

“HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

May 17, 2015, 6:00PM

Scripture Texts: Isaiah 41:10; 43:1-5

The LCS Chamber Choir is going to conclude our service with the great hymn “How Firm a Foundation.” It is powerful hymn for anyone going through a serious trial in life, which we will all do at some point.

The author of this hymn remains a mystery. When it first appeared in 1787 it simply bore the initial “K.” The hymn tune, Foundation, is also of unknown authorship, dating at least to 1832.

This hymn was sung at the funerals of American presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. It was loved by Andrew Jackson and his wife Rachel. It was sung at the funeral of General Robert E. Lee.

We have no idea who wrote this hymn or what he suffered, but every stanza breathes firsthand knowledge of God’s presence and provision in the difficulties of life. What we hear is God’s abundant and sufficient and intervening grace every step of the way.

There is something unusual about this hymn that I want us to notice. All hymns have a point of view. Someone is speaking and someone is being spoken to. Most hymns are sung by us to God and in them we are either offering worship and praise or we are making a request. “How Great Thou Art” is praise to God. “Be Thou My Vision” is a request of God.

Many hymns we sing are about God and what He has done. “Amazing Grace,” “This is My Father’s World,” “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.”

Sometimes we sing to each other. “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” “Come, Christians, Join to Sing.”

Sometimes we even sing to ourselves. “Be Still, My Soul, The Lord is on Thy Side,” “It is Well With My Soul.”

“How Firm a Foundation” is very unusual. After the first stanza do you notice the quotation marks? Stanzas two through six are God talking to us. Though it is us singing the hymn, we are really in the role of God speaking to us, so we have to both sing this hymn and listen to ourselves singing to hear what God is speaking to us.

He speaks to us about what He is like, what His purposes are. And He makes many promises to us. He speaks directly into our life at precisely the place where we most need to hear Him, in the place of our pain or need.

We desperately need to hear God. When our world changes we need to hear from one who doesn't change. When our health leaves us weak, we need to hear from the one who is strong.

*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?*

This first stanza begins with a statement of a very important doctrine, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. God has laid for us the firmest of all foundations for life in His Word.

II Timothy 2:19 But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

All of the rich and full promises of God throughout Scripture are sufficient for our every need in every possible circumstance. Each of the subsequent verses of this hymn give quotations, paraphrases or references to promises made by God, taken from all through Scripture, but especially Isaiah.

*"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.*

This stanza introduces the first glimpse of the glory of God's grace that is present in our own suffering. God is speaking to us and He makes seven promises to us that closely paraphrase **Isaiah 41:10**, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

And the starting place for all pain or suffering is to hear God say to us, "Fear not, I am with you." Think of the toughest thing you have had to face or live through. Can you say, "I am not afraid of.....?" Can you say, "I am not dismayed by.....?"

Look at the next two stanzas which are both inspired by the same Scripture passage, Isaiah 43:2.

*"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.*

Isaiah 43:1 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, 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.

Notice that God’s promise to be with us doesn’t mean that the deep waters or rushing rivers or fiery trials go away. It doesn’t mean that everything will be sweetness and light. God plays a very present and active role in our suffering. Nothing in our lives is by accident or chance. We live in a God-saturated world. We live and move and have our being only because of Him.

God wants us to see His absolute sovereignty, not as a mere truth, but as a wonderful, glorious, comforting reality; something to be embraced and held dear.

Our suffering is never meaningless. God always works with the end in view; He is fitting us for our eternal future. He is making us ready for a weight of glory that far outweighs every temporal and temporary suffering. Even the deepest distress and most severe suffering are sanctified to us for good.

In it He exposes what is unworthy in us and He removes it so that what is most worthy may shine brighter. He removes the dross to brighten the gold. The dross is sin, the gold is faith.

*“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.”*

What a crescendo of hope and promise in the face of the fiercest of enemies, hell itself. The one who holds the power of death, holds no power over us.

You students who have memorized this great hymn, I hope you will never forget it. Right now it may not ring so true, right now you don’t know about floods and fires. Right now these words are like someone giving you answers to questions you aren’t asking. But some day they will come and you will need this Biblical truth set to music. Hold on to this hymn.

Some of you have suffered deeply and long. Some of you have walked through more fires and deep waters and valleys of death than you can remember or count. And through it all there is one thing you know, every word of this hymn is true, dead on, solid rock, firm foundation in His Word. The 173 words of this 220-year-old hymn ring true because they sing what Scripture says and they are borne out of the wisdom that comes from affliction.

Hebrews 13:5b-6 “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” 6 So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

This is the final and greatest glory of His grace, “I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.” The final promise, the last word, *repeated five times*. God has the last word. This is the victory song. Never forget this. Never, never, never forget that He will never forsake you. Never.

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you. Thank you that because of your all-sufficient grace in our lives we can say thank you in the midst of everything that goes wrong in our world and in our own lives and bodies. You have forgiven our sin to the glory of your grace; you have used Satan’s tool against Him and for our good to the glory of your grace; you have given every pain a purpose to the glory of your grace; you have sanctified every suffering that we be more like Christ and our faith more like pure gold. You have carried us in your arms through the fiercest of storms. You have never failed us, you are not failing us now and you never will. May everything in our lives continue to be a demonstration of your glory and your grace and may everything in our lives point to Jesus and be a light of hope and comfort to those in affliction.