

“Be Still, My Soul”

Intro: Singing is one of the great blessings of our worship together and the Scriptures stress the importance of singing with “understanding”. Paul in writing to the Corinthians concerning their use of spiritual gifts stressed the importance of the edification that comes when we understand what we say in worship.

What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also. (1 Corinthians 14:15)

I believe it is helpful at times to examine some of our songs and to show the meaning behind their expressions and to be reminded of the great truths that they convey. I have been amazed through the years at so many wonderful thoughts that I missed in singing because I did not properly use my “mind” in singing. So occasionally I may ask you to study a song with me and then sing it together.

Let’s open our songbook to #689—“Be Still My Soul”.

The History of the Song

Brother Wayne Walker, who has done extensive work in the area of the history of songs has written about this one:

The text was written by Katharina Amalia Dorothea von Schlegel, who was born on Oct. 22, 1697, in Germany. Little is known about her other than that she was a Lutheran and an outstanding woman leader in the Pietistic movement which arose in the Lutheran church during the later half of the 16th century.

Approximately 100 years after the hymn was written, an English translation of her German work was made by Jane Laurie Borthwick (1813-1897) who along with her sister Sarah Findlater, published four volumes of such translations in "Hymns from the Land of Luther" beginning in 1844.

In 1932 the editors of a Presbyterian hymnal arranged the poem to a tune taken from the main theme of the tone poem "Finlandia" which depicts the natural beauty of Finland and was composed by Jean Sibelius (1865-1857). The greatest of Finnish composers, he published it in 1899.

A Biblical basis for the song

Our songbook editor thought the appropriate basis for this song was Ps. 46:10.

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. (Psalm 46:10)

Unfortunately this is not contextually the best translation of this verse from the Hebrew text. The NASV better translates:

“Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10)

Moreover, this imperative, “be still” or “cease striving” is not directed to the faithful but to the enemies of God and His people who are warring against them; and is an admonition for them to recognize His ultimate victory and cease their opposition to Him..

Perhaps a better passage to serve as a basis for this song might be the words of the Lord on the Sea of Galilee:

And being aroused, He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Hush, be still.” And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. (Mark 4:39)

And it appears that the original poet had in mind the episode of Jesus’ calming the storms on the Sea of Galilee. Just as Jesus calmed the seas by the words “be still”, so He can calm our souls, saying “be still” to them in the storms of life because of His power over all that threatens us. The verse even alludes to this event in the wording of the song:

“Be still: the waves and winds still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below” (verse 2).

Thus, the message of this song centers on the truths the Bible reveals about God in times of trouble and how we should respond to those truths.

And, I have the distinct sense that this poem was written to encourage those who had lost their loved ones and were going through the storm of sorrow and suffering. There is another verse to the poem not included in this edition:

"Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart, and all is darkened in the vale of tears, then thou shalt better know His love, His heart, who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears. Be still, my soul: Thy Jesus can repay from His own fullness all He takes away."

The Messages in the Song

Truths about God

The song in its three verses presents many wonderful truths about God that enable us to “be still in our souls” in times of trouble.

Important truths in verse one!

God is on our side. The Hebrew writer appropriated the words of Moses to Israel to comfort God’s new covenant people:
for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.
(Hebrews 13:5)

He will remain faithful to us in every change of life.
Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it. (1
Thessalonians 5:24)

He in His providence has the power to “order” the events of this world to fulfill His purpose and to “provide” what we need in times of trouble.

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide

the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

God as our best and heavenly friend will lead life's events to a joyful end.

and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

Important truths in verse two!

God guides the future as He has the past.

Though all is now mysterious, all will be bright at last.

The waves and winds still know the voice of Jesus who ruled them while here on earth. Thus, He can rule them from heaven.

Important truths in verse three.

The hour hastens when we will be forever with the Lord.

When that day comes, disappointment, sorrow and grief will be gone. Sorrow will be forgotten and love's fullest joy will be restored to us.

When change and tears are past, we will be all safe and blessed; we shall meet at last.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

Exhortations to the suffering when the storms of life arise

Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain

Leave to God to order and provide

Don't let anything shake your hope and confidence

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. (Hebrews 10:35-36)

Let His voice cause your soul to "be still"

Conclusion: Now that we have considered the beautiful thoughts of this song, let's take a few moments to sing it together, hopefully with increased understanding and a sense of its beauty and power.

(Song)

**Each of us in life will go through the storms. Will we have God in our lives?
Will Jesus be our best friend? That depends upon what we are doing with our
lives now!**