

Proper 13 (Series B)

“Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer” (*Lutheran Service Book #918*)

William Williams, the Welsh minister and author of this hymn text, was an itinerant preacher who traveled an estimated 95,000 miles during his lifetime. It seems only natural that he would identify with the travels of God’s Old Testament people. The use of the name “Jehovah” (rather than “Redeemer”) in the original translation of this Welsh hymn made the Old Testament connections even more clear. For the modern Christian, the power of this hymn lies in our ability to see God’s guiding and protecting hand in our own life journeys. Even as our Redeemer led the children of Israel through the desert—feeding and protecting them along the way—so he protects and nourishes us on our pilgrimage.

The hymn begins by depicting us as “pilgrims” in a “barren land,” an apt metaphor for how we feel in our darkest moments. Yet even when we feel weak, we know that God is both strong and in control. Williams’ first stanza echoes Psalm 48:14: “For this God is our God forever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.” We need more than guidance for our journey, however; we also need nourishment. When God’s people were starving in the desert, God told Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you” (Exodus 16:4). This sustaining manna prefigured the true bread from heaven, our Savior Jesus Christ, who said “It is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32). Knowing this truth, Williams can pray, “Bread of heaven / Feed me till I want no more.”

The theme of divine nourishment continues in the second stanza, this time focusing on water. When Williams implores God to “Open now the crystal fountain / Where the healing stream doth flow,” he draws upon both Old and New Testament images. In one sense, he evokes Moses striking the rock of Horeb (Exodus 17:5-7) to provide water for the thirsty, grumbling travelers. But in another sense, the “crystal fountain” alludes to John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation. There he saw “the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne and from the Lamb” (Revelation 22:1-2). We experience true healing when we have drunk of the “living Water” that is Christ. Williams then offers his most obvious Exodus allusion when he asks God for a “cloudy, fiery pillar” (Exodus 13:21-22) to “lead me all my journey through.” He calls God his “strong deliverer” and concludes the stanza with an image from Psalm 28:7—“The Lord is my strength and my shield.”

Our earthly pilgrimage must eventually come to an end. Williams uses the crossing of the Jordan—the end of the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land—to depict our own departure from this life into eternity. Our prayer is that this “crossing” will be peaceful, untroubled by “anxious fears.” This can be so because we are confident of the “Death of death and hell’s destruction.” In the words of St. Paul, “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (I Cor. 15:54), and so we will land safely on Canaan’s side. This knowledge inspires our “songs of praises,” sung until we will join the eternal choirs on the other side of Jordan.

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Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer

Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer
Pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy pow'rful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
Feed me till I want no more,
Feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain
Whence the healing spring doth flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all the journey through.
Strong deliv'rer, strong deliv'rer,
Be Thou still my strength and shield,
Be Thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to Thee,
I will ever give to Thee.

Text: William Williams, 1717-91, abr., tr. Peter Williams, 1722-96, st. 1, alt.
tr. William Williams, st. 2-3

Music: John Hughes, 1873-1932

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[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]