

The Final Days of Jesus
HYMN STORY: THE OLD RUGGED CROSS

Saturday, April 4

Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3

Hebrews 12:2 ...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God

The Old Rugged Cross has been a favorite hymn for over a century. It was written by evangelist George Bennard. Bennard was born in Ohio in 1873 but was raised in Iowa. His father worked in the coal mines but suddenly passed away when George was 16 years old. For a time, George himself worked in the coal mines to help support his family. Bennard accepted Jesus as Savior during a Salvation Army meeting in his early twenties. He and his wife then began working with the Salvation Army and later he would go out on his own as a traveling evangelist, conducting revivals throughout the Midwest.

At one of these revival meetings, Bennard was troubled by some youth heckling him as he preached. This upset him and when he returned to his home in Albion, Michigan he began to really think about the meaning of the cross of Christ. As he did so, a new melody came to his mind. While he had a completed melody, he struggled to find the right words to accompany his new song. The only words that came to his mind were "I'll cherish old rugged cross." As he continued to travel and preach, more lyrics came and several months later he had the complete song. It was sung for the first time at a revival in Pokagon, Michigan on June 7, 1913. Before publishing his hymn, he sent it to famous gospel hymn writer Charles Gabriel who added the harmony parts. He sent the completed hymn back with the message, "You will certainly hear from this song." And he was right.

Soon *The Old Rugged Cross* was heard by evangelist Billy Sunday who began to use it in his nationwide revivals. By 1938, a poll by a national radio network determined that Bennard's hymn was America's favorite song.¹ It has been held dear in the hearts of Christians ever since. It challenges us to think deeply about the meaning of Jesus' cross and how we should respond to the love Christ showed us there by dying to "pardon and sanctify me."

George Bennard ministered for over 40 years before retiring to Reed City, Michigan. He wrote hundreds of other hymns, but none became popular like *The Old Rugged Cross*. On October 9, 1958, Bennard passed away - "exchanging his cross for a crown." A twelve-foot-high cross was erected near his home with the words:

'The Old Rugged Cross'
Home of George Bennard,
composer of this beloved hymn

Listen to "The Old Rugged Cross" on YouTube @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7v26yrlz5w>

¹ <https://christianheritagefellowship.com/george-bennard-and-the-old-rugged-cross/>
<https://christianmusicandhymns.com/2019/10/the-old-rugged-cross-hymn-history-and.html>
<https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/the-history-behind-the-old-rugged-cross-hymn-george-bennard-revival>
<https://www.staugustine.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2017/10/21/story-behind-song-old-rugged-cross/16290488007/>