

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## The Passion of Joseph Scriven

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Joseph Scriven biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Discover the tragic and fascinating story of Scriven, who wrote *What a Friend We have in Jesus*, which remains one of the most popular Christian hymns.

### Aims

Studying the life of Joseph Scriven provides students with a starting place to research the larger topics of religious conflict, religious charity, evangelicals, and immigration in the nineteenth century.

### Background

Joseph Scriven lived a painful and difficult life. Throughout the tragedies and sacrifices, he maintained strong spirituality. Numerous deaths among his loved ones, self-imposed poverty, and frequent abuses were just a few of his torments. His mission in life remained that of an evangelical street preacher, desperately trying to save the souls of those around him. While he never completed God's work, as he saw it, he did create what became one of the most famous Christian hymns in the world.

The amazing series of events that resulted in a musical accompaniment for his script and propelled it to world-wide fame left Scriven behind. Anonymously published and republished, selling 50 million copies by 1894, the hymn *What a Friend We have in Jesus* existed detached from its creator. Scriven, either unimpressed by or unaware of his hymn's fame, died impoverished, thousands of kilometres from his native Ireland in 1886.

The story of Joseph Scriven is an inspirational story of faith and perseverance. Regardless of one's own faith, Scriven is an individual to be marvelled at. His unintentional and virtually anonymous world-wide impact stands in stark contrast to his immense personal suffering and frustration.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

### **Procedures:**

1. Before viewing the episode, write this list of terms and concepts on the board. Have the students come up with their own definitions. Use a dictionary or encyclopedia to verify the definitions.

Hymn | Anglican | Catholic | Evangelical | Liberal Arts  
Peasantry/Peasants | Theology | Congregation | Constitution  
(Physical)

Plymouth Pilgrims | Baptism | Street Preaching

2. As a class, create two timelines, one for Scriven and one for his most famous hymn. Brainstorm all the major events of Scriven's life as well as those within the 'life' of *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. Compare and contrast his life and his hymn's life in a class discussion. To highlight the points of divergence, make sure that the dates and scale are common.

3. Create a wall map or annotate a map of Ontario and the East-Central United States. Mark the places Scriven lived and worked in Ontario, and the path of his Hymn. Include Rice Lake, Port Hope, Peterborough, Millbrook, Toronto, NY City, Erie (Pennsylvania). This activity is quick and helps further visualize the timeline activity.

4. Have students research Evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century. Why did it exist? Against what was it a reaction? Were their laws against 'dissenting' religions? Students should produce a short report in which several questions/aspects are discussed in successive paragraphs.

5. Present the class with census data on immigration to Canada in the early 19th century. Select the countries of origin for the largest and smallest number of immigrants. In pairs, have students select one of the groups and research its emigration to Canada. Create an organiser that includes: the number of emigrants to Canada (perhaps graphed for 1900-1950), 'push' factors (ex: religious intolerance), 'pull' factors (ex: cheap land), religious/ethnic background and its ability to mesh with British-Canadian or French-Canadian society at the time, and modern levels of emigration to Canada from that country. As an extension, students could create a pie chart of their own ethnic background, perhaps going back three generations.

6. Have students research nineteenth century religious conflict in Ireland, particularly between Protestants and Catholics. In small groups, instruct

students to create an organiser that compares the two groups. Include topics of comparison such as Theology, Political role/power, Economic role/power, and Social role/power. Each student could research one topic. Extensions to this activity could include: Discussing with a partner how this split in power would affect people not belonging to either, or what the costs would be of belonging to either group (lack of freedom and pressure to conform).

7. Divide students into four groups of four individuals. Each group assumes the role of one of the following: The Scriven family's Anglican Minister in Ireland, the poor people of Port Hope, Scriven's parents, and his last fiancé. Each group brainstorms the perspective their figure had on Scriven. Have students write a eulogy for Scriven from their figure's perspective. Each individual takes their eulogy to a heterogenous group made up of one person from each of the other groups to present and compare perspectives.

8. Have students research the poor laws/welfare laws of Canada that existed in the nineteenth century as well as those that exist today. What was the role of religious charity in the 19th century? Who provides such services today? In groups of four, have two students work on each of these two questions. Combine their research into a single, comparative report that examines who received/receives help, and what they received/receive.

## **Resources**

[Joseph Scriven Worksheet](#)

Mahon, A, Wylie. *Canadian hymns and hymn writers*. St. John, New

Brunswick. 1908.

Russell, Foster M. *What a friend we have in Jesus*. Belleville, Ontario: Mika Publishing, 1981.

[Joseph Medlicott Scriven](#) (*Contains the words to the hymn and a brief biography*)

[Evangelism and Evangelicals - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Evangelical and Fundamentalist Movements - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)