

Sunday, June 30, 2024 pm

SERMONS FROM SONGS

Nearer My God To Thee

#124, Hymns for Worship

Tonight, we want to examine another song we sing from time to time. As we always note, our songs are a form of teaching, so a proper understanding of the message of a song is important. That is why I engage in this quarterly exercise.

Our song tonight is Nearer My God To Thee. The lyrics of this song are attributed to Sarah (Flower) Adams (1805-1848). Sarah lived in England and was a stage actor early in her life. She wrote many songs, but this one is her most popular. It was commissioned by a preacher, William Johnson Fox who was looking for a song about Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27-28). Over the course of a week (1841) she put together the words to this hymn and published it that year. Originally, it was put to a different tune.

The tune we use is the most popular and was composed around 1844 by Lowell Mason who composed the tunes to more than 1600 songs (including, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", "Joy to the World", "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood", "Blest Be the Tie That Binds", and "My Faith Looks Up to Thee")

Tonight, I want to examine the words to this song including a 4th verse that is not in our hymnal (actually there are as many as 6 verses to this hymn). It is a song to remind us of our pursuit of nearness to God, even in times of difficulty and uncertainty. It was in this vein that it was written.

I. Vs. 1 – Even in times of trouble

- a. **Nearer My God to Thee** – repeated throughout this song. This is its theme and ought to be our goal as Christians. We do what we can to draw closer to God. For it is in that closeness that we have hope beyond this life, AND as we live here. IT is something we are commanded to do.
 - i. James 4:8 – draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.
 - ii. Hebrews 10:21-23, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...
 - iii. Psalm 145:18, *The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth.*
- b. **E'en tho' it be a cross that raiseth me**–
 - i. The idea of a cross indicates a time of sacrifice and sufferings. Recall the words of Jesus, Matthew 16:24, *Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."* He was teaching that the life of a disciple (Christian) would involve troubles and difficulties. And that fact is emphasized throughout scripture. 2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Peter 2:21-23. Jesus even warned it would happen – cf. Matthew 10:16-39. Jesus was speaking first to His apostles, but by extension His followers through them. He spoke of various sufferings, including rejection by family. Vs. 38, Jesus said, *And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.*
 - ii. Some are under the delusion that the life of a Christian is free from troubles.
 1. But that is far from truth and something quickly discovered as one begins his life with Jesus.
 2. Furthermore, when we discuss the life of a Christian, we often make reference to the joyful life of the saved. And certainly, there is great joy in our faith and fellowship with one another.

3. But it is an illusion to say that the life of a Christian is always joyful and free of troubles. Paul declared in Philippians 1:29, *For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.*
4. Often, we deal with sorrows, troubles and burdens that seem impossible to bear. And while God has given us tools to deal with these times, they are still sorrowful. Think of Jesus in that garden and then on the cross. Isaiah 53:3 described Him as, *“a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”*
5. BUT, as we endure our tribulations, they can draw us NEARER to GOD and make the hope of heaven sweeter when this life is over. Cf. Romans 5:3-5.
 - iii. Am I willing to bear my cross for Him?
- c. ***Still all my song shall be, nearer my God to Thee*** – no matter what I will not give up. Matthew 10:22, in the text previously referenced, Jesus noted that he who endures to the end will be saved. He will repeat this on other occasions (cf. Matthew 24:13). Galatians 6:9 calls for us to not give up. Also Luke 9:62.
- d. Instead of letting our cross crush us, let us determine to let it draw us closer to Him.

II. **Vs. 2 – In times of uncertainty**

- a. Genesis 28:10-22. Jacob has deceitfully stolen the blessing of his older brother Esau (earlier he had taken his birthright for a bowl of stew). When Esau discovers it, he is angry and vows that when his father has died, he will kill Jacob. As a result, Rebekah warns Isaac and Jacob is sent away (with very little). He leaves Bathsheba toward Haran (where he will spend the next 20 years). This is a pivotal passage and time in Jacob’s life. He sees God who gives him assurance. Jacob also makes a vow to God that if he is returned safely, he will serve YHWH. He also sets up a stone and calls the place Bethel (“house of God” – Elohim). This is the basis of vs. 2-3 of this hymn.
- b. ***Tho’ like the wanderer, the sun goes down*** – we are described as sojourners and pilgrims on this earth – 1 Peter 2:11, Philippians 3:20 – our citizenship is in heaven. We NEED to be living our lives with this understanding. Are we so comfortable here that we have no desire to leave? Consider Paul’s attitude in Philippians 1:21-23, cf. Acts 21:13 – Paul was willing not only to be bound, but to die for the Lord.
- c. ***Darkness be over me, my rest a stone*** – descriptive of a life of uncertainty and perhaps the feeling of being alone. Also living a life that is uncomfortable – think of a stone as a pillow. When you are in a foreign place, things can be uneasy. Often in life we are dealing with uncertainty, especially considering the darkness that is so prevalent around us.
- d. ***Yet in my dreams I’d be nearer my God to Thee...*** - In spite of this, may I never lose faith.
 - i. In Christ, you are never alone. Jesus understood this as He faced death – Matthew 28:20, Hebrews 13:5, be content, *“For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”* cf. 2 Timothy 4:16-17.
 - ii. In Christ you find the light you need – John 1:4-5, 3:19-21. Psalm 9:9-10, *The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, A refuge in times of trouble. And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; For You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You.*
 - iii. “When uncertainty keeps you up at night, then close your eyes and think of something that is certain. – God’s Love.” (Source unknown)¹

III. **Vs. 3 – Our hope of heaven.**

¹ <https://biblereasons.com/uncertainty/> 6/28/24

- a. I have chosen to include this verse in this lesson because it is tied to the story of Jacob in vs. 2.
- b. ***There let the way appear, steps up to heaven – let us turn to God’s word as the source of our hope.*** Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us that God has today spoken to us through His Son (and His apostles and inspired NT writers). Through God’s word we find direction for our lives – 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Psalm 119:105 says, “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*”
- c. ***All that Thou sendest me, in mercy giv’n*** – let us appreciate God’s mercy.
 - i. Certainly, YHWH extended mercy to Jacob. He was chosen, but he had not acted honorably in the circumstances that led up to this.
 - ii. Let us be reminded of His mercy and grace – Ephesians 2:4-5. Hebrews 4:16, *Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*
- d. ***Angels to beckon me, Nearer My God to Thee*** – think of the promises of God.
 - i. Angels were present as Jacob dreamed his dream. They delivered to him a message of hope.
 - ii. Angels are messengers of God (Hebrews 1:14). While we will not receive messages from angels in the same manner as Jacob on that occasion, we do have God’s word delivered, encouraging us to draw closer to Him. Cf. Matthew 11:28-30.
 - iii. We can take solace in knowing that God is there and that He cares about us. He desires that we cast our cares upon Him – 1 Peter 5:6-7.

IV. Vs. 4 – As we face death

- a. If in this life, our pursuit is heaven, and we are faithful to the end, our pursuit of nearness to God will ultimately be realized. 2 Timothy 4:6-8 – Paul declared confidently that he is ready to depart this life, and we should be to.
- b. ***Or if on joyful wing, cleaving the sky; Sun, moon and star forgot, upward I fly*** – this is describing us as we face death. Leaving this world.
 - i. Notice that he begins with “Or” – This is the other circumstance – leaving this life.
 - ii. Hebrews 9:27 reminds us that it is appointed for us to die. We know this!
 - iii. And Solomon reminds us that after we die, the spirit returns to God for judgment (Ecclesiastes 12:7).
 - iv. But the Christian faces this with hope. That is why Paul would declare in 2 Timothy 1:12 what he anticipated with confidence. Again, recall Philippians 1:21, “*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*” 2 Corinthians 5:8, *We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.*
- c. ***Still all my song shall be, nearer my God to Thee... -***
 - i. Psalm 23:6 – I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.
 - ii. The irony and beauty of this song is that while we sing it now with a desire for a closer relationship with God and our Lord, it is when this life is over, if we have been faithful, that that desire will be ultimately realized. And we will have eternity to think about it.
 - iii. As Paul declared in 1 Thessalonians 4:17-18, *And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

This is a song that is often sung at funerals for Christians who have passed on. There are instances of its usage in entertainment during times when death was imminent. In preparing this, one source² noted that as President McKinley, our 25th president who served from 1897-1901 was dying from an assassin’s bullet, he

² *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, #600, Melody Publications, Knoxville, TN, ©2018.

requested prayers and said, “We are all going, we are all going. God’s will be done, not ours.” As he was dying this song was either sung by him, or his wife sitting by him.

Life is filled with difficulties and uncertainty, especially as the world around us becomes increasingly darker spiritually. As we live in this world, we face a choice: Let the world draw us away from God or closer to Him. Which one will you choose? Think about it!