. Andy is convinced he will make it there one day. He knows that he does not belong behind bars.

Eventually, Andy does break free. Shortly after, Red is released, yet he does not feel free. The only life he has known as an adult is one of incarceration and life on the outside feels alien to him. Mostly though, he misses his friend. He finds a place to live and gets a job, though the work is unsatisfying and humiliating. Once out of prison, Andy leaves clues and money to help Red make the trip to join him. The film closes with a breathtaking shot of a beach, crystalline blue waters, and Andy and Red embracing in the sun.

I had made a second connection: **Heaven is a place of reunion.** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) It will be a time of reunion with those who have journeyed before – those we have loved and lost – and those who have walked with us on the road of faith. When we reach our final resting place, we will be welcomed and embraced by those that mean the most to us; brothers and sisters in Christ that share a bond that transcends any human connection. While my fear of heaven being impersonal and ethereal were not based on anything I was taught, seeing Andy and Red embrace on that beach removed those fears and misconceptions. Our faith is one of relationships and heaven will only serve to make those relationships more fulfilling because they will not be limited by human frailties and time.

Gladiator's Biblical View of Heaven



The
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were back on, but I could not leave. Deep down, I knew I had experienced something true. Something deeper and more important than swords and spears, choreographed fights and battles. What I felt then, I was unable to fully articulate until some years later, but even in my inability to put words to my emotions, I knew *Gladiator* had opened my eyes a little wider and made heaven all the more real.

Gladiator tells the story of Roman general, Maximus. He is betrayed by the usurping prince Commodus. This betrayal leaves him at death's door and his family executed in the vilest manner possible. The rest of the story follows Maximus's attempt to set things right – to bring justice to those who wronged him and to fulfill the dying wishes of the previous Caesar, his friend, Marcus Aurelius. We will not take time to argue the merits of a film that on one level amounts to little more than a revenge tale. That is a fair criticism of the film but does nothing to diminish my point. At the film's conclusion, as Maximus drifts between life and death, he sees a vision of his wife and son waiting for him in the afterlife. This is the one thing Maximus has longed for the entire film, even before his family's death: Home. His view of heaven was to be home with his family. Forever.

It was then I made my third connection: **Heaven is the greatest home we will ever know.** Scripture is clear that at the end of all things, God will bring the new heaven down to the new

earth, and his children will live there forever. This new heaven and earth will be so amazing, we will not even think about the old ones anymore (Isaiah 65:17,21). It will be our home, but better, the way our home was meant to be from the beginning. It will not be some dreamy fantasy of clouds and harps and things we do not recognize or appreciate. It will be real and tactile. It will feel like the best version of the best day you have ever had, but fuller, deeper, and more real than you can imagine.

In discussing this scene with friends, fellow REO contributor, Josh Crowe, put it this way: "That scene...with the music and wheat and other-worldliness was the first time in my adult life that I pictured heaven as a real place. Until then I had always thought of heaven as 'a place in the clouds'. Since then, it's taken on a reality that I can't quite explain." My connection to heaven took on a far more powerful reality when I realized that God's new heaven and earth will be His way of correcting all that went wrong on this earth. It will be the redemption of all the wrong that sin has wrought, and a refashioning of all the good in creation. It will take the best of our world, our home, and make it better.

Taliesin's Vision



In *The Pendragon Cycle*, Stephen Lawhead's epic retelling of the story of King Arthur, Merlin, and the Knights of the Round Table, we are introduced to the bard Taliesin. He is a singer, a poet, and most importantly, a prophet. His life and vision pave the way for Merlin and Arthur. Though raised in pagan druidism, when he encounters the True God, he easily hails him as Lord. It is with this new faith that he is given a vision of the world to come. A world he hopes to help usher into existence. His words, near the end of the first book in the series, pierce me like an arrow every time I read them:

I have seen a land, a land of shining goodness where each man protects his brother's dignity as readily as his own, where war and want have ceased and all tribes live under the same law of love and honor. I have seen a land bright with truth, where a man's word is his pledge and falsehood is banished, where children sleep safe in their mother's arms and never know fear or pain. I have seen a land where kings extend their hands in justice rather than reach for the sword; where mercy, kindness, and compassion flow like deep water, and where men revere virtue, revere truth, revere beauty above comfort, pleasure or selfish gain. A land where peace reigns in the hearts of men. Where faith blazes like a beacon from every hill and love like a fire from every hearth; where the

True God is worshiped and His ways acclaimed by all. I have seen this land. I have seen it and my heart yearns for it.

Here was one final connection: **The Kingdom of heaven is here and coming.** We live in the time between times. Jesus ushered in the Kingdom with his life, death and resurrection, yet the ultimate fulfillment of His kingdom will only come at the end of the age. As believers, we have seen the Kingdom of heaven and our hearts yearn for it. One of my favorite passages of Scripture, from a book that I have wrestled with since I was eleven or twelve years old, is Revelation 21:4-5a. It is a message of hope and renewal. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" I did not realize the importance of the final five words when I was young. At times, I fail to realize them even now. "I am making everything new!" Heaven will be something we cannot imagine, yet will have the flesh and bones of the very best of what we know and love now. The very things that matter most in life: love, faith, family, kindness, fellowship, mercy, grace, home, and peace will be lovingly perfected by the One who made all things. He will fashion this new heaven and earth from the ashes of what has come before and he will declare, "I am making everything new!"

My view of heaven is incomplete but God is doing His best to answer my questions and fill in the gaps. He is using His Word and His character. He is also using the fumbling attempts of man. He is using flawed, fragmented images and unfinished, imperfect connections to reveal Himself. These connections are pushing me back to Scripture to find a fuller picture than I realized was there. This journey has taken me from feelings of confusion and trepidation to deeper trust, assurance, and expectation. So, I pray, much like the Apostle John, at the end of his Revelation, "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"

“Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” – Andy Dufresne in The Shawshank Redemption

Yesterday

Last night, as we are on the vispera (Spanish for “Eve” or “time before”) of another year, ending 2016 and beginning 2017, I didn’t sleep well and lay awake for long periods of time. My thoughts went to the word “yesterday.”

Let me begin by saying that some of my favorite songs, either musically, lyrically, or thematically revolve around “yesterday.” Looking back, reflecting, and reminiscing is something we do somewhat automatically, I suppose, especially at year’s end, but it’s probably a good thing to do from a biblical standpoint: “number our days to gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12), allow the past (history) to be our teacher (Psalm 78), and remember that “our times are in his hands” (Psalm 31:15).

One of the prettiest songs from the 60s was “Yesterday” by *The Beatles*.

*Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away.
Now it looks as though they’re here to stay.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.*

*Suddenly I’m not half the man I used to be.
There’s a shadow hanging over me.
Oh, yesterday came suddenly.*

*Why she had to go, I don’t know, she wouldn’t say.
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.*

Yesterday love was such an easy game to play.

Now I need a place to hide away.

Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say.

I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.

Yesterday love was such an easy game to play.

Now I need a place to hide away.

Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Lovely, soft, melancholy – it is a song that almost anyone would like. Thinking back to an earlier, happier time is so typical of we humans.

“Yesterday, When I Was Young” – by Charles Aznavour and Herbert Kretzmer, was released in 1964. The most famous and best-remembered version was by country music singer and Hee Haw host Roy Clark. The song contains a haunting and powerful lyric about someone who has lived life selfishly and now looks back to all he has lost and wasted.

Yesterday when I was young

The taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue

I teased at life as if it were a foolish game

The way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame

The thousand dreams I dreamed, the splendid things I planned

I always built, alas, on weak and shifting sand

I lived by night and shunned the naked light of day

And only now I see how the years ran away

Yesterday when I was young

So many drinking[1. Roy Clark's version substituted “happy”

for drinking.]songs were waiting to be sung

So many wayward pleasures lay in store for me

And so much pain my dazzled eyes refused to see

I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out

*I never stopped to think what life was all about
And every conversation I can now recall
Concerned itself with me, and nothing else at all
Yesterday the moon was blue
And every crazy day brought something new to do
I used my magic age as if it were a wand
And never saw the waste and emptiness beyond
The game of love I played with arrogance and pride
And every flame I lit too quickly, quickly died
The friends I made all seemed somehow to drift away
And only I am left on stage to end the play
There are so many songs in me that won't be sung
I feel the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue
The time has come for me to pay for yesterday when I was
young.*

Then there was a song from the 1970s, written by the legendary bass singer for the Cathedrals, George Younce, "Yesterday." I probably first heard it in the late 70s or early 80s, and always felt that it ministered to me:

(Chorus)

*Yesterday things were different
Today they're different again
Jesus will never change
Jesus is always the same*

- 1. The sparrow will find a new dwelling
The eagle will change its nest
But I'm holding on the changeless One
And I'm leaning on His breast*
- 2. The river will change, change its course
The mountains may crumble and fall
Time will leave its mark, they say
Upon us one and all
Repeat Chorus*

The song resonates powerfully in response to the fact that we live in a world of change ("yesterday things were different, today they're different again") by triumphantly affirming that "Jesus will never, never change, Jesus is always the same." It's wonderful to have that hope (Hebrews 13:8, Malachi 3:6, James 1:17).

Finally, we go back over 100 years to A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. He wrote a song that isn't sung much today, except perhaps for the chorus, but what a truth it expresses!

*O how sweet the glorious message simple faith may claim
Yesterday, today, forever Jesus is the same.
Still He loves to save the sinful, heal the sick and lame
Cheer the mourner, still the tempest, glory to His Name.*

Refrain

*Yesterday, today, forever, Jesus is the same.
All may change, but Jesus never! Glory to His Name!
Glory to His Name! Glory to His Name!
All may change, but Jesus never! Glory to His Name!
He, who was the Friend of sinners, seeks the lost one now
Sinner come, and at His footstool penitently bow
He Who said "I'll not condemn thee, go and sin no more,"
Speaks to thee that word of pardon as in days of yore.*

Refrain

*Oft on earth He healed the sufferer by His mighty hand
Still our sicknesses and sorrows go at His command
He who gave His healing virtue to a woman's touch
To the faith that claims His fullness still will give as much.*

Refrain

*As of old He walked to Emmaus, with them to abide
So through all life's way He walketh ever near our side
Soon again we shall behold Him, Hasten Lord the day
But twill still be this same Jesus as He went away.*

Refrain

Argentinian evangelist Alberto Motessi preached a message in which he spoke of Christians who focus on a Jesus who lived and worked in the past (historical). Others focus on a Savior who will live and work in the future (echatalogically). He goes on to say we should fervently believe in a Savior who is alive and working today. That is so true, but our trust in Him today flows from who He is and what He has already done through the cross, the resurrection, His immutable nature, and His faithfulness in our lives.

Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow. Let's live for the One who is eternal, unchangeable, and always faithful.

The days pass so swiftly, the months come and go

The years melt away like new fallen snow.

Spring turns to summer, summer to fall

Autumn brings winter, then death comes to call.

Only one life, so soon it will pass, only what's done for

Christ will last.

Only one chance to do his will

So give to Jesus all your days, it's the only life that pays

When you recall you have but one life.[2. Only one Life by

Lanny Wolfe]