

*Prayers for Condemned Malefactors (1785)*¹

[Baker list, #439]

Editorial Introduction:

Both John and Charles Wesley devoted considerable energy to ministering with prisoners. A striking account in Charles's *MS Journal* (July 10–19, 1738) describes how he spent days with a group of prisoners about to be executed, encouraging them to make their peace with God. He then accompanied them to the gallows, offered them a last communion, and joined in singing hymns as they met their fate. Charles clearly assumed that those condemned to die had a particular need to “prepare” to die, and that he had a ministry of helping them in this preparation.

It is little surprise that this ministry would find poetic expression. The earliest published example is “Hymn for Condemned Prisoners” (1742). The largest published collection came in 1785, when Charles issued a set of ten poetic *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors*. Most of these were written in connection with ministry among the prisoners when Charles was in his seventies! A helpful study of these hymns is Joanna Cruickshank, “Singing at the Scaffold: Charles Wesley’s Hymns for Condemned Malefactors,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 56 (2007): 129–45.

Edition:

[Charles Wesley.] *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors*. London: Paramore, 1785.

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Table of Contents

I	2
II	2-3
III	3-4
IV. To be Used by the Malefactors	4
V	4-5
VI	5
VII	6
VIII. Just Before Their Being Led Out to Execution	6-7
IX	7
X	7-8

**PRAYERS FOR
CONDEMNED MALEFACTORS.**

I.²

- 1 Friend of all the sinful race,
Jesus, full of truth and grace,
Sent the wand'ring sheep to find,
Save these outcasts of mankind:
- 2 Earnestly remember them,
That they may themselves condemn;
Them for whom we life request,
On the brink of hell arrest.
- 3 O reverse their sorest doom,
Snatch them from the wrath to come,
Touching whom we now agree,
Mercy to implore from thee.
- 4 Mercy they can ne'er receive,
Till thou dost repentance give:
Giver of the grief unknown,
Look—and break their hearts of stone.
- 5 Let them hear thy dying cries,
Then the dead in sin arise;
Stubborn guilt doth then relent,
Rocks are by thy passion rent;
- 6 With severest anguish torn,
Felons look on thee, and mourn,
Poor repenting thieves confess
Christ their Lord—and die in peace!

II.³

- 1 Faithful and true, thy word we plead,
Met in thy name to intercede
For the sad sons of woe,
Cut off by man, to death consign'd,
And justly swept from earth to find
Severer pains below.

²A manuscript version of this hymn appears in MS Miscellaneous Hymns, 93–94.

³A manuscript version of this hymn appears in MS Miscellaneous Hymns, 94–95.

- 2 With Sinai's thund' rings, Lord, begin
To rouse the sleeping slaves of sin,
 T' o'erwhelm with guilty shame;
Put them in fear, thy wrath reveal,
Shake o'er the opening mouth of hell,
 And scorch them with the flame.
- 3 Conviction's sharpest arrows dart,
And pierce their adamant heart,
 Who now to falsehoods fly;
That when their lies are swept away,
Cut off from all resource they may
 To thee for refuge cry.
- 4 Soon as thou hear'st their contrite moan
"Save, or eternally undone,
 We die the second death,"
O let them call thy death to mind,
And sinking into Tophet find
 Thy mercy's arms beneath!

III.⁴

- 1 Saviour and friend of all mankind,
 Seize the lost sheep for whom we pray,
Them on the brink of Tophet find,
 And take in death their sins away.
- 2 If mercy hath excepted none,
 Why may not all thy mercy prove?
Why may not all their Saviour own,
 Dear objects of thy dying love?
- 3 Eternal death must be their doom,
 Unless the vilest may find grace;
But in thy loving heart is room
 For Adam's whole devoted race.
- 4 Willing, and strong to save thou art;
 Life we for every soul desire;
O let not one, not one depart
 Curst into everlasting fire.

⁴A manuscript version of this hymn appears in MS Miscellaneous Hymns, 95.

- 5 That fire for devils was prepar'd,
But man was made to reign with thee:
By all-redeeming mercy spar'd,
Let these thy heavenly kingdom see:
- 6 Mixt with the sheep on thy right-hand,
The purchase of thy blood and prayer,
Let these at thy tribunal stand,
And hear their joyful sentence there!

IV.⁵

To be Used by the Malefactors.

- 1 Justly by man condemn'd to die,
Jesus the desperate sinner's friend,
Out of the deep regard our cry,
And O! Let hope be in our end!
- 2 Suffering for ills which we have done,
The martyrs' joy shall we require?
No: but we still for mercy groan,
And hope in final peace t' expire.
- 3 Before we gasp our latest breath,
Before we these vile bodies leave,
Remembring thy own precious death,
Saviour, our parting souls forgive.
- 4 Pluck us as brands out of the flame,
And wash'd in thy atoning blood,
And sav'd through thy almighty name,
Present our ransom'd souls to God.

V.⁶

- 1 O let the prisoners' mournful sighs
Come up before thy gracious throne,
Mixt with the blood and dying cries
Of Jesus thy beloved Son.
- 2 Father, regard his powerful prayer,
Who, hanging on the shameful tree,
Doth all our sins and sorrows bear
And look—through Jesu's wounds—on me!

⁵A manuscript version of this hymn appears in MS Miscellaneous Hymns, 96.

⁶A manuscript version of this hymn appears in MS Miscellaneous Hymns, 96–97.

- 3 On us the outcasts of mankind,
Who judge ourselves not fit to live,
But mercy hope from thee to find,
Through him that gasp'd in death, Forgive!
- 4 Hear him, our Advocate with thee,
Him, and the blood of sprinkling hear:
He pour'd out all that blood for me!
He doth before thy throne appear!
- 5 For us he in thy presence stands,
For us he prays the ceaseless prayer,
Points to his side, and lifts his hands,
And shows our names engraven there!
- 6 Lo! On thy Son our souls we cast,
And trusting what he asks shall be,
And dying penitent at last,
We leave our cause to him and thee!

VI.⁷

- 1 Return'd into thy kingdom, Lord,
For good remember me,
And tell a penitent restor'd,
I soon shall be with thee.
- 2 The offering of a broken heart
Thou never wilt despise,
But while my soul and body part,
Accept the sacrifice.
- 3 My spirit humbly I commend,
To thy redeeming care,
My last important moments spend
In penitence and prayer.
- 4 And if I may not testify
On earth my sins forgiven,
Yet, I, the poorest outcast I
May praise thy love in heaven.

⁷The first three stanzas of this hymn appear in MS Malefactors, 10. A manuscript version of the entire hymn appears in MS Miscellaneous Hymns, 97–98. On page 98 there is a note in Charles Wesley's hand: "These prayers were answered, Thursday, April 28th, 1785, on nineteen malefactors, who all died penitent. 'Not unto me, O Lord; not unto me!'"

VII.⁸

- 1 The soul that sins, if God is true,
 Shall die the death which ne'er shall end,
The endless death we own our due,
 Should God to hell this moment send,
And plunge us in the burning pool,
Long as eternal ages roll.
- 2 Poor, guilty worms what can we plead,
 What in arrest of judgment say?
The judge hath suffer'd in our stead,
 The Lamb hath borne our sins away,
Justice divine is satisfied,
And man may live, for God hath died!
- 3 The co-eternal Son of God
 Hath laid the general ransom down,
He bought our peace with all his blood,
 And pleads his death before the throne,
The powerful Advocate above
Of all who trust his dying love.
- 4 How shall we in his merits trust?
 We dare not God our Father own:
Till Christ the merciful and just,
 Convince, and break our hearts of stone,
Our hearts are harden'd from his fear,
And countless sins our conscience sear.
- 5 Yet O! We would, we would believe:
 Thou, Lord, the double bar remove,
The grace of true repentance give,
 And then reveal thy dying love;
Thy love, which speaks a world forgiven,
And lifts lost souls from hell to heaven.

VIII.

Just Before Their Being Led Out to Execution.

- 1 Justice, thy summons we obey,
And come our forfeit lives to pay,
While God and man we justify,
And by a righteous sentence die!

⁸The first three stanzas found in MS Malefactors, 10.

- 2 But the great God in whom we trust
Is merciful, as well as just:
And Jesu's blood for sin atones,
And will not let us die but once!
- 3 Jesus into thy hands we fall,
With our last breath for mercy call,
To thee our ransom'd spirits commend,
And hope, that heaven is in our end.
- 4 Because thou hangedst on a tree,
And didst thyself expire for me,
Me and my dying mates receive,
And bid our souls for ever live!

IX.

- 1 And let these wretched bodies die,
If thou at last receive
The souls thou didst so dearly buy,
That we with God might live:
- 2 Death as the wages of our sin,
Our just desert we claim,
But hope eternal life to win,
Through grace—and Jesu's name.
- 3 Jesus, thou all-redeeming Lord,
Remember Calvary,
And think on sinners self-abhorr'd,
Who gasp in death to thee:
- 4 And while thy mercy's utmost power
On us is magnified,
O save us at our latest hour
Who hast for felons died!

X.

- 1 Our punishment accepting here
With penitent remorse;
With bitter grief, and torturing fear,
We end our shameful course:

- 2 Set forth a spectacle to all,
The refuse of mankind;
We on our guilty brethren call,
And leave a word behind.
- 3 Warning, ye sons of rapine take,
By our unhappy doom;
Now, now your evil ways forsake,
And 'scape the wrath to come.
- 4 Before the righteous wrath of man,
Your careless souls surprise;
And give you up to lasting pain,
And death that never dies.
- 5 Merciful God, to them extend,
To us thy saving grace;
And shew thyself, the sinner's friend,
To all our dying race:
- 6 And lo! Before thy face t' appear,
We now from earth remove,
Concluding with an act sincere
Of sorrow, faith, and love.