

They Sang a Hymn

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Try and picture yourself in the following scene. You and several of your friends are invited to another friend's house to watch the first game of the World Series and have a bar-b-cue. You and your friends arrive early and are in the back yard talking when the owner of the house peeks their head out of the back door and says hurry up they just finished singing the song. Question - What song is your friend referring to?

If you said our National Anthem you would be right. Perhaps that was not so hard to figure out under the circumstances. Keep that thought in your mind for a moment as we look at a scene which is described in all four gospels, but only two of the four accounts provide us with this detail.

From Matthew 26:30 & Mark 14:26 *"When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."*

Question - What song or hymn did they sing?

Scholars generally agree that considering it was at the time of the Jewish Passover the hymn or song would have been what is known as the Hallel. It consists of Psalms 113-118. It is still read or sung by Jews during the major festivals that are described in the Torah. But before reading the words to this song I would like to take us to a few places in Scripture for consideration. The first is found in the last verse of Matthew chapter 23 where Jesus speaking makes this statement.

"For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

And the next place is also found in Matthew. This time in Matthew chapter 21:42.

"Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

the Lord has done this,

and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

Both of the Scriptures above are referencing the 118th Psalm. A Psalm Jesus' hearers would have heard if not read numerous times before.

Which brings me to the next point. How many times have we heard our National Anthem? Do we know the words and more importantly do we know what those words are referring to? What is the scene being described by their words? And do we know the whole song as it was written?

Well here it is

Complete version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" showing spelling and punctuation from Francis Scott Key's manuscript in the Maryland Historical Society collection.

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?
On the shore dimly seen through the mists of the deep
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream,
'Tis the star-spangled banner - O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!
And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion
A home and a Country should leave us no more?
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.
O thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
Between their lov'd home and the war's desolation!
Blest with vict'ry and peace may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the power that hath made and preserv'd us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto - "In God is our trust,"
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

The idea of questioning if someone has really heard what was said or knows what it means was not new back in Matthew's day either. For we read of it in Isaiah day in Isaiah 40:28-31 -

"Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

*The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint."*

Let us therefore not be so quick to judge those who failed to understand the message they were singing about when they sang The Hallel. Here are its words -

Psalm 113

*Praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord, you his servants;
praise the name of the Lord.
Let the name of the Lord be praised,
both now and forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,
the name of the Lord is to be praised.
The Lord is exalted over all the nations,
his glory above the heavens.
Who is like the Lord our God,
the One who sits enthroned on high,
who stoops down to look
on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
with the princes of his people.
He settles the childless woman in her home
as a happy mother of children.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 114

*When Israel came out of Egypt,
Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,
Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.
The sea looked and fled,
the Jordan turned back;
the mountains leaped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
Why was it, sea, that you fled?
Why, Jordan, did you turn back?
Why, mountains, did you leap like rams,
you hills, like lambs?
Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turned the rock into a pool,
the hard rock into springs of water.*

Psalm 115

*Not to us, Lord, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.
Why do the nations say,
“Where is their God?”
Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
But their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell.
They have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.
All you Israelites, trust in the Lord—
he is their help and shield.
House of Aaron, trust in the Lord—
he is their help and shield.
You who fear him, trust in the Lord—
he is their help and shield.
The Lord remembers us and will bless us:
He will bless his people Israel,
he will bless the house of Aaron,
he will bless those who fear the Lord—
small and great alike.
May the Lord cause you to flourish,
both you and your children.
May you be blessed by the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
The highest heavens belong to the Lord,
but the earth he has given to mankind.
It is not the dead who praise the Lord,
those who go down to the place of silence;
it is we who extol the Lord,
both now and forevermore.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 116

*I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
“Lord, save me!”
The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord protects the unwary;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return to your rest, my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.
For you, Lord, have delivered me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
I trusted in the Lord when I said,
“I am greatly afflicted”;
in my alarm I said,
“Everyone is a liar.”
What shall I return to the Lord
for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord.
I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful servants.
Truly I am your servant, Lord;
I serve you just as my mother did;
you have freed me from my chains.
I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the Lord.
I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the Lord—
in your midst, Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 117

*Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.*

*For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 118

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.*

Let Israel say:

“His love endures forever.”

Let the house of Aaron say:

“His love endures forever.”

Let those who fear the Lord say:

“His love endures forever.”

*When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;
he brought me into a spacious place.*

The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me?

The Lord is with me; he is my helper.

I look in triumph on my enemies.

*It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in humans.*

*It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in princes.*

*All the nations surrounded me,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.*

*They surrounded me on every side,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.*

*They swarmed around me like bees,
but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;
in the name of the Lord I cut them down.*

*I was pushed back and about to fall,
but the Lord helped me.*

*The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.*

*Shouts of joy and victory
resound in the tents of the righteous:*

“The Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!

*The Lord’s right hand is lifted high;
the Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!”*

*I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the Lord has done.*

*The Lord has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.
Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.
This is the gate of the Lord
through which the righteous may enter.
I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.
The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.
The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.
You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.*

We can not say with absolute certainty that The Hillel was what Jesus and His disciples sang in that upper room that evening when Jesus was betrayed, because Scripture does not tell us so.

Nor can we be absolutely certain which song in the given scenario our friend leaning out their back door was referring to either. But given the circumstance ???

Might I suggest to you that we do need to know and understand what the words of the Hillel are about. Because some things do endure forever and therefore apply to all of us. *“Let those who fear the Lord say: “His love endures forever.”*

Our nation will pass with time but God’s love endures forever. And Jesus has returned to Heaven to prepare an eternal place for us there. For this is not our home we are just passing through. We are sojourners as **is** written in Scripture. And like those spoken of in the book of Hebrews we are looking for a better home. A home in Heaven. Do we understand what God has done and is it marvelous in our eyes?

Do we love to tell the story of unseen things above, Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love; do we love to tell the story, because we know ’tis true, Does it satisfy our longings as nothing else would do. Do we love to tell the story, will it be our theme in glory, To tell the old, old story Of Jesus and His love. Because - well - we sang the hymn!