

Hymn on the Lisbon Earthquake (1756)¹

[cf. Baker list, #181]

Editorial Introduction:

On November 1, 1755, Lisbon, Portugal was hit by a devastating earthquake, estimated as high as 9.0 on the Richter scale. Each of the three main shocks was followed by a *tsunami*, adding the destructive impact of flooding. The damage was widespread, reaching as far south as Morocco.

It took over two weeks for details of the quake to reach France and England. When they did, the immediate response of most was to view it as a sign of God's anger against sinful humanity and to call for public acts of contrition and repentance. George II's proclamation of February 6, 1756 as such a fast day would soon occasion Charles Wesley's *Hymns for the Year 1756*.

As the scope of the devastation of the Lisbon earthquake soaked in, however, a number of voices began to call into question the notion that such events were providential acts of God. It was hard to imagine any offense that could justify such massive and non-discriminating punishment, or to defend the infliction of such loss merely to awaken humanity to our sin. For some, like Voltaire, the Lisbon earthquake pushed toward cynical dismissal of any kind of providence, ascribing all natural events to blind chance. Others tried to distance God from direct responsibility for the event by emphasizing that God works through secondary causes in nature and suggesting that these secondary causes occasionally go astray.

John Wesley's response to the suggestion that earthquakes be seen as mere "acts of nature" was published in December 1755 as *Serious Thoughts occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon* [Baker list, #213]. He argued that if we set aside God's providential action in nature we have no reason to hope for God's protection in any specific setting.

Charles Wesley's initial response to the Lisbon earthquake was more dramatic. He reprinted *Earthquake Hymns*, Pt. I (1750) in late December 1755 (dated 1756), adding a new hymn occasioned by Lisbon (on pp. 10–12; the only pages given below). The hymn is built around the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation 16–17, presenting the earthquake as the pouring out of the seventh vial, signaling that the day of final judgment was just around the corner! This suggests that the earthquake should be seen not as a tragedy to be averted but as the necessary prelude to our long-desired deliverance.

In this hymn the hints of apocalypticism in "Hymns for 1745" have taken center stage. This tone will continue in *Hymns for the Year 1756* and "Additional Hymns for 1756." But, for various reasons, it did not endure. An example of his more reserved eschatological stance in later years can be found in hymn 16, stanzas 5–6, in *Hymns for the Nation* (1781).

Edition:

[Charles Wesley.] *Hymns occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750, Pt. I; To which are added An Hymn upon the Pouring Out of the Seventh Vial, Rev. xvi, xvii, etc., Occasioned by the Destruction of Lisbon*. 2nd Bristol: Farley, 1756.

[this was the last edition of this collection]

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Revelation 16–17ff.
Occasioned by the Destruction of Lisbon.

[Part 1.]

- 1 Woe! To the men, on earth who dwell,
 Nor dread th' Almighty frown,
 When God doth all his wrath reveal,
 And shower his judgments down!
SINNERS, expect those heaviest showers,
 To meet your God prepare,
When lo! The seventh angel pours
 His vial in the air!

- 2 A voice out of the temple cries,
 And from th' eternal throne,
 And all the storms of vengeance rise,
 When God declares 'TIS DONE!
'TIS DONE! Ten thousand voices join
 T' applaud his righteous ire,
 And thunders roll, and light'nings shine,
 That set the world on fire.

- 3 The mighty shock *seems now* begun,
 Beyond example great,
 And lo! The world's foundations groan
 As at their instant fate!
 Jehovah shakes the shattered ball,
 Sign of the general doom!
 The cities of the nations fall,
 And Babel's hour is come.

- 4 Lo! From their roots the mountains leap,
 The mountains are not found,
Transported far into the deep,
 And in the ocean drowned!
Jesus descends in dread array
 To judge the scarlet whore:
And every isle is fled away,
 And Britain is no more!
- 5 She sinks beneath her ambient flood,
 And never more shall rise:
The earth is gone, on which we stood,
 The old creation dies!
Who then shall live? And face the throne,
 And face the Judge severe?
When earth and heaven are fled and gone,
 O where shall I appear?

Part 2.

- 1 Now only now against that hour
 We may a place provide
Beyond the grave, beyond the power
 Of hell our spirits hide:
Firm in the all-destroying shock
 May view the final scene,
For lo! The everlasting Rock
 Is cleft, to take us in.
- 2 By faith we find the place above,
 The Rock that rent in twain,
Beneath the shade of dying LOVE,
 And in the clefts remain:
Jesus, to thy dear wounds we flee,
 We sink into thy side,
Assured that all who trust in thee,
 Shall evermore abide.
- 3 Then let the thundering trumpet sound,
 The latest light'nings glare,
The mountains melt, the solid ground
 Dissolve as liquid air.

The huge celestial bodies roll
Amidst that general fire,
And shrivel as a parchment-scrawl,
And all in smoke expire.

4 Yet still the Lord, the Saviour reigns,
When nature is destroyed,
And no created thing remains
Throughout the flaming void:
Sublime upon his azure throne
He speaks th' almighty word:
His *fiat* is obeyed: tis done,
And paradise restored.

5 So be it: let this system end,
This ruinous earth and skies,
The New Jerusalem descend,
The new creation rise:
Thy power omnipotent assume,
Thy brightest majesty,
And when thou dost in glory come,
My Lord, remember me!