

Southern Gospel Collection

Devotions
By Nan Allen

I'm Standing on the Solid Rock
with
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms

ROCK

(from *The Words We Sing* by Nan Corbitt Allen
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Everybody knows what a rock is. But why is God sometimes compared to a rock in Scripture, and why do we use this comparison in our hymns and worship songs?

The metaphor goes at least as far back as the patriarch Jacob. In Jacob's blessing to his twelve sons (who would become the twelve tribes of Israel), he calls God "the Rock." In his blessing to Joseph, Jacob says of his favorite son,

"His bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel" (Genesis 49:24).

In those days particularly, the rocky cliffs of the Middle East represented places of protection, hiding places as in a crevice, a cleft, or a cave. These places for King David were points of refuge when he was running and hiding from his enemies. For Elijah, the prophet, a rocky crevice was a place where he went to talk to God in private and where God met with him and spoke with him in a special way. The same with Moses. Moses went up into the rocky cliffs to receive the law from God. So comparing God to a rock often meant a place of refuge, protection, and strength.

But Isaiah also received a word from the Lord that scholars believe is a word of prophecy about a coming Messiah.

"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed" (Isaiah 28:16).

Here, still, the theme of the Rock being a place of strength is used, but probably was starting to include the coming Savior.

As time went on, the metaphor of the rock had evolved enough that Jesus Himself used it to describe “a secure place” that could hold the weight of a house, comparing it, as Isaiah had introduced, with a firm foundation.

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:24).

Though the association to God or Jesus in this illustration isn’t really obvious, it has been interpreted to mean that Jesus was making a statement about Himself and His kingdom.

Later in Scripture, Paul reaches back into history to a time when the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness and were thirsty. Moses struck a rock and water came forth. Paul’s reference to that story in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4 contrasts Christ with the water-giving rock.

“They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”

So, when you sing about the Rock, think of God as a place of safety, a place of strength, a reliable building site, and as a life-giving source.

Think about these references when you sing “I’m Standing on the Solid Rock.”

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**He Looked Beyond My Fault
with Grace Greater than Our Sin**

GRACE

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The elegant movements of a dancer; the prayer of thanksgiving before a meal; the allowance for delayed payment; a generous and forgiving spirit—all of these describe grace. But the grace that we sing about is far more than these. The grace of the Old Testament was having the favor of God because of faith or rightness with Him.

“Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:8, KJV).

As with so many biblical concepts, grace became something brand new when Jesus came.

“And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom,
and the grace of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40).

Looking back on the life of Christ he had just witnessed, John admitted,

“The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came
through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Paul takes it from there. Recognizing that he was a true recipient of grace, therefore understanding the unearned and undeserved favor of God, he knew that this kind of grace would forever change humanity’s relationship with God. The event that would bring it to us was the giving of the life of His Son for those who could not, would not, ever be worthy of it. One of Paul’s most quotable verses is one that has defined now our reconciliation with God.

“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”
(Ephesians 2:8-9).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul keeps our salvation far separate from our ability to achieve it. And this truly defines grace.

“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8).

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Smoky Mountain Gospel Medley
includes
**The Unclouded Day, On Jordan's Stormy Banks,
and In the Sweet By and By**

JORDAN
(from *The Words We Sing* by Nan Corbitt Allen
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Songwriters have sometimes taken places with ancient biblical and historical significance and used them metaphorically in song lyrics. Jerusalem, Ebenezer, and Gilead are some places I have explored in this book and shown how the lyricists used these poetically to make a point. The word *Jordan* or *Jordan River* is another biblical landmark that has been occasionally used in hymns.

The first song that comes to mind referring to a river that flows north to south through Israel and surrounding countries is “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand.”

“On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan’s fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.”¹

Mention in Scripture of the river and its fertile valley goes back to Abram. When he and Lot were dividing up their land, Lot chose the most desirable region—that land around the Jordan River—for himself.

“Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered,
like the garden of the LORD” (Genesis 13:10).

Indeed, the land around the Jordan River was choice property because of its growing and grazing potential. But the hymn isn’t speaking only of lush farmland, is it?

Moving through Scripture, we see that the river becomes even more significant as time passes. After the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness those forty years following their Egyptian exodus, the land they had been longing for and

promised lay across the Jordan River from where they had been waiting. It was the Promised Land that God told them was theirs for the taking. This is what happened when Joshua led the people into their new home:

“Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away...So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground” (Joshua 3:15-17).

Like the parting of the Red Sea forty years earlier, this was another miraculous sign from God that He indeed wanted His chosen people to live abundantly. The chorus of “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand” brings in the Promised Land reference:

“I am bound for the promised land,
I am bound for the promised land;
O who will come and go with me?
I am bound for the promised land.”

It is generally thought that this lyric compares Canaan, the Promised Land, to heaven. The *Jordan*, then, is that passage between life and eternal rest believers will find in heaven.

Later in Scripture, however, the Jordan River remains significant through the life of Jesus for another reason.

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’” (Mark 1:9-11).

This marked the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, so it seems the Jordan was, in fact, His place of crossing over, too.

The hymn “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” refers to the Jordan as not only a cross-over spot, but also a treacherous one:

“When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Bear me through the swelling current,
Land me safe on Canaan’s side;
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to Thee,
I will ever give to Thee.”²

So Jordan was in a biblical sense a point of departure, a threshold of decision, or even a barrier to what God wants for His own. Consider your symbolic Jordan. Is there a barrier still between you and His promise? Are you bound for the Promised Land? Do you cast a wishful eye?

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¹Words by Samuel Stennett

²Words by William Williams

Cross Medley
includes
**Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross; Had It Not Been;
and The Old Rugged Cross**

CROSS
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Death by crucifixion was invented by the Persians but perfected by the Romans.

By the time Jesus came along, crucifixion had almost developed into an art form. There were specialized teams of executioners assigned at each killing. These teams usually included a commanding officer and several soldiers under his authority. The team's job was to bind a prisoner, affix him to the crossbeam with nails in his wrists and feet, and then stay close by until the criminal was dead. This last assignment could account for the fact that often deaths were hastened by the breaking of bones, spears through the body cavity, or sharp blows to the chest. Sometimes smoking fires were built at the foot of the cross to help deprive the victim of oxygen.

The cause of death in a crucifixion could have been blood loss, shock, sepsis, or dehydration. However, the most common theory of the cause of death was asphyxiation. The victim's outstretched arms were required to bear the weight of his body against the gravity that constantly pulled, and as fatigue and muscle spasms set in, inhaling enough air to sustain life became impossible. Depending on the general health of the victim, this process alone could have taken several days. A common belief is that Jesus' death was hastened by a combination of many of these factors, but also it is believed that Jesus gave up the fight to stay alive because of His obedience to His Heavenly Father and His love for us. This is conjecture and/or commentary, however.

Only slaves, rebels, pirates, and especially despised criminals could be crucified under Roman law. Most Roman citizens were exempt from this fate, however, unless a crime of high treason, an offense against the Caesar himself, was pronounced. Ancient Jewish laws did not allow crucifixion as a capital punishment.

So why was Jesus sentenced to death by this method?

Had Jesus' trial ended before the Jewish high priest Caiaphas, His death could have been by stoning or even burning alive since the charge against Him was blasphemy. But, truly, even blasphemy was not a serious enough crime at that time to warrant death, according to the Jews.

That's where the Roman leaders came in. Throughout the night, Jesus' guilt was debated, but then it was declared that He had indeed committed an act of treason and would face the Roman execution method. All claims against Jesus were bogus, of course, but the verdict and the sentence were set and carried out in record time.

Now we see that the method of blood sacrifice—and crucifixion was certainly bloody—tied into the Jewish tradition of animal sacrifice. The blood of a perfect lamb could atone for the sins of the worshiper. Perhaps that satisfies the why-was-crucifixion-necessary question, but it's just the tip of the iceberg.

So what does the cross mean today?

The theology of the cross is another subject that I could explore here, but my research revealed that this is where speculation and commentary abound. Reporting my findings would probably only raise more questions, such as—Was Christ's execution the only way for us to obtain salvation? Did it have to be crucifixion for His death to have been a fitting sacrifice?

One thing biblical scholars say about Jesus' death on the cross: It was predicted and dramatized before crucifixion was even regarded as a viable form of execution. Psalm 22, one of David's lyrics, is said to be one of the best examples of prophecy of the impending doom of the cross.

Here is a comparison of the psalm and the gospel account. The psalm starts out with a cry to God that Jesus quotes verbatim in His dying moments.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1).

“About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”(Matthew 27:46).

Then, the piercing of his hands and feet was predicted.

“Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet” (Psalm 22:16).

Though the gospels do not describe the details of the crucifixion this way, we know from history that the hands and feet of the victim were nailed to a wooden beam.

However, concerning one detail of the events surrounding the cross, the psalmist’s words are almost eerie when compared to what actually happened as Jesus was dying.

“They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing”
(Psalm 22:18).

“And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get” (Mark 15:24).

Many hymns and modern songs try to make sense of the cross. Most of them speak of it as a symbol of forgiveness and redemption and shame and glory.

The lyric of “The Old Rugged Cross,” one of our most beloved hymns about the cross, vacillates between fact and feelings, emotions and theology:

“On a hill far away
Stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suff’ring and shame;
And I love that old cross
Where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.”¹

Then there seems to be poetic resolve in the chorus. It also echoes hope of future reward that the cross was meant to supply:

“So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it someday for a crown.”

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¹Words by George Bennard

Goodbye World, Goodbye

So many Southern Gospel music lyrics are about heaven. There are several in this collection. One of our favorites is this song written by the great Mosie Lister, who is now living in Florida. His songs have been recorded by artists such as Jimmy Dean, George Beverly Shea, Floyd Cramer, B. J. Thomas, Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard, and, of course, Elvis.

This song lyric, written in 1955, refers to the things we can look forward to in heaven. For instance, the lyric says, “Goodbye to each tear and each sigh.” Where does that come from? Look in Revelation 21:4. In John’s vision of heaven he sees this:

“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.”

In the chorus of the song, Mosie writes, “When I hear that last trumpet sound, my feet won’t stay on the ground.” That goes back to Paul’s writings in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52:

“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

Read Revelation 21:9-21 for a further description of heaven.

If heaven is that glorious, I agree with Mosie. I am ready to say goodbye world, goodbye!

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Sweet Beulah Land

The only time “Beulah” appears in the Bible is in Isaiah 62:4:

“No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah,
and your land Beulah;
for the LORD will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.”

But what does it mean? Literally, Beulah means “married” in Hebrew. But this reference might mean that it is the place where the Jews would return: the promised land. The reference to marriage in the definition probably means that God was still honoring His covenant with the Jews, much as marriage implies a covenant between a man and a woman.

In John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the words Beulah Land refer to “the peaceful land in which the pilgrim awaits the call to the Celestial City.” The Celestial City is the final destination of the pilgrim (heaven perhaps), and Beulah Land is that place which seems to be the threshold into heaven. It’s not totally clear how this fits into the biblical descriptions of heaven, but “Sweet Beulah Land,” written by Squire Parsons and recorded in 1979, seems to refer to that same spot that is just this side of heaven, kind of like in the songs about the Jordan River. (See the background on Jordan in the devotion for “Smoky Mountain Gospel Medley.”)

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Just a Little Talk with Jesus
with
What a Friend We Have in Jesus

The author of the hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” wrote it for his mother, who was going through a time of grief. The lyricist’s name was Joseph Scriven, and he wrote the text in 1855.

If the idea of seeing Jesus as a friend seems too casual to you, read the words Jesus told His disciples right before He went to the cross, recorded in John 15:15:

“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

Simon Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:7:

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

Some translations say, “Cast all your cares on Him,” but either way it sounds as though God (as one with Jesus) wants to hear about your problems and talk to you about them. Sounds like friendship to me.

I don’t think you can ever find a better friend than He.

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The Lighthouse

Rumor has it that Ronnie Hinson wrote this song in 1971 on a piece of toilet paper, and that he had never even seen a lighthouse when he wrote it. In an interview with Ronnie, he confirmed both rumors. He said, “We were in a big church where we were rehearsing and I said to my brothers and sisters, ‘I’m gonna go to the little boys room downstairs and I’m going to come back up here in just a few minutes with a hit song’ and I just laughed and they laughed at me.

“I came back up and had written some words on a piece of toilet tissue and I opened it up on the pulpit and said, ‘This is my song. Are you ready?’ and I started singing it. One of them grabbed it, wadded it up, laughed and said as hard as it is let’s get back to the hymn books.

“So we tried two more song books and it was almost daylight and my brother Kenny, sleepy young kid, guitar bigger than he was, said, ‘Get that piece of toilet paper out of the trash and open it up. I’ve got an idea’ and he started singing. The presence of the Lord filled the place. It was as bright in that place, it seemed in my spirit man, as noon.”

When asked about the metaphor of the lighthouse, Ronnie replied, “I was so intrigued by it, what it was about this song, that I got on my bicycle and rode 30 miles to find a lighthouse.

“It was the first time I ever laid eyes on a lighthouse, to my knowledge, unless I was a child and had seen it in a social studies book. I parked my bike, chained it to a fence post, climbed up on a sand dune and for the first time – at the Pigeon Point Lighthouse in Santa Cruz, California, I sat there and I saw the lighthouse and I thought, ‘What a picture. What a scene.’ The ocean was gray. It was desolate looking. It was like something out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie but there stood the lighthouse; hope in the middle of all that dreary hopelessness.

“Then I looked at my paper, my toilet paper, and I saw the picture that I’d never seen before. It came to life on that paper and tears ran down my face and I knew that there was something God had orchestrated.”¹

The song was one of Elvis Presley’s favorites, and he requested it sung to him often. Elvis never, however, recorded the song himself.

¹www.southern-gospel-music-lyrics.com/the-lighthouse-ronnie-hinson.html

Heaven Medley
includes
**When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,
When We All Get to Heaven, and I'll Fly Away**

James Black, who wrote the hymn “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” was a Sunday School teacher and had invited a 14-year-old girl, who was poor and lonely, to attend Sunday School. In Ira Sankey’s *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns* (1906), James tells the story behind the song:

“One evening at a consecration meeting, when members answered the roll call by repeating scripture texts, that lonely young girl failed to respond. I spoke of what a sad thing it would be, when our names are called from the Lamb’s Book of Life, if one of us should be absent; and I said, ‘O God, when my own name is called up yonder, may I be there to respond!’ I longed for something suitable to sing just then, but I could find nothing in the books. When I reached my home, my wife saw that I was deeply troubled, and questioned me, but I made no reply. Then the words of the first stanza came to me in full. In fifteen minutes more I had composed the other two verses. Going to the piano, I played the music just as it is found today in the hymn books.”

The young girl who inspired the song became ill with pneumonia and died 10 days later.

This song was sung in *Sergeant York*, the 1941 Academy Award winning movie.

The Bible never really mentions a roll call that will occur from heaven, but in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 it says,

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

If there is an actual roll call when Jesus comes again, I want to be able to answer, “Here I am!” Don’t you?

Then Came the Morning

The theme of this song is the resurrection of Jesus. The lyric asks us to look back in time when Jesus' friends and family watched Him die and saw Him laid in a tomb. Darkness consumed the earth at that moment, and there seemed to be consuming darkness in the hearts of those who had put so much faith and hope in Him as their Savior. It must have been a sobering event.

Written by Bill and Gloria Gaither and Chris Christian in 1982, this song compares the cross and the empty tomb as how night compares to day—midnight and dawn, death and victory.

These comparisons originated with the prophets of old and were to be repeated by the writers of the New Testament after the resurrection. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he writes:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.
Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?
The sting of death is sin,
and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God!
He gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
(1 Corinthians 15:54-56)

Yes, thanks be to God for the victory through the resurrection of Jesus our Lord!

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Church Medley
includes
**The Church's One Foundation, The Church Triumphant,
and The Family of God**

In 1970, a young father was severely burned in an explosion where he worked in Alexandria, Indiana. His church family, which included Bill and Gloria Gaither, began prayer chains for his recovery. The next day was Easter Sunday, and it was then that the prayer warriors learned that their friend was still alive and had a strong possibility of recovery.

On the way home from church, Bill and Gloria talked about the love and concern that was shown by this family of believers. They began to piece the words and music of the song "The Family of God" together, forgetting their noon meal. The song was completed by the time they sat down to eat.

'Til the Storm Passes By
with
Precious Lord, Take My Hand

His story is sad, but his music has encouraged many believers who have reached out to the Lord during time of crisis.

Thomas A. Dorsey wrote this hymn in 1932 a few days after the death of his first wife, Nettie, and their infant son. She died in childbirth, and the child died within 24 hours of the mother. Dorsey had been away in St. Louis on a gospel music tour when he received the telegram from Chicago about his wife. For several days he was lost in grief. A friend helped him through this period and encouraged him to sit down at the piano. There he began to play a melody, and as he did, he once again felt close to God and the words to "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" came to him.