

Dorsey remembered an old pentatonic (five-note) melody from his Sunday School days, MAITLAND (The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 424) by George Allen (1812-1877), paired with the text "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone." Arranging this tune and adding his own words, "Precious Lord" became the most famous of his many gospel songs. He gave the song to Frye who introduced it to the choir at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church the next Sunday, an event that, Dorsey later remarked, "tore up the church." Martin Luther King, Sr. was the pastor of Ebenezer at this time, beginning his ministry there in 1931.

The three stanzas capture the grief not only of Dorsey, but also of any who have suffered significant loss. The incipit or opening line of stanza one, "Precious Lord, take my hand. . . .," indicates a suffering soul that is reaching out. The singer acknowledges that they are at the end of their rope: "I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm worn." Perhaps Dorsey was referring to Matthew 8:23-27, the narrative where Christ stills the storm, when he penned, "Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light."

Stanza two draws upon the imagery of a journey, one in which the "way grows drear." The traveler cries out, and once again reaches for the hand of Christ. The third stanza begins, "When the darkness appears," reminiscent of Psalm 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ." By the time we reach the third stanza, the terrain has changed from a stormy sea (stanza one), a long road (stanza two), to a river of hope (stanza three). Upon singing, "at the river I stand," the singer reaches at last the final destination, the symbolic Jordan River. Each stanza concludes effectively with the refrain, "Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home," perhaps an image of the Good Shepherd in the Gospel of John.

"Precious Lord" has been recorded by many famous singers including Elvis Presley, Mahalia Jackson, Roy Rogers, and Tennessee Ernie Ford. Martin Luther King Jr. drew inspiration from this, his favorite song. It was sung at the rally in Memphis the night before the civil-rights leader's assassination. President Lyndon B. Johnson requested that "Precious Lord" be sung at his funeral.

Dorsey was the first African American elected to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Gospel Music Association's Living Hall of Fame. Fisk University houses his archives as well as those of noted musicians W.C. Handy and George Gershwin.

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Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

Psalms 139:10

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