

The Lord Is My Light

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Introduction.

- A. In passages like Colossians 3:16, we are commanded not just to sing hymns, but to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The precise difference between a hymn and a spiritual song is open to discussion, but we have a pretty good idea of what a psalm is. Indeed, the book of Psalms contains 150 of them, and if we are to follow this commandment, we need to draw at least part of our worship content from that book.
- B. This idea, as simple as it is in conception, is much more difficult in execution. In the first place, it's practically impossible for us to sing the Psalms as we read them in the Bible without some paraphrasing or arrangement. Our style of music is metrical. That means that in order for words and music to fit smoothly together, the words have to have a natural bounce, and when we read the Psalms, it's obvious that they don't have one.
- C. Nor, indeed, is the process of fitting psalms into rhythm and meter a simple one. In fact, it's fair to say that of all the kinds of hymn one can write, a Psalm paraphrase is the most difficult. For one thing, most Psalms are considerably longer than any of our hymns, which means that the arranger must decide which verses he wants to use. For another, the more regular the writer makes the meter and rhythm, the more he loses the content of the original Psalm. As a result, most Psalm paraphrases are stilted, unhappy compromises that sound like the writer took grammar lessons from Yoda in *Star Wars* instead of poetry lessons from David.
- D. Because of this, the rare paraphrase that actually succeeds as a hymn is noteworthy indeed. There are several that we sing regularly. "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah!" is actually a paraphrase of Psalm 148, arguably the best paraphrase ever written. Similarly, "The Lord's My Shepherd; I'll Not Want" paraphrases Psalm 23. There are a few more that are equally worthwhile, but when we consider the hundreds of other hymns we have, it's obvious that we need more. That's where tonight's hymn comes in. It's taken from a Psalm 3000 years ago, yet still carries a relevant message to us today. Let's look at how Psalm 27 became "The Lord Is My Light."

I. Verse 1.

- A. As is only reasonable, we begin our study this evening by looking at the first verse of the hymn. Perhaps the first thing that we see when we look at it is that unlike almost all of the hymns we sing, it doesn't rhyme. Normally in a hymn, this is not a good thing. Rhyme makes a hymn more structured and consistent. Hymns that don't rhyme all too often have a blob-like, mushy feel to them, and failure to rhyme is normally the sign of a writer who doesn't really have the skill to be writing hymns in the first place. That is not the case here. Here, the writer deliberately chose not to rhyme to remain truer to her text.
- B. We see just how accurate an arrangement this is when we compare the first half of this hymn to its source passage, Psalm 27:1. The first half of this section is an exact quote. When we sing those lines, we are singing Scripture. The second half isn't much further off. We might wonder where "defense" came from, but there's a reason why even that apparently extra word is included. In the original Hebrew, there's some question about how one word in this verse should be translated, and if we look at a couple of major translations, we'll see that they translate it differently. About half say "strength of my life," and about half say "defense of my life." The author here is actually including both, both to fill up her line and to convey that nuance of content.
- C. Now that we've looked at form, we can consider the message that this hymn is sharing with us. One of the devil's biggest tools in our lives is fear. Satan loves to make us afraid: afraid of God, afraid of each other, and afraid of the consequences of doing right. That fear paralyzes us and keeps us from being the useful servants that God wants us to be. This passage is David's battle cry against fear. As Christians, there is no reason for us to be afraid of anything. When we sin, God will save us if we call on Him. When we're feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of our lives, we can go to God, and He will give us the strength to handle whatever is before us. When we're dealing with people who are quite frankly intimidating, we need to remember that however big and mean they are, God is a whole lot bigger and meaner. As Paul says in Romans 8, there is nothing and no one that can take us away from God if we don't let them. We can lean on the Lord for help and be assured that whatever may happen, He will care for us and keep us safe.
- D. We see similarly strong content when we look at the second half of this verse, which comes from Psalm 27:7, 9. There are a couple of things that we need to pay attention to formally here to understand what's happening. In the first place, this is an illustration of the way that psalm paraphrases must condense the content of the Psalms. The hymnist here doesn't have room in her composition to include all of the content from both of these verses, so instead, she is obliged to choose the phrases she considers most powerful and use only those. Nonetheless, we can see quite clearly that these are indeed the two verses she used. Also, we're beginning to see how the author compensates for her decision not to rhyme. Remember how we said that rhyming adds structure to a hymn? Here, the author is adding structure through the use of parallels. More specifically, she's using a short, repeated quotation from the text to tie each section together.

- E. Of course, the form of the hymn isn't really the point. The point is the content and the way the hymn gets it across. Here, the message is just as clear as in the first part of the verse. We've already spent a lot of time discussing the way that we can address our problems without being afraid, but in every instance, that's only possible through the help of God. This section makes that link explicit. It points out first of all that we haven't earned the right to demand help from God. Instead, His help for us only arises from His abundant mercy. The reason why God must not turn away, then, is because without Him, His people would be in dire need. I suppose that those who live without the Lord in their lives find something else to rely on: their wealth, their friends, their wisdom, and so forth. For those of us who are Christians, though, we've learned not to trust in those things, and to trust in God instead. If we're in that situation and God turns His face from us, then we are truly of all men most to be pitied. We don't have anything else. That's why we call on Him so diligently.

II. Verse 2.

- A. We see all of these themes that we've explored so far continue in the second verse. For one thing, the same structure of using short repeated phrases in place of rhyme continues. In addition, the connection between hymn and Scripture is conspicuous. The first half of this verse is plainly drawn from Psalm 27:11, 13.
- B. It begins with an appeal to God to lead us in a "path straight and even." Now, the significance of this language is probably lost on most of us modern-day city dwellers. Whenever we want to go very far, we hop on a multi-lane superhighway that's a massive, smooth layer of asphalt, and we zip along at speeds that David would never even have thought of. Folks, what the Bible calls a road or a royal highway was worse than anything we see anywhere outside of Farmer Bob's cow pasture. They were nothing but ruts and pits and mudholes from beginning to end. When we read the story of Uzza and the ark of the covenant and the Philistine cart, we shouldn't be surprised that the oxen fell badly enough to tip the cart over. The only real surprise is that they got as far as they did before it happened.
- C. It's in this context that we need to understand David's plea for a level path. He was asking for God to provide him with something better than any man possessed. It's in this light that we need to consider the way of God. We can't leave God's smooth, even path and find something else just as good. Instead, every other way out there is full of all kinds of hazards, and worst of all, will lead us not to Zion, but to destruction.
- D. Of course, even though the way is smooth, Satan does everything he can to make our journey to heaven as difficult and unpleasant as possible, and these difficulties often cause the faint of heart to give up. Psalm 27, by contrast, expresses steely determination. We need to take that attitude for our own. We need to resolve never to despair, but always to be sustained by the goodness of God. It's plain to see, friends, in the natural world, in His word, and even in the things that He has done for all of us already. From those things, we need to take heart and continue to allow Him to teach us of His smooth, level way.
- E. We see a similar determination with respect to the goals of the singer in the second portion of this second verse. Its content comes from Psalm 27:4, and the wording is every bit as close as it has been. If we're paying attention, we might wonder how we can sing such a thing today. After all, David here is writing about the tabernacle worship and his desire to share in it, or possibly even about his desire to build the temple.
- F. It's good to ask these questions, especially when we're dealing with the Psalms, all of which were written under the old covenant. However, friends, we need to remember that all of those Old-Testament types have a spiritual equivalent that is relevant to us today. There is no building somewhere we can call "the house of God." Instead, everyone who is a Christian is part of that house, which 1 Peter 2 tells us is built of living stones. When we sing about dwelling in the house of God, then, we're not singing about going to Jerusalem. Instead, our minds should be focused on continuing in the fellowship we share as Christians. Some things, though, stay the same. Just as David wanted to see God, so too we want to see Him, and this desire, to see the Lord and to dwell with Him forever, is what should animate every one of our days.

III. Chorus.

- A. However, these two verses aren't all the content the hymn has to offer. There's also a chorus. This draws content from Psalm 27:14, and, as we can see, the only things that separate this chorus from being a direct quote are repetition and a couple of missing words.
- B. Furthermore, as has been true throughout this hymn, this chorus expresses a thought we need to understand and incorporate in our lives. It's urging us to wait on the Lord. There are several layers of meaning to this idea. The first one is obvious. It's telling us to wait on the Lord in the same way that we might wait for a bus. From this, we should learn that God is always working for our help and salvation, but He's not necessarily doing it on our timetable. God is not like a drycleaner. We can't just drop our messes in His lap at the beginning of the day and expect to have them all cleaned up by the time we come home from work. God in His wisdom knows that the immediate response is not always the best one, and we simply have to trust Him.
- C. Beyond that, though, the idea of waiting on the Lord encapsulates an entire way of life. We don't just wait on the Lord when we have a problem. We wait on the Lord in everything, and always allow Him to guide us.

Conclusion. If you haven't been waiting on the Lord in your life, now is the time to begin.