

*Beautifully written, Pam's reflections on the stories behind our much loved hymns are truly inspiring, reminding us of God's faithfulness, presence and grace in our daily lives.*

**Dave Bilbrough, songwriter and contemporary worship leader**

*Pam Rhodes seems to me the ideal author for such a refreshing book as this. Over the past decades, presenting Songs of Praise for the BBC, her empathy and skill have brought us moving stories of spiritual and human experience, often related to the words of a hymn. By drawing on these interviews, together with her own reflections on (mostly) familiar hymns, she brings to the page a warmth and freshness which enable these hymns to lift our hearts to God and point us again to Jesus.*

*From her long experience as a presenter on Songs of Praise, Pam Rhodes explores the place of hymns in the spiritual and human stories of some of those interviewed. This unique background, and the freshness of the writing, combine to offer us a different and very welcome kind of book about familiar hymns.*

Love so Amazing *displays the warmth, freshness and evident love of hymns that we have come to expect from such a favourite presenter of Songs of Praise.*

**Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith, hymnwriter**

*Pam Rhodes brings a warm personal touch to the telling of some great stories about the greatest hymns.*

**Sally Magnusson, journalist, broadcaster and writer**

*Love  
So Amazing*

*40* reflections on my favourite hymns

Pam Rhodes

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## *Contents*

Introduction	7
God Be with You Till We Meet Again	11
Just as I Am	15
What a Friend We Have in Jesus	18
Saved by Grace	21
Great is Thy Faithfulness	25
And Can It Be	29
For All the Saints	33
There is a Green Hill Far Away	36
In Christ Alone	40
It is Well with My Soul	44
Make Me a Channel of Your Peace	48
For the Beauty of the Earth	51
Nearer, My God, to Thee	54
O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go	58
Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus	61
Forgive Our Sins	65
Count Your Blessings	69
Dear Lord and Father of Mankind	72
Jesus Bids Us Shine	76
Amazing Grace	79
God Moves in a Mysterious Way	83
Take My Life and Let it Be	87

Eternal Father	91
Be Thou My Vision	95
Tell Me the Old, Old Story	98
O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing	102
Glad That I Live Am I	106
The Servant Song	110
O Perfect Love	114
Now Thank We All Our God	117
I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say	121
Abide with Me	124
Father, Hear the Prayer We Offer	128
A Mighty Fortress is Our God	132
Fight the Good Fight	136
Be Still, for the Presence of the Lord	140
How Great Thou Art	144
Blest Be the Tie That Binds	148
To God Be the Glory	152
When I Survey	156
Acknowledgments	160

## Introduction

You could have knocked me down with a feather when the publishers asked me to compile this book of devotional thoughts which could be used as an aid to prayer throughout the year. I was delighted because I've often enjoyed using collections like this myself. I was just surprised they asked me. Surely they would be better to choose someone trained in theology and ministry – someone who is likely to know the answers – rather than me, who has spent many years as a presenter on BBC Television's *Songs of Praise*, asking the questions?

But the questions I ask are answered by people who are generous and brave enough to share their private, sometimes painful experiences with *Songs of Praise* viewers, in the hope that the lessons they've learned along the way might be of help to others. Inevitably, they are. The people I interview on the programme are seldom professional speakers. They are mostly ordinary folk, your neighbours and mine, who are extraordinary in the way that each and every one of us is. Each of us has a story to tell, our own challenges to face – and yet,

## *Love So Amazing*

because we all share the experience of being human, our feelings are often much the same, whatever our individual circumstances.

We can learn a lot from others who have had to cope with difficult times of bereavement, illness, disappointment, fear, or loneliness. When they speak of their sense of helplessness or doubt, we know just what they mean. When they go on to share their sense of God in the darkest times, we can be encouraged and reassured by their certainty that, even though it sometimes felt as if their prayers were going nowhere, God was there all the time, in the hurt and despair with them, guiding, protecting, and comforting them along the way.

So I have decided to draw on the experience and wisdom of others who, armed with faith, have faced whatever life has brought them, then shared their experience in the most evocative, touching, and memorable way – through writing hymns. Time marches on, and everyday life changes at an alarming rate – but I don't think the human experience changes much at all. Whether it's a psalmist waking up one morning 3,000 years ago feeling weary of the world and in need of guidance and comfort, or Stuart Townend or Graham Kendrick waking up today feeling world-weary and in need of comfort and guidance, are their emotions and reactions really so very different? As wordsmiths, they express those feelings in the most beautiful texts which, when matched with the



## *Introduction*

right piece of music, become unforgettable treasures for the rest of us. That means that when we wake up feeling weary, without direction or comfort, we can find inspiration in the timeless thoughts of hymn writers. Hymns are prayers in our pockets, a spiritual first-aid kit that has its home among our memories. Just think of a hymn like “Abide with Me”, written by Henry Lyte at a time when he knew his own death was imminent:

*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide,  
The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide.*

Can you think of a more beautifully worded prayer than that? And after years of singing that hymn, those words are so deeply embedded in our minds and hearts that Henry Lyte’s prayer can be ours too, whenever we feel darkness is deepening around us. Hymns speak to us and for us, heart to heart, soul to soul, connecting us in fellow feeling to the writer, whoever they are and whenever they wrote.

Five centuries ago, the great Christian reformist Martin Luther already understood the power of the hymn book. He held up a Bible and declared, “This is the gospel.” Then he raised his other hand, in which he held a hymn book, and said, “And this is how we remember it.”

So this is a storybook of the very human experiences and feelings of the writers of some of our favourite hymns. What was going on in their lives as they wrote those lines

## *Love So Amazing*

which are stored with love in our memories? What sort of challenges were they facing that echo what we can relate to ourselves? And what might we learn from their lives which might help us with our own?

And why is the title of this book *Love So Amazing*? Because the common theme expressed in these hymns in answer to all the difficulties and challenges we face is God's love, expressed so eloquently by hymn writer Isaac Watts at the start of the eighteenth century in his hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross". It is still every bit as true for each and every one of us today. He said God's amazing love "demands my soul, my life, my all".

Wow! What a challenge that throws out to us – but then, the words of hymn writers aren't always cosy and comfortable. They nudge our conscience and scrape away at our complacency. They remind us of the true demands of the Christian life. They spur us on to react and respond. Most of all, they remind us of the Almighty God who created the heavens and earth in all their vastness and complexity, but who also created us to be unique and precious through his divine and *amazing love*.

*God Be with You  
Till We Meet Again*

*God be with you till we meet again;  
By his counsels guide, uphold you,  
With his sheep securely fold you:  
God be with you till we meet again.*

*Till we meet, till we meet,  
Till we meet at Jesus' feet;  
Till we meet, till we meet,  
God be with you till we meet again.*

(Jeremiah E. Rankin: 1828–1904)

*J*n 1882, when Jeremiah Rankin, the minister of a congregational church in Washington DC, thought he could do with a hymn for his choir to sing as the congregation departed each week, he found himself thinking of the true meaning of the word *goodbye*. Looking in the dictionary, he discovered that it was short for *God be with you*. With that snippet of knowledge, he

*Love So Amazing*

created a hymn which would become dear to those in fear, conflict, or deep sorrow for generations to come.

In fact, very soon after, this hymn took on life and death significance for soldiers fighting in the Boer War between the British Empire forces and the Dutch settlers in South Africa. Back at home, most of these men would have had a family copy of the Sankey hymn book which was known around the world and from which number 494, “God Be with You Till We Meet Again”, was a text they kept in their hearts as they marched off to war. There is a very moving account written by one young British soldier about how the lads would meet in the “glory room” on any evening before they were due to go into battle. These tough men would shake each other’s hands and whisper, “God bless you – 494”, knowing that the significance of that number would be instantly recognized. He wrote:

*These are Christian men parting from Christian men, and no one knows whether it will be in earth or heaven that he will meet his comrade next. And so night by night before each regiment takes its departure someone starts 494. Often with hands clasped and not without tears they sing:*

*God be with you till we meet again,  
Keep love’s banner floating o’er you,*

*God Be with You Till We Meet Again*

*Smite death's threatening wave before you,  
God be with you till we meet again.*

*They will not forget it, these soldier lads, and as  
they pass one another on their long marches, or  
as with rapid tread they advance to charge some  
almost impregnable defence, they will shout to  
one another, these Christian soldiers, 494 – God  
be with you till we meet again!*

Saying goodbye is never easy, especially when we're worried about where those we love are going or how long they will be gone. Somehow, knowing that the word *goodbye* is really a prayer for God's blessing makes the separation from those we love and miss more bearable.

This song was played as the curtain closed on my mother's coffin, and I still feel choked with sadness and loss when I think of that moment of farewell from the very best friend I've ever had. But with the blessing of these words, I knew that God was with her in death just as he had been her constant companion in life. And somehow the blessing was not just for her, but also for all of us who mourned her passing and wondered how we would manage in a world that didn't have her warmth and loving presence in it. God was with us. He would never leave us. There was infinite comfort and reassurance in that knowledge, a comfort that has remained with me ever since.

*Love So Amazing*

*Father, stay with us always – in our fear, our uncertainty, our pain, and our sadness. Comfort us in the shelter of your love, and help us to show that same love in your name to others who need to feel the strength of your compassion and the certainty of your presence.*

494

AMEN

## *Just as I Am*

*Just as I am, without one plea  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come.*

*Just as I am, though tossed about  
With many a conflict, many a doubt,  
Fightings and fears within, without,  
O Lamb of God, I come.*

(Charlotte Elliott: 1789–1871)

Until she reached her thirties, Charlotte Elliott led a happy, carefree life filled with much pleasure. She especially enjoyed portrait painting and was so skilled at it that her work became quite popular. And then, when she was thirty-two, she was struck down by an illness that was to rob her of her health and energy for every day of her life until she died at the age of eighty-two. It seems her illness caused a form of paralysis which meant that she could barely drag herself around her room. Her

## *Love So Amazing*

limbs ached so much that lying in bed was all she could manage. It's hardly surprising that she struggled with deep depression, frustration, and hopelessness.

There were times when she felt particularly useless, like the day in 1834 when her brother, a vicar in Brighton, was organizing a bazaar to raise funds for a much-needed school to educate the children of poor clergymen. The whole household was swept up in the preparations and was too busy to notice Charlotte's increasing despair at not being able to join in and contribute in some meaningful way. She felt abandoned not just by the family, but also by God – and these thoughts were so shocking that she comforted herself by thinking of the reasons she knew in Scripture that would help her remember that God's love was constant and faithful. She thought about how Christ's blood was shed for her and how God has promised to receive all who come to him in faith – and, being a poet, she started to write the first lines of this hymn. In the verses that follow, she poured out her own sense of inadequacy in the knowledge that, despite her limitations, she was as precious and loved by God as anyone else.

She managed to get the poem published, and was glad because she thought she could contribute any proceeds to her brother's school fund. The poem was instantly successful and was soon selling across Britain in large numbers as well as being translated into a number of foreign languages.