

Nearer, My God, to Thee

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Introduction.

- A. For Christians who haven't been involved in it or thought about it much, the journey of a hymn from the mind of the author to the pages of the hymnal seems simple. In reality, however, the editors of any hymnal will often change its content, sometimes subtly, sometimes not. For example, in our hymnal, #666 is "He Bore It All," and it is no accident that it ended up paired with such an inauspicious number. Here's what happened: the guy who assigned hymnal numbers loathed the hymn. He felt that it was borderline blasphemous to pair solemn lyrics about the crucifixion of our Lord with a tune that sounds like it escaped from a circus. He couldn't get the hymn barred from the hymnal entirely, so he stamped it with the number of the beast instead.
- B. Other hymnal changes are much more significant. In particular, many of the hymns that we sing have had entire verses that were present in the original removed. Sometimes this is necessary for reasons of space or reasons of doctrine. "O Sacred Head," for instance, which is #136 in our hymnal, originally had about 14 verses. In such form, it's almost entirely unpublishable, so various editors have pared the verses down to two.
- C. Sometimes, though, these long-ago editorial decisions leave us scratching our heads. For an example of this, consider "Nearer, My God, to Thee," #124 in our hymnal. Even in this form, it's a very good hymn. The tune is pretty, the words are pretty, and the sentiment is moving. However, once we probe more deeply into the meaning of the hymn, it becomes apparent that there isn't much unity among the verses. The second verse is about darkness and rocks, then all of a sudden, the third verse is about birds.
- D. The reason why "Nearer, My God, to Thee" lacks coherence isn't because the original lacked it. It's because subsequent hymnal editors removed it. In the original, "Nearer, My God, to Thee" is a story hymn, just like "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" and "Dare To Stand Like Joshua" are story hymns. Our version, though, has two-thirds of the story removed. Let's look at these missing verses, which will be in our new supplement, in an effort to recapture the story, and indeed the meaning, of "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

I. Nearer to Thee.

- A. This story begins with the first verse, which is much more generic than the rest of the verses. Even though this is true, the appeal that it makes is still both Biblical and relevant. Consider the words of James in James 4:8. This is a point that many around us miss totally. Modern Americans emphasize getting what they want. When they go to Burger King, they expect to get their Whopper made just the way they ordered it. When they buy a car, they pitch a fit if it comes with cloth seats rather than the leather they wanted.
- B. The problem with this way of thinking is that many come to demand that the world revolve around them in everything, not just in areas where they're paying for it. That doesn't work in workplaces, in friendships, or in marriages, and it especially doesn't work with God. After all, when it comes to our salvation, God is the One who paid the price for our souls, and by that alone, He has the right to tell us what to do. If we deny His will and do what we want instead, our sin will separate us from Him. The only way we can have God truly draw near to us is if we draw near to Him first. We can't be part-timers in this drawing near, either. Instead, we have to dedicate our lives to that effort, for then, and only then, will God truly be with us.

II. My Rest A Stone.

- A. From there we proceed to the second verse, which carries the same theme forward, but is actually much more Scripturally specific. At first glance, this doesn't appear to be the case. We get the feeling of the verse well enough. It seems very gloomy and poetic, but without its Biblical context, we're at a loss as to what the author is specifically talking about. What wanderer? What stone? What dreams? If anything, it sounds like a scene from *The Lord of the Rings* or something like that.
- B. All of this poetic language, though, makes much more sense once we line it up with one particular Bible story. We see the specific passage in Genesis 28:10-12. In general, here's what's been going on: As we recently studied, Jacob, the son of Isaac, deceived his father in order to steal the blessing from his older brother Esau. Esau resents this a great deal and decides that once Isaac is dead, which he expects to happen quite soon, that he's going to kill Jacob in return. Their mother Rebekah warns Jacob, who quite wisely flees for his life.
- C. As we consider these two verses, it becomes apparent that this is not some well planned, well thought-out journey. Instead, as darkness overtakes Jacob about a day's journey from his father's encampment, he is so poorly prepared for travel that he has to grab one of the rocks that's lying around and use it for his pillow. It's in this state of preparedness that he's supposed to travel hundreds of miles to live with his father's relatives in Syria, and in those wild days, the odds were not good. Jacob is well aware of all of this, and we can only imagine what his state of mind must have been as he cuddled up with his rock to go to sleep.

- D. That's where all the language about wandering and darkness and stones comes from. By using it, the author is appealing to us to imagine that we, like Jacob, are alone, friendless, hopeless, and totally unsure of what to do next. Now, I don't think that any of us have ever been on the lam from someone who wants to kill us, but there have been times in all of our lives when things really haven't been going the way we wanted them to.
- E. The point, though, is that regardless of what physical disasters we may have encountered, the spiritual opportunities before us remain exactly the same. God isn't going to separate Himself from us unless we separate ourselves from Him, and that means that we have the chance to seek Him no matter what's going on in our lives. Indeed, sometimes it is hardship that brings us closest to God. It certainly worked that way for the children of Israel. They forgot about God when times were good, but bad times reminded them that they needed His help. The same may well be true for us, when harsh circumstances in our own lives direct our attention to the loving and merciful God who does not change and is always ready to help.

III. Steps Unto Heaven.

- A. With that, we exhaust the Scriptural references of the second verse and must move on to the third. Its relevance to the hymn quickly becomes apparent when we consider what Jacob saw once he began to dream. This portion of the story is recorded in Genesis 28:12-15. Jacob receives a vision of angels climbing on a ladder that stretches to heaven, and then God Himself appears and makes a series of promises to Jacob. First of all, the day will come when the descendants of Jacob will possess the land upon which their ancestor now lies as a penniless fugitive. Those descendants will be numberless, and through them will come a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Finally, as if those promises were not enough, God promises Jacob that He will remain with him and protect him until everything God had spoken was fulfilled.
- B. As we consider the story, it's easy to see how the author of the hymn plucked elements from it and used them in her work. Jacob's ladder becomes the way of steps that reaches to heaven, the promises that God makes to Jacob become His merciful sending, and the angels that climbed the ladder become all those who give encouragement to the faithful. As a result, we see the story of Jacob recast to apply to us.
- C. Indeed, the application of this is clear to any of us who have ever known sorrow or difficulty in our service to God, which is of course all of us. The point is that God and His help can appear in the most unlikely places. It's interesting that Jacob didn't see this vision when he was still dwelling safely in his father's tents, and he didn't see it later in life, when he himself was established and secure. Instead, it was only when he was alone in the wilderness that he saw the ladder to heaven and heard the promises that would shape his life and the lives of his people for thousands of years to come. The same may well be true for us, that not only are we most inclined to seek God in difficult times, but that God establishes those times as moments when He especially wants us to seek Him. In times like that, we can find our way just as Jacob did. When things on earth aren't going so well, the devil isn't able to use them as a distraction quite so readily, and we are capable of looking beyond, to the future that God has prepared for us and the hope of heaven. At times like that, let's remember to follow in the footsteps of Jacob. Let's allow hardship to focus our minds on the promise.

IV. Bethel I'll Raise.

- A. The parallels between the story of Jacob and our stories conclude in the fourth verse. The language here tracks that of the conclusion of the story of Jacob's ladder, which we read in Genesis 28:16-19. Once Jacob receives this reassuring vision, he awakens and exclaims in gladness and fear about what he has seen. Then, in response, he takes the stone against which he had been sleeping, turns it so that it stands on its end like a pillar, and consecrates it as "the house of God," which in Hebrew is "Bethel."
- B. Of all of the verses of "Nearer, My God, to Thee," this one might do the best job of retelling Jacob's historical encounter. Jacob getting up early in the morning to glorify God morphs into waking thoughts that are bright with His praises, Jacob's pillow becomes our stony griefs, which we, like Jacob, consecrate to God.
- C. Once again, what we see in this verse is something that we need not just to sing about, but also to put into practice. When we receive consolation from God during our difficult times, we shouldn't just go on our way without a second thought. Instead, we should pause like Jacob did to glorify Him for what He has done for us. More than that, though, we should look for ways to make our lives more useful to God because of what we have experienced. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Paul describes how he is able to use the comfort bestowed on him by God to comfort other Christians who are still wrestling with their problems, and that's something we should learn to do too. One of the great truths of Christianity is that as long as we are in Christ, sooner or later, everything is going to work out, and if we've experienced that for ourselves, we can use our experience to console those who are beginning to walk the same mile we've just finished. Interestingly enough, as the song says, if we use our woes for this purpose, even our sorrows have brought us nearer to God.
- D. In all of this, perhaps the most profound point is what Jacob says in Genesis 28:16, when he exclaims "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." God is like that sometimes. We forget about Him and stray into some lonely miserable place, but then, we open our eyes and discover that even there, He is with us.

Conclusion. If you want to find God today, all you have to do is look where He says, and He will be there.