

THE STORY OF

“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”

THERE CAN be no doubt that the “Great Jehovah” was guiding a young traveller as he paused in his holiday journey homeward to hear a young man preach from a flat tombstone in the courtyard of a village church.

The place was a small village in Wales. The preacher was a twenty-four year-old dissenter, Howell Harris. The traveller was William Williams, a medical student, on his way home to Pantycelyn. As young Williams listened to Harris preach repentance, the Spirit of God gripped him so that he left the scene determined by God’s grace to be a preacher of the gospel, although he had formerly been intent on becoming a physician.

The birth place of William Williams (1717-1791) is still intact and inhabited even today by descendants of the Williams family. His father, who was a deacon of an independent and persecuted church, determined to educate his son William well. Accordingly, he was sent to Presbyterian College, Carmanthen for his medical training. It was at this time that the events mentioned above changed the course of the life of William Williams.

Within a few years of his decision to preach the gospel, Williams was ordained a deacon of the Anglican Church. He was denied, however, ordination into the priesthood because of his evangelical methods, whereupon he joined his friend Howell Harris and ministered to the dissenters. For some years he worked in fellowship with the Wesley brothers. Williams took all of Wales for his parish and journeyed, preaching and singing his original Welch hymns for the rest of his life. It is said that he travelled nearly 100,000 miles on horseback and on foot, preaching everywhere, almost always in the open, and often being mobbed and beaten for his reward.

His talents as a singer and poet seemed to outweigh his considerable preaching ability. To this day in Wales, you may hear his great hymn sung — just as we sing our national anthem — before outdoor athletic events. The first line in the Welch language is as follows:

Arghwydd, arwain trwy'r anailwch

Of the 800 Welch hymns written by “The Sweet Singer of Wales,” only eight or ten have been translated into English, and of these only *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah* remain in common use today. The first stanza was translated by Rev. Peter Williams, and Williams Williams himself translated the second and third stanzas. In this form the hymn was first sung and used by the ministerial students of Trevecca College, South Wales, which was supported by the gracious Countess Huntingdon. This benevolent lady was also instrumental in introducing the hymn into America, for it was she who urged Williams to prepare a collection of hymns entitled *Gloria in Excelsis*, which was sent especially for use in George Whitefield’s orphanage in America in 1772.

the wilderness wanderings of the Children of Israel into a personal journey from the new birth to the land of promise for each believer. The author's use of the singular personal pronoun makes the hymn intensely warm and filled with intimate personal meaning.

The entire hymn is a prayer for personal guidance and provision for the journey to "Canaan's shore." I am weak and in need of a strong and wise guide. More than manna, I need the "Bread of heaven" and for drink the healing streams that flow from that spiritual Rock — Christ. As Israel relied on the "fiery, cloudy pillar," I need the Spirit's guidance to lead me to the "verge of Jordan" where the self-life is buried and I enter the promised land of the life hid with Christ in God.

Almost two centuries later another evangelist caught the spirit of the hymn and added the verse which is now often sung with the original three:

*Care and doubting, gloom and
sorrow,
Fear and shame are mine
no more;
Faith knows naught of dark
tomorrow,
For my Savior goes before.
Songs of Praises
I will ever give to Thee.*

This verse expresses the confidence that we shall not fall into the same error of unbelief which shut out the Children of Israel, but through faith and obedience we will inherit the promises.

The author of this stanza is Rodney (Gypsy) Smith (1860-1847), and like William Williams, he was a successful singing evangelist. He, too, led many souls to Christ and started them on their journey. It has been said of Gypsy Smith that he prayed not only before his meetings, as most evangelists do, but he also prayed after each service to be kept down at the feet of Jesus, and this perhaps explains the depth of his ministry.

We would do well to sing this prayerful hymn in real faith, believing that we shall have the guidance of Jehovah in everything all our journey through, and particularly through the new year which we are entering. — R.D.K.

Guide Me

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The hymn itself is full of beautiful Bible imagery. It transforms