**History of Hymns: 'Down to the River to Pray'**

C. Michael Hawn[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Down to the River to Pray”  
African American Spiritual  
*Worship & Song*, 3164

*As I went down to the river to pray,  
studyin’ about that good ole way and  
who shall wear the starry crown*[*robe and crown*]*,  
good Lord, show me the way.  
O sisters, let's go down,  
let's go down, come on down.  
Come on, sisters, let's go down,  
down to the river to pray.*

When the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was released in 2000, “Down to the River to Pray” captured the imagination of the musical world. In a poignant scene, the performance by bluegrass singer Allison Maria Krauss provides the backdrop for a white-robed throng slowly processing past the lead characters down to a tranquil river in rural Mississippi to be baptized. Since the film debuted, numerous choral arrangements have appeared. Many choral groups throughout the United States and beyond (including The King’s Singers) have renditions available on YouTube.

Attributions in hymnals published since the film range from “American folk song” and “Southern folk song” to African American spiritual. Because of the song’s “river” language and its context in the film, “Down to the River” appears in the Baptism or Christian Initiation sections of collections, beginning with the Catholic hymnal *Gather Comprehensive: Second Edition* (Chicago, 2004).

*Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1867), the first collection of folk songs published in the United States and containing the earliest printed version of the song, includes an early version titled “The Good Old Way.” Though published after the Civil War, this collection is a primary source for antebellum African American songs. *Slave Songs* was compiled by Northern abolitionists William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware during the early years of the Civil War in the 1860s, primarily in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. White plantation owners fled the islands as the Union Army advanced near the beginning of the war. They left their property in the hands of the Union forces and the formerly enslaved Africans who had toiled previously in bondage under their masters. Ascribed in the index (No. 104) to “Mr. G[eorge] H. Allan,” Nashville, it is included in section “III. Inland Slave States: Including Tennessee, Arkansas, and the Mississippi River.” Allan most likely transmitted the song orally or transcribed it for the compilers by memory rather than composing it himself.

J.B.T. Marsh, the historian for the Fisk Jubilee Singers, included a second version of the song a decade later in *The Story of the Jubilee Singers with Their Songs* (London, 1876) under the title "Come, Let Us All Go Down" (No. 33).

Comparing the melody in recent versions and *Slave Songs* and the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ publication indicates that the tune now sung has similarities with the earlier versions. There are many distinct differences, however. The earlier text does not have a baptismal theme but draws upon the “valley” trope found in numerous folksongs. For a fuller discussion of this theme, see [“History of Hymns: ‘Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley’”](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-jesus-walked-this-lonesome-valley). While the “valley” was a prevalent location/destination in secular ballads and religious folksongs, the scriptural origin of this trope is likely Psalm 23:4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” (KJV) The valley was a place of refuge and prayer in times of deep distress. Congregational minister and Abraham Lincoln biographer William Eleazar Barton (1861–1930) described the importance of prayer in his *Old Plantation Hymns* (1899):

Several songs tell of going down in the valley to pray. The valley seems to the colored Christian the proper place for all prayer save that of ecstatic fervor; and that fervor voices itself in song rather than in prayer. Prayer, to the negro, was so commonly associated with the thought of trouble that often had no other outlet, that all the drapery of the valley seemed to fit its mental association (Barton, 1899, p. 4).

An undesignated “mourner” is invited to the “valley to pray” in the earlier printed versions. The destination is "the valley" rather than "the river." “Mourner” may be a designation for “sinner” (Odum and Johnson, 1925, p. 73). Barton reflects on “mourners”: “The ‘mourners’ of these songs are not necessarily those in affliction, but those who frequent the ‘mourner’s bench’ and have not yet ‘got through.’ Some of these songs inform these mourners that, ‘When I was a mourner just like you, I prayed and prayed till I got through.’ . . . A period of ‘mourning’ is counted a prerequisite for conversion” (Barton, 1899, p. 4).

A baptismal destination replaces the valley of the earlier versions. Rather than an undesignated “mourner” who is invited to the “valley to pray,” the singer extends the invitation to family members (brothers, sisters, etc.) to “come down to the river to pray.” Only in more recent versions does the list of family members appear—sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, children, and so on—a rhetorical feature often employed in spirituals and folk songs. These siblings and parents are not just blood relatives but also family members by virtue of their common faith.

Spirituals that address baptismal practice are rare. The best known is [“Take Me to the Water”](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-take-me-to-the-water). More common are spirituals that mention the Jordan River, a conduit to “the promised land,” such as ["Deep River"](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-deep-river) and “I am a poor wayfaring stranger (Going over Jordan).”

The practice of singing during river baptisms is captured in this account by an enslaved person:

All I knows about baptizing is they just took them to the river and plunged them in. They sung someping about “Going to the River to be Baptized.” Us had prayer meetings on Wednesday nights sometimes (Callie Elder, cited in Guenther, 2016, p. 90).

Various interpretations of spirituals abound. African American Baptist scholar Miles Mark Fisher was an ardent subscriber to the philosophy that enslaved Africans retained many African cultural traits in colonial America and the United States. Thus, African cult meetings persisted on the North American continent under the guise of white camp meetings during the Second Great Awakening, beginning in the 1790s and early 1800s. For Foster, “Deep River” expressed a desire to return to Africa. “Steal Away” was a signal to attend a secret cult meeting to plan an insurrection. Citing the “valley” form of the text, Fisher offers a brief but undocumented, contextual preface for this "prayer song," suggesting that it refers to “secret experiences of Negroes in Nashville, Tennessee, [who] called upon some Civil War missionary to give help which the African cult did not supply” (Fisher, 1953, 77–78).

Some scholars indicate that the change from “valley” to “river” may suggest that this was a “signal” spiritual. A river provided a source of escape, making it harder for dogs to follow the scent of the fugitive seeking freedom. The “starry crown” may have been an indication to follow the path in the direction of the North Star. “Show me the way” may have been a prayer to follow the path of the underground railroad. However, since no known nineteenth-century versions incorporate the “river” theme, this interpretation seems less likely.

1. C. Michael Hawn. September 1, 2022.  **“History of Hymns: 'Down to the River to Pray.” *Discipleship Ministries. United Methodist Church.* https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-down-to-the-river-to-pray.** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)