



Precious Lord

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

I'll never forget the fervent choir of voices ringing out in my seminary class that November afternoon. I had suggested we begin the session with a hymn. Jun Kim, one of my several Korean students, requested "Precious Lord." The students sang with gusto, particularly the Korean contingent. What surprised me was that they sang all the stanzas in English—not missing a word.

Actually, I shouldn't have been surprised. "Precious Lord" is not just an old-time Southern Gospel. It is one of the world's best-known songs, recorded by leading gospel, country and rock-n-roll singers, from Mahalia Jackson to Elvis. Its lyrical melody and touching words have filled the largest stadiums and the smallest thatched-roofed huts the world over.

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn....*

The oldest of ten children, Thomas A. Dorsey grew up in a poor African-American community in rural Georgia in the early years of the twentieth century. Because his father was a preacher and his mother was an organist, church ministry might have come naturally to him. Instead he dropped out of school at age eleven to join a local vaudeville troupe, and then in his teens went to Chicago, where he later joined Ma Rainey and became a popular Blues singer and piano player.

Dorsey's life was marred with mental breakdowns and depression. When he returned home to Georgia, his mother pleaded with him to serve the Lord. But he was restless. Back in Chicago, amid the Blues, he found Nettie. Marriage, however, did not solve his problems, and mental illness found him again. In the midst of the Great Depres-

sion, and his own personal pain, he turned to God. Now his songwriting had a new focus. Indeed, he was convinced that his songs could give people hope and lift them "out of the muck and mire of poverty."

But hard times were never far away. While in St. Louis participating in a revival meeting, he received a telegram—Nettie had died in childbirth. The next day he arrived back in Chicago to a house filled with grieving relatives who still held out hope for his newborn son. But that night the little boy died, as well. Sadness overwhelmed him. He went back on the road, feeling only emptiness. "I felt that God had done me an injustice," he lamented. "I didn't want to serve him anymore or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well."

It was then that a friend stepped in and offered him solace—space where he could be alone with a piano. "It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows," Dorsey remembered. "I felt at peace. I felt as though I could reach out and touch God. I found myself playing a melody, one I'd never heard or played before, and words came into my head—they just seemed to fall into place." The words tumbled out of his pain—words that healed his own heart.

The words and melody have served to bring solace and tender mercies in times of trouble to both high and low alike. President Lyndon Johnson requested that song be sung at his funeral, as have countless others before and after him.

And the song was on the lips of Martin Luther King, Jr. when he died. King's last words were reportedly spoken to the musician who was scheduled to play at an evening event: "Ben, make sure you play 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord,' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty."

"Through the storms, through the night... Precious Lord, lead me home." □

—Ruth A. Tucker

...he was convinced that his songs could give people hope and lift them "out of the muck and mire of poverty."