

# Got Any Rivers?

Got any rivers  
you think are uncrossable?  
Got any mountains  
you can't tunnel thro?  
God specializes  
in things thought impossible,  
And He can do  
what no other pow'r can do.

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## THE STORY OF AN INSPIRATIONAL SONG

By Glenn Gohr

One of the most familiar old-time gospel choruses is "Got Any Rivers?" Having been sung at camp meetings, revivals, worship services, and in many settings, it is a catchy chorus with a strong message of hope and deliverance. No doubt many have hummed or whistled this chorus when at work or while attending to their daily chores. Although the song was composed more than 65 years ago, it is still sung with exuberance in many circles today.

What is the story behind this beloved chorus?

The author of this well-known song is Oscar Carl Eliason, who lived for many years at Cook, Minnesota. He was born January 6, 1902, at Nössemark, Dalslånd, Sweden, and immigrated to the U.S. in 1908 at the age of 6.<sup>1</sup> In his early ministry, Eliason and his wife Norma were copastors of the Assembly of God at Huron, South Dakota, and were privileged to be involved in its founding. Oscar also pastored the Assembly at Virginia, Minnesota, and brought it into affiliation with the Assemblies of God in 1940.<sup>2</sup> And he was the first pastor of the Assembly of God

at Ft. Dodge, Iowa. In addition, he traveled as a musical evangelist. And when, because of health reasons, he was unable to withstand the stress of itinerant work or of pastoring, he tuned pianos.<sup>3</sup> In the course of his lifetime he composed more than 50 gospel songs. The best known of these are "Got Any Rivers?" and "A Name I Highly Treasure."

Oscar Eliason passed away March 1, 1985, at Cook, Minnesota. His widow, Norma Eliason, is currently living at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with their son Victor, who is the manager of a Christian radio and television ministry called VCY/America. Another son, Vern, lives at Mukwonago, Wisconsin.

During the summer of 1929, after graduating from Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School in Minneapolis, Oscar Eliason went through some severe testing. He became gravely ill with tuberculosis and ended up at Glenlake Hospital in Minneapolis. He was not expected to live. His brother had passed away with the same dreaded disease a couple weeks earlier in the same hospital. Oscar became very depressed and discouraged.

While in his hospital bed, Eliason began reading the *Pentecostal Evangel* and was encouraged by the many reports of healing in the magazine. He felt impressed to call upon a local Presbyterian minister, C. K. Ingersol, to come and pray for him. This minister had great faith for healing. He couldn't explain it, but from the day that minister laid hands on him, he began to get better. The result was that Oscar Eliason was healed of tuberculosis.<sup>4</sup>

After his healing, Eliason, who had already been composing songs while in Bible school, felt even more motivated to compose gospel songs. With this in mind, in the spring of 1931 he was reading the Minneapolis newspaper and read about the slogan which had been used by one of the large construction companies which helped build the Panama Canal.<sup>5</sup> Immediately he told himself, "Only God can say that!" So, he felt led to make a slight change in the familiar slogan, placing God as the focus, and made a song out of it.<sup>6</sup> The words of that original slogan, of course, were not sacred, but with a few minor changes they formed a strong gospel message. The rhyme which had been promoted by the large construction company went like this:

*Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?  
Got any mountains you can't tunnel through?  
We're specializing in things thought impossible.  
We do the things others cannot do.<sup>7</sup>*

Eliason inserted God's name in place of the word "we."<sup>8</sup> Later, the last line of the song was changed. He wrote music, and

**A Panama Canal construction company's  
motto was turned into a  
popular and encouraging gospel chorus.**

the song became a popular gospel chorus.<sup>9</sup> The chorus was introduced to churches in North Minneapolis where he lived, and in a short while it seemingly was being sung all over the English-speaking world. At that time it had no verses. Those came later.

The original chorus was:

*Got any rivers you think are uncrossable,  
Got any mountains you can't tunnel through?  
God specializes in things thought impossible,  
He does the things others cannot do.<sup>10</sup>*

Eliason first sang the chorus at a home in North Minneapolis in the summer of 1931. Two women called The Harmony Twins traveled together and sang the song in several places before it was put into print as a chorus. The song soon made its way across the nation and became very popular. A few variations on the words have cropped up over the years, but currently the chorus is copyrighted by Singspiration Music and administered by the Benson Music Group.

After the chorus became popular, a reader in Washington wrote to the Pentecostal Evangel and raised a question about the song. "I never can understand why intelligent and well-educated people will sing such lines as: 'Got any rivers ...' Why not redeem this good chorus from grammatical disgrace by eliminating 'got' and submitting proper verb forms?" The Evangel editor's answer was that this was a take off from the Panama Canal builders' slogan or song which had lifted the spirits of the workers through heat, toil, and problems of disease during that time of construction.<sup>11</sup>

It appears that good grammar is not the issue—but whether or not a song is biblically sound and whether it ministers to believers. Indeed this chorus does both.

The next part of the story concerns a young Air Force cadet during World War II who was stationed for a while at Stockton, California. Dick Knautz had been a student at Bob Jones University, and was called into service for his country, entering the Army Air Corps and taking pilot training. People who knew young Knautz recognized him as an outstanding Christian and appreciated his good singing voice, which he would often use while he worked.

One Sunday afternoon, while flying his plane over the airfield at Stockton, he was waiting for his signal to land. Happy in the Lord, he began singing the chorus, "Got Any Rivers?" and unknown to him, his mike switch was on! Thus he broadcast the words of this well-known chorus to all the people in the control tower, plus loudspeakers brought

**A World War II air corps pilot flying over Stockton, California, unwittingly sang this song to 5,000 cadets on the ground when his mike switch stuck to the on position. When he landed, five airman sought him out and prayed the sinner's prayer.**

the message to some 5,000 cadets in the airfield below.<sup>12</sup>

Dick's receiver crackled as the control tower cut in: "Listen, Knautz, if you want to start a revival, you come down to earth." God was in this incident, for when Dick landed the plane, five young men sought him out and wanted to accept Christ as their Savior. He was able to lead each of them to salvation through the testimony of that song.<sup>13</sup>

You may be wondering why this incident happened? The most likely answer is that on that particular Sunday afternoon, Dick's mother up in Coos Bay, Oregon, was praying for her son that God would definitely use him in some way. And God answered that mother's prayer.

Later Dick Knautz was killed while serving his country. And the story of this testimony and the message of the chorus were shared by a friend of his named Cliff at a

Gideon convention in nearby Modesto, California, in June 1944. The story was later published in The Gideon magazine and in the Pentecostal Evangel.<sup>14</sup>

The song was used for many years by Youth for Christ, but until 1948 it had no verses. After Dick Knautz's testimony was published, Oscar Eliason began to receive requests for copies of the chorus, and some asked for "the whole song." They supposed that it had verses.

Oscar told his wife, "What can I do? I don't have any verses." She responded, "Well, there's nothing to keep you from writing verses." So he proceeded to write some verses which were dedicated to Dick Knautz's mother. He chose the themes of Joshua, Moses, etc. Mrs. Eliason says, "The words and theme fit so beautifully with the chorus. I think this was a good choice for the song."<sup>15</sup> Although the verses never became as popular as the chorus, you'll probably agree with Mrs. Eliason:

*"Be of good courage," God spake unto Joshua,  
When o'er the river God pointed the way;  
Jordan uncrossable! things seemed impossible;  
Waters divide as they march and obey!*

*Battles to win! they would meet with their obstacles,  
Jericho's walls, too, must fall to the ground.  
God never failed; He stood back of His promises;  
Walls had to crumble as they marched around.*

*God is the same, and His Word is dependable,  
He'll make a way through the waters for you;  
Life's situations by Him are amendable,  
Mountains and hills He will part for you too."<sup>16</sup>*

In the spring of 1955, Oscar Eliason was asked to tell the story and his wife was asked to sing the song at Phil Kerr's Monday Musicales in the Civic Auditorium at Pasadena, California. After this the Eliasons were invited to present the song in churches of many denominations in various parts of the country.

The Eliasons were friends of Haldor Lillenas, founder of Lillenas Publishing, who lived at Pasadena, California. Their son, Victor Eliason, remembers one time that he played the song, "Wonderful Grace of Jesus" with Haldor Lillenas in his home. Lillenas really liked the song, "A Name I Highly Treasure," which Oscar wrote. He purchased the song for \$400, and it is currently in the Nazarene hymnal.<sup>17</sup> Lillenas also published a number of other songs which Eliason had written. One arrangement of "Got Any Rivers?" has appeared in some of the songbooks published by the Lillenas Publishing Company.

Three well-known Swedish singers were fond of Oscar Eliason's music. Einar Ekberg, Einar Waermo, and Karl Erik Olevabring each sang "Got Any Rivers?" "A Name I Highly Treasure," and others of Eliason's compositions. Einar Ekberg had a worldwide ministry and sang before kings and other dignitaries. He was in the Eliason home on a number of occasions and used to say that "Got Any Rivers?" was his favorite song.<sup>18</sup>

Once Oscar and his wife told the story of "Got Any Rivers?" and sang it in a large church in Des Moines, Iowa. An evangelist there gave a testimony of how God had used the chorus in his life. He said that one winter he was sched-

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Oscar Eliason, about 1931, when he wrote "Got Any Rivers?"

"Got Any Rivers" became a special encouragement to missionaries Rod and Sherry Boyd and their children



Einar Ekberg sang Oscar Eliason's composition's.

Glenn Gohr is a staff member of the A/G Archives.



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Give Me An Open Heaven  
God's Grace Has Satisfied My Soul  
God's Truth Marches On  
Good-Bye  
Greater Love Was Never Shown  
His Tender Touch  
Home Eternal  
I Fancied I Was In Heaven  
I Have a Home Where Angels Sing  
I Lean On His Mercy  
I Think of Home  
Jesus, the Fairest of All  
Jesus Will Understand  
Just Believe

Make My Heart Into a Heaven  
My Longing Eyes  
Shall Soon Behold My King  
My Paradise  
My Soul's Deep Need  
A Name I Highly Treasure  
No Book Can Satisfy Me So  
No Friend So True  
No Name Has Meant So Much to Me  
No Sweeter Message  
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On Yonder Hill  
Soon Jesus Will Come  
Traveling To Glory  
Waters of Peace  
When Our King Shall Reign  
Why Should He Stand as a Stranger?  
Wonderful Place of Prayer  
Would You Be Ready to Go?  
A World Beyond

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Oscar and Norma Eliason, 50th Wedding Anniversary.

Haldor Lillenas, a friend of the Eliason couple

