

How Firm a Foundation
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July 22, 2012

Psalm 23

- ¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Isaiah 43:1-7

- ¹ But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
³ For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
⁴ Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
⁶ I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

Last week, I gave you the backstory of the composer as well as the author of our hymn. This week, I've got neither a backstory on the author nor on the composer. The hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*, first appeared in a 1787 book of hymns, entitled *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*,¹ and edited by John Rippon, a Baptist minister in London. The authorship was credited in the original book simply to “K.” In subsequent editions, the author credit evolved from “K” to “Kn” to “Keen” to “Kirkham.” “Robert Keene (or Keen), a close friend of Rippon’s, was the song leader at the Carter Lane Church [where Rippon served] from 1776-1793...Six tunes bear the attribution ‘R. Keene’ or ‘Keene,’ and logic would dictate that if Keene had written the text, this would have also been clearly indicated.”² So, despite our desire for tidiness, the true authorship remains a mystery, even to the best hymnologists. And yes, there are hymnologists, people who study hymns.

As for the composer of our tune, which we refer to as FOUNDATION, he or she is also unknown. “The anonymous folk tune FOUNDATION is an American contribution to the hymn that first appears with the text in Joseph Fund’s 1832 *Genuine Church Music* under the tune name PROTECTION.”³ Not uncommonly, this hymn, like others, had been sung to other tunes before this one. Most notably, this song was associated with ADESTE FIDELIS, which you may know is the tune we use with the hymn *O Come All Ye Faithful*. It appears to be the tune Rippon used for the hymn in his first publication.

John Rippon's primary calling was not hymnody, however. From Cathcart's Baptist Encyclopedia, published in 1881, “John Rippon...was born at Tiverton, in Devonshire, England, in 1751. When about sixteen years of age he was called by divine grace to follow Jesus. When a little over seventeen he entered Briston Baptist College. When about twenty-one he became the successor of the great Dr. Gill, in London...He was the pastor of the community...from 1773 to 1836, a period of sixty-three years.”⁴ Imagine. Sixty-three years as a pastor. Surely in that time, he honed what it was that anchored his own faith. He already had a good grasp after just fourteen years, which is how long it was from the start of his ministry before he compiled the hymnbook with today's hymn. A subtitle under the title reads

¹ <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=4315>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.reformedreader.org/rippon.htm>

*Exceeding great and precious promises.*⁵ There were originally seven stanzas and the final five, four of which we sing, speak of God's promises through Christ's voice.

I was going to share with you two anecdotes of others in history who relied and trusted in these promises through this song. But not today. Ask me later and I will be happy to share them. Today, though, I don't want to dwell in the past. These promises matter just as much today, maybe even more. In light of what happened in Aurora, Colorado, these promises matter today. The full impact of what happened didn't occur to me right away. Then I saw The Dark Knight Rises last night. I didn't do this without much thought about what going to a movie, especially that one, said. You see, I fully believe in the healing power of film. You may think I speak in hyperbole. I do not say this glibly - film has tremendous power to give respite, to give escape, and, most importantly, like any art form, to give hope.

In a day of financial collapse and uncertain futures and myriad health problems whose bills leave families homeless in return for second chances at life, we need hope. In the face of deep and destructive mental illness, in painful, broken relationships which may have once seemed solid, after days and months of abuse of bodies and minds, we need hope. I admire the newscasters who have very consciously named the suspect as few times as possible. It strips some power from that individual. Not letting that act take away a means of hope, like seeing a simple movie, is my conscious decision not to let him take away my hope. I'm no fool - my husband and I went in with plans of how we would try to keep my mother and son safe were anything to happen. But we didn't give in and we didn't give up. We went and saw a movie about hope in the face of a fictionalized, but maybe not by too far, a fictionalized hellish existence on earth.

A movie is just a movie, though, no matter how much it makes your spirit soar, no matter how much it frees your imagination, no matter how much it inspires us to live a little differently. And that feeling we get from a movie is like the presence of a butterfly on your fingertip - so beautiful and captivating while it lasts but impermanent.

"The soul that on Jesus leaned for repose, / I will not, I will not desert to its foes; / That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, / I'll never, no never, no never forsake." This is the very last stanza of the hymn; in these words from Christ, the speaker, there is a permanence beyond our imagining, and certainly beyond our own doing. In the flurry of media coverage I lost track of the original article but a survivor of Thursday night's sorrowful event was quoted as saying something to the effect of, "I'm a man of faith but it's times like this which tries it." Every week before the prayers of the people, I try to remind us that we are a community of faith beyond just ourselves. I don't always mention that we are a

⁵ Brown, Robert K. and Mark R. Norton, *The One Year Book of Hymns* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995) February 9.

community beyond these walls but we are. Oh, we are. And as the body of Christ, we join our efforts in Christ's name. Though all hell is endeavoring to shake the souls of those who survived and those who lost loved ones, and even the man with his own demons who took these terrible actions, we do not forsake our faith. We hold onto ours that we might share it with men like the man whose faith is tried. Like those who mourn the life of a six-year-old and the life of a man celebrating his birthday and the hoped-for life for a son who was pursuing a PhD in neuroscience.

These are the promises of our faith, the promises of the hymn, the promises of the Twenty-third Psalm and the forty-third chapter of Isaiah; hear this word from God through the hymn:

Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen and help thee, and cause thee to stand
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

Even down to old age all My people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,
Like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne.

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.⁶

The specific words of God through Isaiah say, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." I know in my heart there are people in Colorado doubting these words from God, just as there are people throughout the world, who have walked through waters and fire and violence, who walk through depression and disillusionment and grief so heavy it seems tangible. And so, today, we sing for them while they cannot and we will continue to sing until they find their voices and their faith again and

⁶ <http://nethymnal.org/htm/h/f/hfirmafo.htm>

we will keep singing for those who have yet to walk through waters and fires which test their faith. One day it may even be us who doubt, and so we each will rely on one another to remember and claim, “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, / is laid for your faith in His excellent Word! / What more can He say than to you He hath said, / You, who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?” A missing verse hides the promise that connects us all in faith: “In every condition, in sickness, in health; / In poverty’s vale, or abounding in wealth; / At home and abroad, on the land, on the sea, / As thy days may demand, shall thy strength ever be.”⁷

Let us pray: God our Savior, some now walk through the darkest valley, some through waters, some through fire; help us to hold onto our trust and faith that in so doing, we might serve as the bridge to you for them, as one day others might do for us. Amen.

⁷ <http://nethymnal.org/htm/h/f/hfirmafo.htm>