

Evensong

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Introduction.

- A. As I'm perhaps too fond of saying, one of my favorite things about the Lord's people is that we are a people of song. We love to use our voices to create beauty, and this stands in sharp contrast to just about everybody else in the world around us. Most people can't carry a tune in a bucket, and when they try to sing things like "Happy Birthday," they absolutely murder the poor tune. For most in the church, that is not true.
- B. Now, there's a reason why we're this way. It's not because we're innately smarter or more musically gifted; it's because we're used to singing. When we come to services on Sunday morning, we're not supposed to sit quietly in the pews and listen to the choir or the organ or the praise 'n worship band. We're supposed to be participants in the worship instead of audience members. We sing ourselves, and are trained by that.
- C. Interestingly enough, this same familiarity with singing marked the early Christians too. Just like we do, they never used instruments in their worship, and just like we do, they loved to sing. Indeed, judging from what early church traditions have to say about it, they loved to sing even more than we do. The Christian household of two thousand years ago would interrupt its day at several points to praise God in song.
- D. One of the most important of these moments of praise took place at sunset. Back then, of course, they didn't have electric light on demand, so the loss of natural light was a bigger deal for them. If they wished to continue working, they had to pause to go through the house and light all the lamps. When a household of Christians carried out this important task, tradition tells us that they sang an evening hymn, a hymn that thanked God for the blessings of the day now past and invoked His protection through the night.
- E. This tradition of evening hymns is present even in our hymnals of today. Hymns like "Sun of My Soul," "Abide with Me," and "Savior, Grant Me Rest and Peace" were all originally intended to be sung at evening, when the worshiper is invited to compare the impermanency of things on earth with the eternal nature of God. Hymns like these often contain some of the most profound thoughts in our repertoire of song, and it is in the light of this tradition that we need to consider this evening's hymn offering, "Evensong."

I. Verse 1.

- A. The title of this hymn alone identifies it as belonging to this genre, but this identification is made more concrete when we consider the first verse. Formally, there's nothing terribly unique to what we see here. The hymn is well written, but it employs traditional concepts of rhythm and rhyme.
- B. Nor is the content of this verse anything that is terribly complex, either. The author's goal here is not to launch immediately into a theological discussion of the meaning of sunset, but simply to paint a picture for those worshipers who are gathered in a windowless church building and can't see what's happening outside. It also acknowledges that this change is caused by God, that just as He provided us with hours of light, now He is bestowing hours of darkness. However, it continues to say that although God's blessing of physical light is not permanent, His blessing of spiritual light is. As Christians, we don't have to be afraid of the dark. Even when all other lights have gone out, we can still find comfort in the eternal light of Jesus.

II. Verse 2.

- A. Once we've extracted that crucial point from the first verse, we can travel on to the second. As was true in the first verse, there's nothing remarkable about the form. The content is more interesting. Here's the point that we need to get out of this: When we as Christians lay our heads down on our pillows, every night, we should discover a blessing that no one else in the world can claim. We don't have to fear what is going to happen tomorrow; we don't have to be afraid of anything or anyone. Instead, we can go to our rest in perfect peace.
- B. The second half of the verse explains why we can know this peace. Just like a shepherd watches over his sheep at night, Jesus, our Shepherd, watches over us. We can trust that He will always be there to protect us. No harm can reach us throughout the night because even though we sleep, our Lord never will.
- C. Even without considering God's word, we can tell that there's a lot of content here, but what makes the hymn even better is that its content comes from Scripture. Many of these deceptively simple phrases are Scriptural quotes or Scriptural references. The first of these appears in the first line, and it makes reference to the great peace that is described by Paul in Philippians 4:6-7. Folks, if we do what God says, this is the kind of peace we should have, and, as James says, if we don't have it, it's because we're not asking for it. We need to remember, friends, that we aren't the ones who are in control here. It's not up to us to plot the course of our lives. That's God's job, not ours, and if we humbly do what He says and trust in Him, we have absolutely no reason to worry, because for God's people, things are going to work out. That's where we find peace.
- D. The hymn then proceeds to describe us as unworried by tomorrow. This too is an explicitly Scriptural thought. We see Jesus instruct us to be this way in Matthew 6:34. Friends, this is advice from which all of us can profit.

Typically, we spend far too much time worrying: about our families, about our finances, about our health, about the nation, about just about everything. We wear ourselves down to a nub with worrying, and it's often about things we can't control. At times like that, friends, we just need to relax, because God's on it. Let's ask ourselves: what problems can we possibly have in our lives that God can't solve? If we lose our jobs, God can deal with that. If one of our loved ones runs into some kind of crisis, God can deal with that. If we learn that we ourselves are sick, or even about to die, God can deal with that. Now, none of this is to say that we shouldn't be prudent people and do what we can with our problems. God expects His children to be wise. However, friends, once we've done what we can, we need to sit back and let God take over and not worry.

- E. Likewise, as the hymn says in the next line, Scripture tells us not to be troubled by our foes, either. We see this in 1 Peter 3:13-14. Many of us don't have enemies. As far as I know, there isn't anybody on the planet right now who bears me any particular enmity. However, if we do have enemies, and especially if we have enemies for the sake of Christ, that can be a burden to bear sometimes. Once again, though, God's message about our enemies is that we don't need to be afraid and we don't need to be troubled. They're going to do whatever they're going to do, and God's going to respond, and things are going to turn out all right.
- F. The hymn then identifies the reason why we don't have to worry in the fifth and sixth lines. This identification of us as sheep and Christ as our Shepherd comes, of course, from John 10:12-14. I preached a whole sermon on this context only a few months ago, so I won't walk that ground again, but one of the things that we need to understand about this metaphor is how it describes us as completely dependent on Christ. A domesticated sheep out on its own is nothing more than a meal on four hooves, friends. It has so little ability and so little sense that it's dead meat for the first predator to come along. We're that way too, friends, and if we lay ourselves down at night without Jesus, who can tell what horrible thing might happen to us? With Jesus, though, we know that He has a lot more sense than we do, and we can trust that He will watch over us.
- G. The reassuring thought of the last two lines is taken from Psalm 121:4, 7. It asserts that we will be protected from evil, and then explains why. Folks, every earthly guardian is vulnerable. Anything we can trust in on this planet will let its guard down. God won't do that. He never sleeps, so He is always watching over us.

III. Verse 3.

- A. From here, our journey needs to take us to the third verse. As is common in hymns, this last verse switches gears somewhat. It's still talking about sunset, but now it's comparing that evening to the evening of our lives, to the time when we ourselves may die. As we consider God's glory and immortality, it becomes inevitable that we reflect on our own. However, when and if that time comes for us, we still do not need to be afraid. God has promised and will perform His word. We will be raised from the darkness of death to glory in heaven.
- B. Once again, though, these thoughts are not human inventions. They come from God's word, and that means we can rely on them. The first three lines express one Scriptural thought, and it comes from Psalm 90:2-4. Unlike most of the Psalms, which are ascribed to David, Psalm 90 lists Moses as the author, and it provides a very sobering look at human mortality. God is permanent, yes, but that doesn't mean we are. All the years of our lives pass before His eyes so quickly we can't even fathom it, and it is by His will that we, as is true of all flesh, must die. There is absolutely nothing we can do about that. It's human reality, and we need to accept that and live our lives so that we are constantly planning for our own deaths.
- C. Similarly, the idea that the glory of men is like grass is Scriptural. We see it appear most prominently in 1 Peter 1:24-25. The point is that not only are we ourselves mortal, but everything we do is equally transient. I can't help but think about that every time I see some great work of man: a towering skyscraper, a massive highway, an airplane that soars through the clouds. All of those things, as impressive as they are, are here for a limited time only. All of them can be destroyed, and someday, all of them will be. Poof—gone.
- D. That means, friends, that there is nothing within the realm of our knowledge that we can rely on but God, but as the hymn goes on to say, we know that we can rely on Him. This thought comes from the story of Jacob's ladder that we just looked at a few weeks ago, in Genesis 28:15. God is always going to be there, friends. As long as we remain faithful to Him, He is going to be there every step of the way through every day of our lives, and then, once our lives are over, He will be with us in death. God has made a promise to every one of His servants, and He's not going anywhere until the moment when He keeps that promise.
- E. We see what that promise provides described in lines seven and eight, which are drawn most prominently from Matthew 13:43. God's oath to the faithful guarantees that even if we die, we shall live again. Nor is this resurrection just a return to the status quo. When God summons His people to meet Him in the heavens, we're not going to be wearing reconstituted versions of our earthly bodies. Instead, we are going to have spiritual bodies so magnificent that the Bible can only describe them as shining like the sun. That's what God has sworn, and that is absolutely what is going to happen. Thus, the hymn comes full circle, from our evening reflections about the presence of God to our own personal morning when we wake from the darkness of death. Throughout our lives, and even beyond our lives, we can always trust in God to be with us.

Conclusion. If you want God in your life, meet Him on His terms. Come to Him now as the Bible commands.