

## Hymn Story Hymn Story

By Harry Eskew

### “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”

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 with Theodore Fry when he received the telegram from Chicago about his wife. For several days he was lost in grief.

“I felt that God had done me an injustice. 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,” he said. 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. It was not copyrighted until 1938. An additional stanza begins with the line, “When the darkness appears and the night draws near.” This personal song of consolation has become Dorsey’s most popular composition and is translated into more than 50 languages.

The tune PRECIOUS LORD is Dorsey’s arrangement of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century hymn tune MAITLAND, commonly sung to the text “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone.”

Thomas Andrew Dorsey (1899-1993), a native Georgian, was born in Villa Rica, west of Atlanta. He traveled as a boy with his father, an itinerant Baptist preacher, and played the reed pump organ for his father’s services. In 1910 he moved to Atlanta, where a year later he attended a “Colored Night” service at a Billy Sunday revival and was impressed by Homer Rodeheaver’s musical leadership. In Atlanta he also came under the influence of blues pianists and began to play for dances.

About 1916 Dorsey moved to Chicago where he studied at the Chicago College of Composition and Arranging. He continued to support himself as a pianist and worked with record companies and music publishers. His composition *Riverside Blues* was recorded by King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band in 1923, and from 1923 to 1926 he toured with the famed blues singer Gertrude (Ma) Rainey.

Dorsey was simultaneously composing sacred music. After hearing the Rev. A. W. Nix sing at the 1921 National Baptist Convention, he was inspired to write his first gospel song, “If I Don’t Get There,” published in the hymnal *Gospel Pearls* (Nashville, 1921, no. 117). After several years of involvement in both blues and gospel, in the early 1930s he turned exclusively to gospel music. Among the gospel performers he was associated with during this decade was Mahalia Jackson, with whom he toured from 1939 to 1944.

Dorsey reportedly composed nearly 1,000 songs, publishing more than half of them. He was influenced by the gospel hymns of Charles A. Tindley, composer of “Trials Dark on Every Hand,” familiar to many Baptists through the arrangement by B. B. McKinney in *The Broadman Hymnal* (Nashville, 1940). Among African-

Americans, Dorsey is known as “The Father of Gospel Music.” In addition to the erection of an impressive historical marker, the city of Villa Rica each year near the close of June honors the memory of Thomas Andrew Dorsey with a Dorsey music festival.

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