

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

ALICE WINE

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This spirited song, a Movement favorite, is, like many others, a reworking of an old hymn, “Keep Your Hand on the Plow,” itself based on a verse from the Gospel of Luke: “No man having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God” (9:62). A new hymn with the present title, composed before World War I but of unknown authorship, is based instead on two verses from Philippians (3:17, 3:14) that urge people to “keep your eyes on those who live as we do,” and that speak about pressing toward “the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” The lyrics were again changed during the Civil Rights Movement, in 1956, by activist Alice Wine. It is her version we present here. How does this song connect the biblical beginning with Paul and Silas to the contemporary experiences of the Freedom Riders? What, according to this song, is the prize, and where will it be found—here in America or on the other side of Jordan (in the next life)? To what extent does the song stick to its Biblical origins?

Listen to the African American a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock sing “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_tcZAqQUAg.

Paul and Silas bound in jail,
Had no money for to go to their bail.

(Chorus)

Keep your eyes on the prize,
Hold on, hold on.
Keep your eyes on the prize,
Hold on, Hold on.

Paul and Silas begin to shout,
The jail door opened and they walked out,

(Chorus)

Freedom’s name is mighty sweet,
Soon one day we’re gonna meet.

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(Chorus)

Got my hand on the Gospel plow,
I wouldn't take nothin' for my journey now.

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(Chorus)

The only chain that a man can stand,
Is the chain of hand in hand.

(Chorus)

The only thing that we did wrong,
Stayed in the wilderness a day too long.

(Chorus)

But the one thing we did right,
Was the day we started to fight.

(Chorus)

We're gonna board that big Greyhound,
Carrin' love from town to town.

(Chorus)

We're gonna ride for civil rights,
We're gonna ride for both black and white.

(Chorus)

We've met jail and violence too,
But God's love has seen us through.

(Chorus)

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Haven't been to heaven but I've been told,
Streets up there are paved with gold.

(Chorus)

Albenny Georgia lives in race,
We're goin' to fight it from place to place.

(Chorus)

I know what I think is right,
Freedom in the souls of black and white.

(Chorus)

Singing and shouting is very well,
Get off your seat and go to jail.

(Chorus)

Jordan River is deep and wide,
We'll find freedom on the other side.