

The Old Rugged Cross

One of the hymns we sing this Sunday, March 17th, the Fifth Sunday in Lent, is an old-time favorite. ***“The Old Rugged Cross”*** is one of the most popular Christian hymns. It was composed in 1912 by evangelist and song leader George Bennard. Bennard was born in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1873 and his childhood was cut short when his father died when George was a young teen. He became the support for his mother and siblings and took a job in the coal mines where he worked for a decade. Bennard was not raised in a Christian home and at age 24 he attended a Salvation Army meeting and accepted Christ as his Savior. He soon married and he and his new wife joined the Salvation Army and spent several years as traveling preachers with the Army. He later joined the Methodist Church and became an itinerant preacher holding revival meetings throughout the Midwest. It was during one of these revival meetings that he produced this hymn. Several youths at a revival meeting in Michigan were heckling and ridiculing him during his preaching. Bennard was so troubled by their disregard of the gospel that he turned to the Bible to reflect on Christ on the cross. He then wrote the lyrics of the first verse of what would become *“The Old Rugged Cross”*.

He continued to work on the lyrics over the next several months and got another well-known musician and composer of the time, Charles H Gabriel, to help with the tune and harmonies. The version that we know today was first performed on June 7, 1913, in Pakagon, Michigan at the First Methodist Episcopal Church.

Bennard continued to perform the hymn at revivals and churches throughout Michigan and it later came to the attention of the famed evangelist Billy Sunday who used it in his meetings. He is the one who popularized this song. *“The Old Rugged Cross”* has been sung and recorded by numerous artists throughout the years. It was featured on the Lawrence Welk television shows in the 1950’s and renowned musicians such as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Mahalia Jackson, and Willie Nelson have recorded this beloved hymn.

The term “rugged” in *“The Old Rugged Cross”* conveys the physical harshness and brutality of the crucifixion. It reflects the unimaginable pain and suffering that Jesus endured on the cross, highlighting the depth of His sacrifice. Its powerful lyrics inspire us by reminding us of the transformative power of Jesus’ sacrifice. It serves as a source of hope, comfort, and strength, reminding us of God’s unfailing love and the eternal life that awaits us through faith in Christ.

Refrain:

*So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it someday for a crown*

*1. On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the Dearest and Best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.*

*2. Oh, that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.*

*3. In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see,
For ’twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
To pardon and sanctify me.*

*4. To the old rugged cross I will ever be true;
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He’ll call me someday to my home far away,
Where His glory forever I’ll share.*