

Tried and True: God Bless America
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We have learned the stories behind the hymns *Amazing Grace* and *It is Well with My Soul* in this series "Tried and True." Today we will hear the story behind the beloved song *God Bless America*. Let's pray: *Thank you Heavenly Father, for your love for us. Thank you for your patience with us and with our faltering nation. Help us to hear your words of life and truth today that will move us to be your ambassadors of reconciliation in this land that we love. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Israel Beilin was born on May 11, 1888, in the western Siberian town of Tyumen, Russia. Called Izzy, he was the youngest of eight children of Moses Beilin, an itinerant cantor, and his wife, Leah. He led singing in synagogues. It was a dangerous time for Jews in his homeland. The family came face to face with the horrors of the systematic persecution and slaughter of Jews in Russia when, in 1893, the family home was deliberately burned to the ground. Izzy was only 5 years old. He and his parents were forced to flee the country in the hope of finding a better and safe life in the United States.

Life in America was hard for the Baline family — the new name apparently a misspelling of Beilin when they arrived in New York. They lived in a tiny windowless apartment. Israel's father made a meager living for his family as a cantor at the local synagogue, but the family was together and they were safe. Izzy had a 'clear, true soprano voice,' and his father encouraged him to develop his musical talents at an early age.

When Israel was only 8, his father died, putting a strain on an already meager family budget. As soon as he was able to help support his family at age 13, Izzy quit school and worked for pennies as a street singer outside cabarets. He performed as a chorus boy in theatrical productions, a stooge in vaudeville, a singing waiter and a song plugger who introduced new songs in music stores by singing them. He had little education and could never read or write music with ease. But he had great talent and the strong determination of a hungry young man eager to put food on the table.

At age 19, he wrote his first collaborative song as the lyricist of 'Marie from Sunny Italy.' Whether a printer's error or the writer's conscious choice, the sheet music for the song attributed the words to I. Berlin, and 'I' soon stood for Irving. Exactly when and why Israel Baline became Irving Berlin is unclear. Four years later, in 1911, he published his first big hit, 'Alexander's Ragtime Band,' and attracted fans from all over the world.

He married in 1912, but his wife died of typhoid fever that same year. It was a terrible time in his life and went into a dry spell of composing. And then things turned around. He started writing and publishing music at an incredible rate. He became a major Broadway songwriter making a very lucrative living.

During World War I, while serving as a private in the U.S. Army at Long Island's Camp Upton, Berlin bolstered military morale by writing the music for a 1918 show titled *Yip Yip Yaphank*, featuring *Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning*. *God Bless America* was originally composed for *Yip Yip Yaphank*. When it didn't fit with the other songs, however, he set it aside.

Here's how he described how he wrote the song: *"I wrote 'God Bless America' at Camp Upton in 1918 to be the finale of Yip, Yip, Yaphank. but I didn't use it. Of course, I always had it in back of my mind to use someday on the right occasion. That occasion came after I returned from London in 1938 where I had gone to see the opening of Alexander's Ragtime Band, the picture. I was there during Chamberlain's visit to Hitler and the beginning of the Munich pact. On my way back, I tried to write a song that I felt at that time. I remember finishing a chorus of a song called Thanks America which I tore up because it was very bad. It seemed a bad editorial set to music. I then recalled God Bless America and rewrote it. I underline rewrote because that is a very important part of the story of God Bless America. The original version was as follows: God Bless America, land that I love. Stand beside her and guide her to the right with a light from above. Make her victorious on land and foam. God Bless America, my home sweet home. It is obvious that the word 'right' had to be changed because in 1918 "guide her to the right" meant*

the right road. In 1938, there was a right and a left and it had a different significance. So, in changing it, the song was improved when I said 'stand beside her and guide her, thru the night with a light from above.' Then again, in 1918 it was written as a war song, which the phrase 'make her victorious on land and foam' indicates. In 1938, I didn't want it to be a war song. I wanted it to be a song of peace." America was in an economic depression. Hitler was taking over Europe and Americans were afraid we'd have to go to war. This was the era just before television when radio shows were huge. American families would sit around their radios in the evenings, listening to their favorite entertainers, and no entertainer of that era was bigger than Kate Smith. Berlin spoke to singer Kate Smith's manager, who ended up introducing the song *God Bless America* to the nation on her CBS radio show, *The Kate Smith Hour*, on November 10, 1938 – 81 years ago TODAY!

She introduced the song at the end of the show with these words, *"And now it's going to be my very great privilege to sing for you a song that's never been sung before by anybody. One that was written by one of the greatest composers in the music field today. It's something more than a song - I feel it's one of the most beautiful compositions ever written, a song that will never die. The author - Mr. Irving Berlin. The title - 'God Bless America.'"*

The response to *God Bless America* was overwhelmingly positive. It received enormous attention in the press and from the public. Yet there was sharp criticism as well. In answer to those who questioned the sincerity of his lyric and his reference to God, Berlin had this to say: *"God Bless America is a patriotic song written so it can be sung and understood by everyone. It is not a hymn or an anthem. It is just a song. What's wrong with a patriotic song?"* He told the New York Herald-Tribune on October 10, 1940, *"All that I hope for God Bless America, is that it will continue to be popular, especially in these days when so many people feel a need for some vocal expression of their patriotism."*

In the summer of 1940, both major national parties sought to use *God Bless America* for their conventions. In a July 16, 1940, letter to W. F. Maloney, an official of the Democratic Party, Berlin wrote: *"In reply to your inquiry, no political party has the exclusive rights to the song 'God Bless America'. In our grant to the Republican Party Campaign Committee for Wendell L. Wilkie we specifically mentioned the fact that we could not give the exclusive rights to any political party to a song that is so obviously for all Americans."*

Many Americans found the song so powerful and compelling that they lobbied for it to replace *The Star-Spangled Banner* as our national anthem. In an August 16, 1943, letter to the well-known author Dale Carnegie, Berlin wrote: *"I think it would be a mistake to suggest changing our National Anthem. I am, of course, touched and flattered that you think so highly of God Bless America, but in my opinion the Star-Spangled Banner cannot be replaced."* He said to others: *"A national anthem is something that develops naturally through age, tradition, historic significance, and general recognition. There is no such thing as a new national anthem. We can't legislate one. They arise alone and stand the test of time. We've got a good national anthem. You can't have two."*

For many years the Kate Smith recording was played at Philadelphia Flyers hockey games, and for especially key contests Smith was on hand to sing it in person. Berlin himself sang it on television in 1968 during an eightieth birthday tribute presented to him on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and sang it again, most movingly, at the White House in 1974 in honor of returning Vietnam War prisoners. It was his last public appearance. In 1945 President Harry Truman awarded him the Army's Medal of Merit for his patriotism during the two world wars. In 1955 President Dwight D. Eisenhower presented him the Congressional Gold Medal for *God Bless America* and his many other patriotic contributions to popular music. In 1977 President Gerald Ford awarded him the Medal of Freedom for his contributions during times of national conflict. Irving Berlin died peacefully in his sleep at 101 years old on September 22, 1989, one year after the death of his wife Ellin, with whom he had shared 62 years of marriage. He was survived by his three daughters, nine grandchildren, six great-grandchildren and his unforgettable place in American history.

For the younger people here, here are some great facts about Mr. Berlin. His songs have provided memorable moments in dozens of other films including *Home Alone* (1991),

Titanic (1997), *The Simpsons* (2006), *Spider Man 3* (2007) and *Downton Abbey* (2011). He was awarded an Academy Award for Best Song of the Year in 1942 for *White Christmas*.

Irving Berlin, as successful as he was, never found composing music an easy task. No matter how many years passed and how much experience he had, he could never shake free from the feeling that his life depended on writing another song. He was always under stress while composing. When he wrote the verse and refrain to *God Bless America* an associate said he worked very hard, 'like a woman in labor about to give birth.' When I read that, I thought that as much as his song *God Bless America* was meant to point our attention to a God who protects, guides, and (we pray) blesses a nation with peace, it doesn't sound as if Berlin had tapped into the peace that God alone can give for his own life. I find this ironic and sad. And yet, how this teaches us that God can use anyone and anything at any time to lift other's eyes to Him, to direct us to seek Him, and to remind us of our own responsibilities to live in and further peace wherever we are.

Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:9), "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*" That is an amazing verse that deserves its own sermon. But in a nutshell, let me remind us all that we are not given the distinction of being called children of God until we have put our faith in Jesus Christ. Until we have made peace with God through believing the truth about his Son, until then, we are unable to bring true peace into any situation, into any heart, mind, or soul. We might be those who can 'smooth things over,' but we are not real peacemakers. As disciples of Jesus, as children of God, we are called to be peacemakers. We are called to strive for peace. We are called to be dispensers of peace. We are called to be walking peace-people wherever we are. That's hard, isn't it? When we are provoked, when we are falsely accused, when we are 'up-to-here,' when we are feeling angry, hurt, afraid, or alone. Peace can seem beyond-our-reach. But it's not. It's part of the fruit from the Holy Spirit living within us. We have it. We just need to exercise it more – and especially as we approach this new presidential election year of 2020.

There is a movement arising called Golden Rule 2020. Have you heard about it? It is a call for civility in our nation based on Jesus' words in Matthew 7:12. "*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.*" Treat others the way you want to be treated – this is what Jesus taught us. It is choosing to be 'civil' towards one another: showing mutual respect toward one another. On the website for Golden Rule 2020 it was published that 78% of Americans think incivility and political dysfunction prevent our nation from moving forward. I'm surely one of those represented in that 78%. Also printed on the website are these words:

"We all know that America is painfully and bitterly divided. Everywhere we look we see mistrust and suspicion between our fellow citizens and a growing feeling that those who have different views are not just wrong, but dangerous or evil. Furthermore, people of different views aren't able to talk to each other very well and there is often more name and personal attacks than real discussion. Sadly, this seems to happen between Christians of different views as much as it does others in our society. We are observing Golden Rule 2020 because we believe that the teachings of Jesus offer a way out of our national dilemma. Indeed, Jesus' command to "treat others as we want to be treated" would completely transform our country if enough Christians followed that principle in our daily lives."

Maybe we can't change the rhetoric in Washington, but we sure can do our part here in our valleys. I just don't know how we can sing the words of *God Bless America*, asking God to bless our country if we, as his own children aren't doing our job as true peacemakers. I'm not saying you can't stand to the right or stand to the left. I'm not saying that you shouldn't let your thoughts about candidates or issues be known. I'm saying that we need to do all of this in a respectful way and listen to others as they share their thoughts that may differ than ours. This, I believe, is an act of worship. Anytime we are doing what God's Word tells us to do, it is an act of worship! It is expressing to God that His way of always treating others with respect, honoring their creation as ones made in the image of God, is the right way. The best way. The Biblical way. And then we can sing without hypocrisy or guilt, *God Bless America*, as we, as His people do our very best to live up our calling as peacemakers.

Let us pray now for our country, for our leaders and for ourselves. We will have times of spoken prayer alternating with times for silent prayer.

- Almighty God, we come to you with concern about our country and ask your help in bringing healing to our land. Help us to remember that our differences in politics, gender, race and age are far less important than the fact that we are all your children.
- We are thankful for your teaching that we are to "treat others as we want to be treated" and ask your help in applying that principle to our daily lives. Help us to stay mindful of the fact that we are to treat everyone with dignity and respect.
- We pray for the leaders of our country and ask that you will help them to see the importance of finding ways to work together for the good of our country and for the world.
- We pray for forgiveness for those times when we have failed to show respect for others and have been too quick to dismiss those with whom we disagree. Help us to not judge others so harshly that we fail to see the needs, and especially the spiritual needs, of the person behind the views that are being expressed.
- We pray for the humility to admit the limits of what we know and to acknowledge when we are wrong. Help us to keep our own shortcomings in perspective so we can work more effectively with others.
- We pray for the patience to listen to others even when we disagree with what they are saying.
- We pray for wisdom needed to understand those who have different views and the courage to find ways to work together for the common good. Amen. Please join me in a responsive reading:

All: In response to God's commandment, we will strive to treat those who have different views, as we want to be treated by them.

One: We acknowledge that the Bible tells us to be "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry."

All: In response, we will seek to do more listening and less talking so that we might learn from others.

One: We remember that Jesus said we should forgive the sins against us not just seven times, but "seventy times seven."

All: In response, we will remember to forgive those who say harsh things about us and resist the temptation to respond in kind when we are attacked.

One: We know that, as Christians, we are told to work for increased understanding and peace between all people.

All: In response, we will do what we can to stay mindful of the sacredness of each person and practice the Golden Rule in our personal lives, in our community, and in our country.

Unison Prayer: *(Readers, please join in praying this with us wherever you are, whenever you are reading this.)*

Almighty God, our hearts are heavy with concern for our country. We see the bitterness between our fellow citizens, and it makes us fearful for the future of our nation. Bless us, the people of this community that we, in times of conflict, engage one another without hatred or bitterness, that we listen for your voice amid competing claims, and that we work together with mutual forbearance for the common good. Forgive us when we have failed to show respect for those who have different views, and for when we have been too quick to judge and dismiss those with whom we disagree. Grant us the courage we need to speak your truth, and the humility we need to work effectively with others. In every interaction we have, help us to stay mindful of your command to treat others as we want to be treated. Bless all of us in the coming year as we debate the future of our country. Help us to stay mindful of your teachings so that we may engage each other in a spirit of wisdom, charity, and love. Help our political leaders to find ways to bring us together and not divide us. Help us all in this land to seek ways to faithfully serve each other and promote our common life together. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.