

THE HYMN “HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION” (Anonymous)¹

“Exceeding great and precious promises” II Peter 1:4²

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The words to the hymn “How Firm a Foundation,” all of which are based on scripture, are as follows:

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent Word;
What more can he say than to you he has said?
You, who unto Jesus for refuge have fled.

(II Peter 1:4)

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 your days may demand, shall your strength ever be.

Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed,
I, I am your God, and will still give you aid;
I’ll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand.

(Isaiah 41:10)

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

(Isaiah 43:2a)

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,
My grace all sufficient shall be you supply;
The flame shall not hurt you, I only design
Your dross to consume, and your gold to refine.

(Isaiah 43:2b; I Peter 1:7)

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

(Isaiah 46:4 and Isaiah 40:11)

¹ Several authors for this hymn have been suggested. The hymn was first published in 1787 in a hymnbook edited by Dr. John Rippon, who is reported to have been an admirer of Isaac Watts, considered by many to be the greatest English hymn writer of all time, but Rippon apparently wanted some hymns by other writers as well. Some hymn historians believe the hymn was written by George Keith, the son-in-law and clerk of Dr. Rippon, who is reported to have led the singing in Dr. Rippon’s church. Others dispute this, and ascribe the hymn to Robert Keene, who is also reported to have been associated with Dr. Rippon’s church.

² The original has “Exceeding great and precious promises” II Peter iii.4 [sic], but the quotation is from II Peter *chapter 1*, verse 4, not from *chapter 3*, verse 4.

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all Hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never—no never—no never forsake”
(Hebrews 13:5)

This hymn extols the foundation we have for our life in the Word of God, and the hymn itself is strongly based on Scripture. After the first seven lines of the hymn, the rest of the hymn consists of near literal poetic adaptations directly from Scripture, the references for which are indicated at the end of each stanza. The sufficiency of Scripture is emphasized by the scriptural prefix of the hymn, the context of which is a foundational Scripture that teaches the sufficiency of Scripture. The sufficiency of Scripture is emphasized in the third and fourth line of the first stanza—

What more can he say than to you he has said?
You, who unto Jesus for refuge have fled.

The Scripture on which the hymn is based is given in the heading of the hymn: II Peter 1:4, “exceeding great and precious promises.” II Peter 1:4 is best seen in context, so quoting verses 3 and 4—

“According as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness [the spiritual life] through the knowledge of Him Who has called us to glory and virtue, to which end we are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, in order that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lusts.”

This hymn was sung by nearly every church congregation in the 1800s and was known by most believers at the time. In those days people learned poetry and most believers knew all of the stanzas of the great hymns like “How Firm a Foundation.”

This hymn was sung by soldiers on both sides of the lines during the War Between the States in 1861 to 1865. Reportedly, this was the favorite hymn of General Robert E. Lee. And, General Andrew Jackson, when old and about to die, is reported to have requested of a group of visitors who had come to see him before his death: “There is a beautiful hymn on the subject of the exceeding great and precious promises of God to His people. It was a favorite of my dear wife till the day of her death. It begins: ‘How Firm a Foundation, You Saints of the Lord.’ I wish you would sing it now.”

Today, the tune commonly used to sing “How Firm a Foundation” is a traditional American melody. But during the late 1800s the hymn was sung to the tune *Adeste Fideles*, which is the tune to which we sing the well-known Christmas hymn “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”

During the Spanish-American War, on Christmas eve in 1898, the United States Seventh Army Corps was camped on the hills above Havana, Cuba. It is reported to have been a beautiful topical night. Out of the darkness a man called out a hymn number and the unit around him began to sing “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” and this singing spread across the entire corps so that thousands of men were singing *a cappella* the familiar Christmas hymn.

But then, because the tune was the same, there was a transition to “How Firm a Foundation,” and these young soldiers, waiting to enter battle and face death the next few days, sang from memory the lyrics of “How Firm a Foundation,” including the third stanza—

“Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed,
I, I am your God, and will still give you aid;
I’ll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand.
(Isaiah 41:10)

One of the greatest theologians of the 1800s was Charles Hodge, Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Hodge wrote one of the most widely used textbooks of systematic theology, still in use today by those who value systematic theology. A story is told of Hodge that when he was quite elderly he was leading an evening devotional service at Princeton and as part of the service read the lyrics of “How Firm a Foundation.” During his reading Hodge became so overwhelmed with emotion about the content of the hymn that by the time he got to the last stanza—

“The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all Hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never—no never—no never forsake”
(Hebrews 13:5)

—he could no longer speak and had to merely beat out the rhythm of the words.

“How Firm a Foundation” is one of the most doctrinally correct and scripture-based hymns of all time. It is a shame that its popularity has been overshadowed by the trite and narcissistic contemporary “Christian” music of our time.