

“Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah”

Intro: Sometimes our songs may be confusing to people who are not familiar with the Bible story. What do we mean when we sing, “On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand” or “I don’t have to cross Jordan alone”? Why Jordan?

And what do we mean when we sing, “In the desert of sorrow and sin”? Why are we said to be a “in the desert”?

Many of the songs we sing are based on imagery from the OT; and one of the most common images used in our hymns is the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the land of Canaan. Just as the Israelites were delivered from bondage to enter the Promised Land, so we too are delivered from spiritual bondage to enter a spiritual promised land. Thus, the imagery of Israel’s journey to the Promised Land often serves as a metaphor for our spiritual life and journey to heaven. Many of our songs use this theme, like the one’s I mentioned a moment ago.

Let consider tonight one of our older and often sung spiritual songs: “Guide Me, Oh Thou, Great Jehovah” (#844)

History of this Spiritual Song

The text was written in Welsh by William Williams (1717-1791). He was the son of a Welsh farmer, who after studying for the medical profession decided to dedicate his life to the ministry, preaching first with the established Anglican Church and then with the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. Williams was said to have traveled over 100,000 miles, mostly on horseback and foot, to preach to others. However, the chief source of his influence was his hymns. He authored between eight or nine hundred hymns. This one, originally in five stanzas, first appeared in the 1745 hymnbook "Halleluiah" which he published in Bristol, England. It was later set to music by Thomas Hastings (1784-1872) in 1830 and first appeared in his 1832 "Spiritual Songs for Social Worship". As you can see at the bottom of the page, the tune of this arrangement is a Welsh tune called “cwm (pronounced “kum”) Rhondda, an expression meaning the Valley of Rhondda, the melody apparently being named from the location of its composition by John Hughes. So appealing is the history and melody that the English often break out in singing this song in rugby matches, much the same way that Americans might singing “Amazing Grace”.

The Message of this Spiritual Song

Often many of our songs are also prayers to God. And this song is just that --- a series of petitions to God to help us in our spiritual journey to the Promised Land. We are pilgrims who need God’s help

The song begins with an acknowledgement that this earth is not our home. We are in fact “pilgrims” passing through. In that sense we are like the people of faith discussed in Hebrews 11:

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13)

This life, like that of the ancient Israelites, is like a journey through a desert unable to supply what we need. I like very much that expression. So often people think that everything we need to live is here in this life; but this song reminds us that what we need most is not here; it must be supplied by God!

We must depend upon God to provide for our spiritual lives.

We need spiritual guidance

“Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah uses of course the pronoun forms of Middle English (thee, thou, thy) because it was first translated in the 1700’s among people under the influence of the KJV. It refers to God by the derived name of God created from the transliterated Hebrew letters of God’s name “YHVH” or “Jehovah” (i.e. the God who revealed himself to Moses as “I am who I am”).

The first idea is such an important one. We cannot make our way through this “desert” without the guidance of God!

Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah

Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey thru

Just as God guided Israel to the Promised Land in this way, so we are depending upon the Lord to guide our way. And we can be thankful for the promise of John 16:13 which assures us that we have through the apostles of Jesus everything we need to guide us in our journey.

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. (John 16:13)

We need spiritual nourishment

The desert of Sinai lacked the provisions to sustain the lives of the Israelites; but God lovingly provided everything the Israelites needed for life.

And Thou didst give Thy good Spirit to instruct them, Thy manna Thou didst not withhold from their mouth, and Thou didst give them water for their thirst. (Nehemiah 9:20)

In a similar way we need the spiritual food and drink.

Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more

Open now the crystal fountain whence the healing stream doth flow.

It is interesting that the Jews wanted Jesus to duplicate Moses' miracle as proof that he was from God.

They said therefore to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?"

Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.' (John 6:30-31)

Jesus responded by saying that He was the bread of heaven! He was the water of life! If we are to live, we must feed upon Him!

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." (John 6:35)

We need spiritual protection in life

God had demonstrated to Israel that He was a "great deliverer". By His powerful hand He had brought them out of Egypt and with His powerful hand He would protect them from their enemies.

In a similar way we have been "delivered" from sin, but there are many dangers lurking. We need the Lord's strength and protection against these dangers.

I am weak but thou art mighty, hold with thy powerful hand

Be thou still my strength and shield

I wonder if we pray enough for spiritual protection for ourselves and others. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for spiritual protection:

"And lead us no into temptation, but deliver us from evil"

Paul prayed for the protection of his fellow-disciples:

But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. (2 Thessalonians 3:3)

Paul had his own assurance; they were the final words from his pen on earth.

The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:18)

We need spiritual support in death

It is interesting that Israel experienced two events that involved the parting of waters: 1) one at the beginning of their journey (Red Sea); 2) one at the end of their journey (Jordan River).

Thus, they were reminded of the need for God's deliverance to begin and end the journey. So it is with us.

One day we will "cross Jordan"; but to do so we will need the spiritual support of the Lord. The song reminds us of that need:

When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside

Bear thru the swelling current, land me safe on
Canaan's side!

We will give songs of praise to God forever!

God's great deliverances have always produced songs of praise. When Israel was delivered by God from Egypt, God gave them a song to sing. It is the Song of Moses, recorded in Exodus 15:1-2

Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and said, "I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted; The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father's God, and I will extol Him. (Exodus 15:1-2)
Thus, the song reminds us that our deliverance will be accompanied by songs of praise.

Songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee
When we were delivered from sin, God will give us a song. It will be the song of the Lamb, which celebrates the great sacrifice.

Revelation mentions two songs that are sung in heaven:

*And they *sang the song of Moses the bond-servant of God and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and marvelous are Thy works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Thy ways, Thou King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? For Thou alone art holy; for all the nations will come and worship before Thee, for Thy righteous acts have been revealed." (Revelation 15:3-4)*

Conclusion: What a great and encouraging message this song contains. Based on the real experiences of the children of Israel, it reminds us that we have a God who can make good all His promises to us!

Let's sing the song together!