

***Bound for Canaan, The spiritual journey of Africans in America 1619-1865***, *Christian History*, Issue 62 (Vol. XVIII, No.2), published by Christianity Today, Carol Stream, IL 60188, 1999 (29 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

*Did You Know?* Spiritual memories of slaves-in their own words

### **1. Good-bye, Child**

*While traveling in Delaware, a child of a slave was sold:* As the colored woman was ordered to take it away, I heard Fannie Woods cry, "O God, I would rather hear the clods fall on the coffin lid of my child than to hear its cries because it is taken away from me." She said, "Good bye, Child."

We were ordered to move on, and could hear the crying of the child in the distance as it was borne away by the other woman, and I could hear the deep sobs of a broken hearted mother. We could hear the groans of many as they prayed for God to have mercy upon us and give us grace to endure the hard trials through which we must pass. -*Fannie Woods* [Page 2]

### **2. Religion with Filling**

That religion I got in them way-back days is still with me. And it ain't this pie-crust religion, such as the folks are getting these days. The old-time religion had some filling between the crusts. -*Prince Bee* [Page 2]

### **3. Revealed Freedom**

I've heard 'em pray for freedom. I thought it was foolishness, then, but the old-time folks always felt they was to be free. It must have been something 'vealed [revealed] unto 'em.- *Anonymous* [Page 2]

### **4. Church Meetings**

"After arriving and greeting one another, men and women sat in groups together. Then there was "preaching ... by the brethren, then praying and singing all around until they generally feel quite happy." [Page 12]

*Defeating the Conspiracy* by Mark Galli

### **5. This Place Not My Home**

"The slave forgets all his sufferings," Randolph summed up, "except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming, "Thank God, I shall not live here always!" [Page 12]

### **6. African Americans Hearing the Gospel**

It is a remarkable event not merely because of the risks incurred (200 lashes of the whip often awaited those caught at such a meeting) but because of the hurdles

overcome merely to arrive at this moment. For decades all manner of people and circumstances conspired against African Americans even hearing the gospel, let alone responding to it in freedom and joy. [Page 12]

### **7. Non-Whites Are Beasts**

Anglican missionary to South Carolina, Francis Le Jau reported in 1709, “Many masters can’t be persuaded that Negroes and Indians are otherwise than Beasts, and use them like such. [Page 12]

### **8. Servants as Men**

Such thinking was combated by men like Puritan Cotton Mather, who, in his tract *The Negro Christianised*, pleaded with owners to treat their “servants” as men, not brutes: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self. Man, thy Negro is thy neighbor.” [Page 12]

### **9. Christians Worst Slaves**

According to John Bragg, a Virginia minister, slave owners agreed that conversion would result in the slaves “being and becoming worse slaves when Christians.” Some even believed “A slave is ten times worse when a Christian than in his state of paganism. [Page 13]

### **10. Spiritual Vitality Prized**

John Thompson, who was born a Maryland slave in 1812, said he and his fellow slaves “could understand but little that was said” in the Episcopal service his owner required them to attend. But when “the Methodist religion was brought among us ... it brought glad tidings to the poor bondsman.” It spread from plantation to plantation, he said, and “there were few who did not experience religion.”

Baptists and Methodists prized spiritual vitality more than education in clergy, so if a converted African American showed a gift for preaching, he was encouraged to preach, even to unconverted whites. Thus arose the earliest black preachers of repute, men with names like “Black Harry” Hosier, Josiah Bishop, “Old Captain,” and “Uncle” Jack. [Page 13]

### **11. Gospel Had Missing Messages**

The gospel presented to slaves by white owners, however, was only a partial gospel. The message of salvation by grace, the joy of faith, and the hope of heaven were all there, but many other teachings were missing.

House servants often sneered and laughed among themselves when summoned to family prayers because the master or mistress would read “Servants obey your masters,” but neglect passages that said, “Break every yoke and let the oppressed go free.”

One white evangelist to slaves, John Dixon Long, admitted his frustration: “They hear ministers denouncing them for stealing the white mans grain, but as they never hear the white man denounced for holding them in bondage, pocketing the wages, or selling their wives and children to the brutal traders of the far South; they naturally suspect the Gospel to be a cheat and believe the preachers and slaveholder [are] in a conspiracy against them.” [Pages 14-15]

## **12. Cruelty Often the Norm**

Some didn't wait until Monday. One slave reported that his master served him Communion at church in the morning and whipped him in the afternoon for returning to the plantation a few minutes late. Susan Boggs recalled the day of her baptism: “The man that baptized me had a colored woman tied up in his yard to whip when he got home.... We had to sit and hear him preach, and [the woman's] mother was in church hearing him preach.”

It is not difficult to see why Frederick Douglass called slaveholding piety “a cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action nor bowels of compassion.” [Page 15]

## **13. Bible Message and Slavery Not Mixing**

It is amazing that under these circumstances any slaves found the Christian message convincing. And yet blacks clearly saw the difference—a difference white owners were utterly blind to—between the message of the Bible and the slaveholding culture in which it was taking root. When William Craft's supposedly Christian master sold his aged parents because they were no longer an economic asset, Craft said he felt “a thorough hatred, not for Christianity, but for slaveholding piety.”

## **14. Christ Tasted Death for Every Man**

Josiah Henson said he was “transported with delicious joy” when he heard a sermon from the Book of Hebrews that said Christ tasted death “for every man.” He exclaimed, “O the blessedness and sweetness of feeling that I was loved!”

Such experiences were so real that nothing masters did or said could shake their Christian confidence. [Pages 15-16]

## **15. Whipped for Worship**

Although some southern whites forbade blacks from meeting alone, this didn't stop slaves from taking risks to enjoy their own experience of the Spirit. Ex-slave Charlotte Martin, for example, said her oldest brother was whipped to death for secreting off to a worship service. [Page 16]

## **16. Hush Harbors**

To get a little distance between themselves and their masters, slaves would often meet in woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets, aptly called “hush harbors.” Calvin Woods recalled singing and praying with other slaves, huddled behind quilts and rags, hung “in the form of a little room” and wetted “to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air.”

On one Louisiana plantation, slaves would steal off into the woods and “form a circle on their knees around the speaker, who would also be on his knees. He would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated and cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender’s mouth.” [Page 16]

## **17. Refused to Let Whites Frame Faith**

But the Christianity that finally took hold of black souls, that grew and blossomed in its own distinct way, and that comforted and gave hope to a sorely oppressed people, was a different thing altogether than what whites had imagined. It was in some sense created and nurtured by blacks themselves, who refused to let whites frame their faith.

Instead they discovered for themselves the biblical message, as historian Arnold Toynbee put it, “that Jesus was a prophet who came into the world not to confirm the mighty in their seats but to exalt the humble and the meek.” [Page 17]

## **18. God Cares for the Poor**

Black boldness was due in part to their belief in God’s special concern for the poor. As ex-slave Jacob Stoyer put it, “God would somehow do more for the oppressed Negroes than he would ordinarily for any other people.”

But blacks were also bolstered by their trust in a coming judgment at which slaveholders would receive recompense. Moses Grandy remembered how during violent thunderstorms whites hid between their feather beds, whereas slaves went outside and, lifting up their hands, thanked God that judgment day was coming at last.” [Page 17]

*He Still Wid Us -- Jesus* The musical theology of spirituals by Yolanda Y. Smith

## **19. Sing All Day**

But such songs weren’t limited to the “praise-house”; they also served an important function in the work environment. Whether house slaves or field hands, they were expected to put in long hours of backbreaking work, with a minimal amount of food and rest.

In order to keep up with this pace, the slaves often sang as they worked. As one ex-slave reflected, “We would pick cotton and sing, pick and sing all day”. [Page 18]

## **20. The Means of Hope**

The spirituals provided a means of expressing the hope and despair that arose out of the living conditions under the brutal system of chattel slavery.

Nobody knows the trouble I see,  
Nobody knows my sorrow;  
Nobody knows the trouble I see,  
Glory, hallelujah! [Page 18]

## **21. God for the Oppressed**

In the midst of such hardships, the spirituals emerged as a source of strength and support. Through the spirituals, enslaved blacks affirmed that God is on the side of the oppressed. Inspired by God’s actions on behalf of the children of Israel in Egypt, slaves firmly believed that God would deliver them from their bondage.

They anticipated, as Howard Thurman stated, “that inasmuch as God is no respecter of persons, what he did for one race he would surely do for another.” One such spiritual began:

My army cross over,  
My army cross over.  
O, Pharaoh’s army drowned!  
My army cross over. [Page 18]

## **22. Slaves Children of God**

Slaves referred to themselves as “all God’s chillun’,” “born of God,” ‘and “little children.” This sense of their own humanity was validated by their belief that they were indeed children of God and created to be free. In light of this self-understanding, the slaves expressed a longing for freedom-not only from trials, tribulations, sin, and evil, but from slavery.

An’ befo’ I’d be a slave,  
I’ll be buried in my grave,  
An’ go home to my Lord an be free. [Page 19]

## **23. Spirituals Express Passion & Hope**

Though spirituals have changed over the years and no longer resemble the original form they embodied during slavery, they continue to evoke a sense of passion and hope whenever they are sung.

As W.E.B. DuBois wrote half a century after the Civil War, “Through all the sorrow of the sorrow songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things.” [Page 19]

*By Any Means Necessary*-Black abolitionists were tired of waiting for a gradual, peaceful end to slavery by Ted Olsen

## **24. Beginning of Abolition**

Will the Lord suffer this people to go on much longer, taking his holy name in vain? Will he not stop them, preachers and all? O Americans! Americans!! I call God-I call angels-I call men to witness that your destruction is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless you repent.”

The words of David Walker, the Bostonian son of a free mother and slave father, were as much a threat as they were a jeremiad. His 76-page pamphlet, *Walker’s Appeal ... to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829)*, marked the beginnings of a new abolitionism—and the beginnings of a rift between white and black antislavery movements. [Page 20]

## **25. Abolitionist Had Prejudice**

“Until abolitionists eradicate prejudice from their own hearts,” opined one antislavery editor, “they can never receive the unwavering confidence of the people of color.”

A few did receive such confidence, however, most notably William Lloyd Garrison. The publisher of the radical abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, Garrison was one of the few whites to support *Walker’s Appeal* (though, as a pacifist, he denounced its call for violence, saying “a good end does not justify a wicked means”). One of the main founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, he was the loudest voice calling for an immediate, not gradual, end to slavery. [Page 21]

## **26. Whites Found They Were Slaves Also**

As white abolitionist Abby Kelley wrote, “We have good cause to be grateful to the slave for the benefit we have received to *ourselves*, in working for *him*. In striving; to strike his chains of, we found, most surely, that we were manacled ourselves.” [Page 22]

*Black Moses*-The mystical faith and no-nonsense tactics of the Underground Railroad’s most famous leader. By Matt Donnelly

## **27. Underground Railroad**

In 1831, a Kentucky slave named Tice Davids made a break for the free state of Ohio by swimming across the Ohio River. His master trailed close behind and watched Davids wade ashore. When he looked again, Davids was nowhere to be found. Davids’s master returned to Kentucky in a rage, exclaiming to his friends that Davids “must have gone

off on an underground road.” The name stuck, and the legend of the Underground Railroad was born.

There were no tracks on the Underground Railroad, or even any designated routes. Neither did anyone hide or travel underground. The Underground Railroad was simply a loose network of free blacks and whites in the North who helped an estimated 40,000 to 100,000 fugitive slaves find freedom in the northern United States and Canada.

Some individuals helped by offering fugitive slaves a place to hide for a day or two, others provided money for their travel to Canada, and a small number even went south to personally lead slaves to freedom. [Page 24]

## **28. Helping Fugitives Not Easy**

The task of helping fugitive slaves was not an easy one. Those known to be involved in the Underground Railroad—and it was often not a secret—were criticized in popular books and newspapers in both the North and South. Neighbors spied on their activities, and slave owners and slave catchers kept their houses and businesses under almost constant watch. Some were asked to leave their churches, and their children were often harassed in school. Others, fearing for their lives, left their homes and moved to other states.

Still they remained, driven by their Christian faith and the conviction that “all men are created equal” (at a time when it was far from “self-evident”). When a fugitive slave came into their area, these “conductors” on the Underground Railroad acted quickly to usher him inside and into a safe hiding place. [Page 24]

## **29. Harriet Tubman**

The most celebrated leader in the Underground Railroad was ex-slave ‘Harriet Tubman, who had escaped from the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1849. When she first reached the North, she said later, “I looked at my hands to see if I was de same person now I was free. Dere was such a glory ober eberything, de sun came like gold through de trees and Ober de fields, and I felt like I was heaven.”

Tubman was not satisfied with her own escape to freedom, however. She made 19 return trips to the South and helped deliver at least 300 fellow slaves to freedom, boasting “I never lost a passenger.” Her guidance of so many to freedom earned her the appellation Moses.

Tubman’s friends and fellow abolitionists claimed that the source of her strength came from her faith in God as deliverer and protector of the weak. “I always tole God,” she said, “ ‘I’m gwince [going] to hole stiddy on you, an you’ve got to see me through.’ ” [Pages 24-25]