

Podcast 246 Hymns will get You Through the Night.

Let's pray, and then I'm going to read a little excerpt from a newsletter that was published 21 years ago this month. Father, thank You for nice weather, any weather, the fact that we can enjoy it, we're alive and we're breathing, and there's so much to be thankful for. And thank You for Your lovingkindnesses, which are new every morning. And thank You for music and our ability to sing and worship You and learn in the process. Bless us as we talk this morning and consider this topic. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When you sing a hymn, it's the most complete exercise. As you sing the lyrics and you hear it and as you're reading the words, your mind is engaged and your heart is engaged and your spirit is engaged and you're singing with understanding meaningful words and theological truths at the same time. It's a complete holistic activity. You're using your body, soul, mind and spirit maxed out in every capacity when you sing a hymn well.

I have not always had a great affinity for hymns, but I have grown to love them. I remember when Elisabeth Elliot would talk about her childhood and how her family conducted daily devotions each day before the five siblings went to school. Her family began on January 1st of the new year singing number one in a hymn book, number two on January 2nd, and continue this pattern throughout the year. Her mom played the piano, and they would follow their singing by reading a chapter of Scripture.

For those who are listening don't know who she is, in 1956 Elisabeth Elliot and four other women lost their husbands to spears from the Waodani tribe in Ecuador. Their story has been chronicled in her book "Through Gates of Splendor" and in Steve Saint's book "At the End of the Spear."

I'm going to quote from her newsletter, which she faithfully wrote until she died a few years ago.

"Hymns will get you through the night. In January of 1956, when five women were waiting with bated breath to find out whether our husbands were dead or alive, I lay in bed in Nate Saint's home, my little daughter Valerie sick in a crib beside me, the hymn "How Firm a Foundation," those magnificent words taken from Isaiah 43:1-2, sustained me, especially stanzas 2, 3 and 6, memorized when I was a child in our daily family prayer times. Here are the verses:

How Firm a Foundation, #56

2. "Fear not, I am with thee, Oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, I will still give you aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my gracious, Omnipotent Hand.

3. "When thro the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;

For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

6. "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."

How Firm a Foundation has become one of my favorite hymns. A few days later these brave women discovered that their husbands did die, and that hymn sustained her. I once heard her say that in her deepest valleys, her darkest days, it was hymns that she learned as a child that carried her through.

I had these these thoughts in mind when our family started having family worship times. Like Elisabeth Elliot's home, we purposed to emulate them and go through a hymn book beginning with #1. We chose a hymn book and set out to sing them together. My wife had grown up in more of a Baptist fundamentalist home. I grew up in a Methodist home, attended a Presbyterian college, and attended a seminary that was interdenominational. Between the two of us, we were familiar with many of the tunes. However we found out there were some hymns we just did not know and we needed someone to play the piano.

This was in the days of cassette players, and I found friends that were pianists, and paid them to play hymns for our family. Over the course of a couple years, we used to pay people to play hymns, and we had as many as 200 hymns on cassettes. We sang our way through them in a little over two years.

There something sweet about starting the day with a hymn during our family worship time. When we were meeting for family worship, it was before everybody had iPods and headphones and all the rest. I loved hearing my sons doing their schoolwork or my wife doing her activities, humming the tune for the hymn we had sung earlier that morning. Often my wife will wake up with a hymn running through her mind, and she'll come out of the bedroom singing it. It is not long before I find myself humming it in my mind as well.

There's something about hymns that are just beautiful. Elisabeth Elliot in her newsletter says: "A true hymn has rhyme and meter, a logical progression from the first verse and the last." I find that most hymns that I am attracted to are in a major key. They're upbeat, and they help me hold on to joy and hope.

We also went through a season when we sought to memorize hymns. We'd been singing them for a few years, and I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to have them salted away so that we could sing them without a book?" We were driving in the car one time and I asked the kids, "Let's sing all the Christian songs that we know." We sang "Only a Boy Named David" and "The Wise Man Built His House Upon the Rock," "Amazing

Grace,” and “Jesus Loves Me” just the first verse. We hadn’t gone very far before we ran out of material.

That year, we focused on memorizing hymns, and we would try to memorize one every couple of weeks. We would work on one verse at a time, and since we had boys who are more visual, we would give them paper, crayons, markers, colored pencils and they would draw pictures to give them little visual aids for remembering the words.

Memorizing is a really neat family activity, especially when you memorize a hymn as a family. After we’d memorized about nine hymns, we would find ourselves on car trips. We used to live far from everything, so we spent a lot of time in the car, and I would start a hymn and everybody would chime in. When I would forget one of the verses, my wife would remember it, or if we didn't know it, one of the kids would remember it. We also kept a hymn book in our van so if we forgot, somebody would look it up and put us back on the right track.

It was a neat experience learning hymns as a family. Let me just give you a couple interesting stories. One of the hymns we decided to learn was “Dare to be a Daniel.” It goes like this: “Standing by a purpose firm, heeding God’s command, honor them, the faithful few! All hail to Daniel’s band! Dare to be a Daniel! Dare to stand alone! Dare to have a purpose firm! Dare to make it known!”

The challenging phrase in this song was “purpose firm.” I was drawing a blank when it came to illustrating these two words. I don’t know if I prayed or not, but all of a sudden, I got an idea, and drew a picture of a dead porpoise. A dead fish. Because it’s a porpoise firm, rigor mortis has set in. When I drew this fish, I put an x over his eyes to show that he was conked out.

The funny thing was, my kids just grabbed onto that. “Yes, a dead fish!” And they’re drawing these pictures of a man standing next to a dead fish—standing by a purpose firm. Sometimes, the more bizarre and the funnier the picture, the more it sticks in your mind. Here we are, many, many years later, I can still sing all four verses of the hymn. I don’t think about dead fish, I just think “standing by a purpose firm, heeding God’s command, honor them the faithful few.” Have fun with this. Of course, my wife rolled her eyes when we were drawing dead fish and getting all excited, and that just made it better.

I have different strategies for memorizing hymns. Some people are more auditory learners and so they just need to hear it over and over, some people would like to write it out over and over, but just find out whatever works for you and your kids and for your family. One strategy I have is to look for patters, so in “Jesus Loves Me” I discovered the second word in each verse begins with these letters—L–F–L–T. Which could be the word leaflet. LFLT.

The first verse, “Jesus LOVES,” L, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible...” and once you get started in the verse, it’s pretty easy. Now the second verse, the

second word starts with an F, as in Frank. “Jesus FROM.” And now, listen to the rest of the verse: “Jesus from His throne on high came into this world to die. That I might from sin be free, bled and died upon a tree.” This song has a really nice rhythm and cadence. I don’t know all the words to use, but all I need to get started is if I can remember the rest of the verse.

The third verse begins with Jesus L again, “Jesus LOVES me, He Who died, heavens gates are open wide. He will wash away my sin, let His little child come in.” These are beautiful verses, deep. The last verse is T, “Jesus TAKE this heart of mine, make it pure and wholly Thine, Thou has bled and died for me, I will henceforth live for Thee.” The poetry in hymns lends itself to really memorizing hymns, especially hymns written by men like Isaac Watts and others who were geniuses with hymns.

I have also found that when I focus on a hymn long enough I understand it better. I just finished memorizing “Be Thou My Vision.” For some reason, that just has been a hard one for me. Other songs like “Jesus Loves Me,” I picked right up, all four verses. But “Be Thou My Vision” I’ve had to think it through as I sing it. The more I sing it, the more I comprehend the depth of each phrase and the beauty of the progression through the verses. Sometimes when I go to bed and I can’t sleep and I don’t want my mind to wander in areas that aren’t helpful, I’ll go through the words to a hymn, and drift off to sleep meditating on God and His goodness.

“Rejoice, the Lord is King” is another favorite that I have under my belt. If I’m ever in a prison with Paul and Silas, I’ll be able to contribute a few songs to encourage ourselves. The more we can salt away, you might say, God’s Word in our hearts and hymns, the more we’re going to be able to bring to mind when our Bibles are taken away, when we’re throw in prison.

I’d like to read a portion of a history about Isaac Watts from “Hymns for Family Worship.” I developed this resource for families. It has a hundred hymns in it, with the history of the song on one side of the page, and the lyrics on the opposite side. It is printed on 8.5 by 11 paper so it’s easier for children to see it and read. All of the sacred songs in this collection are old enough that they’re not under copyright, and you can make copies of them and can print them up so the kids can color on them or you can circle key words.

Here we go: “Isaac Watts was born in Southampton, England, on July 17, 1674, to Isaac and Sarah Watts, who were believers but did not conform to the church of England, which was a crime at the time. The elder Watts was arrested shortly after his son’s birth, and Sarah is said to have nursed the baby Isaac while sitting on a stone outside his father’s prison. The young Watts was a bright rascal who enjoyed making up poems. One day, when reprimanded for not shutting his eyes during prayers, he replied, “A little mouse for want of stairs ran up a rope to say its prayers.” This didn’t deter a spanking, so Isaac tried a different rhyme. “Oh, father, father, pity take, and I will no more verses make.” But the verses kept pouring forth. When he was seven, he wrote an acrostic with his name that demonstrates the gospel instruction he had been

receiving. I–I am a vile polluted lump of earth. S–So I’ve continued ever since my birth, A–Although Jehovah grace doth daily give me. A–As sure this monster, Satan, will deceive me, C–Come, therefore, Lord, from Satan’s claws, relieve me.”

He started learning Latin when he was 4, Greek when he was 9, French when he was 10, Hebrew when he was 13. One Sunday morning in his independent nonconformist church, he was getting a little bored singing Psalms. He didn’t have a problem with the Psalms but he felt they were dead. At this point in history, hymns had already been sung in Germany as much as a hundred years earlier and Martin Luther had written “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” One day after listening to his complaints, Watts’ father told him, “Well then, young man, why don’t you give us something better to sing?” Watts rose to the challenge. Over the next two years, he wrote a new hymn each Sunday.

The Psalms remained near to his heart, but he felt they should be sung in light of Christ’s finished work, which the psalmists had not fully known. He felt also they should be more singable, so he wrote imitations of 138 songs in poetic meter. I found his collection online. It is called “Psalms of David: Imitated in the Language of the New Testament,” published in 1719. He took each of the Psalms and rewrote them in light of Christ with poetic meter. Now I understand in Hebrew that many of the Psalms originally did rhyme and they did have meter in the Hebrew language, but they had lost that when they were translated.

The Ten Commandments

In 1988 I taught at a Christian school in Massachusetts. When I got there, I found out that the school had made a commitment to memorize the Ten Commandments. They employed the Ten Commandments as written by Isaac Watts, with a few adaptations which I think Isaac Watts would approve of, like changing “thee” to “you.”

The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus chapter 20, which I like to recall is the second book in the Bible. Ten Commandments, 2 (for second book) times 10 is twenty. In the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, in the fifth chapter, we also have the ten commandments. Here is Isaac Watts’ rendering.

Thou shalt have no more gods but me
Before no idol bend the knee
Take not the name of God in vain
Nor dare the Sabbath day profane
Give both your parents honor due
Take heed that you no murder do
Abstain from words and deeds unclean

Nor steal though you are poor and mean
Nor make a willful lie, nor love it
What is thy neighbor's, do not covet.

It is much easier to memorize that poem because of the rhyme and meter. So I'm a big fan of Isaac Watts. Isaac Watts wrote so many hymns, but the more you read about the histories of these hymns in this book that I've compiled, you'll find out that it was common practice sometimes for preachers to sing a hymn that went with their sermon. So they would frequently enlist somebody the week before what their sermon text was going to be, and whoever was responsible would then make a hymn to fit the message.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for these people that have gone before and these giants of the faith, these people that loved You and loved Your word and have had a gift for putting words together in ways that we can sing Your truth. Thank You for Isaac Watts and Fanny Crosby. Thank You for Elisabeth Elliot and her testimony, and thank You for the Spirit of God that inspired David to write the Psalms which have inspired hymn writers right up to the present. So bless us now and help those who are listening to choose just the right hymn and give them creative ways to learn it and bring their family together in a unique way as they sing it together. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You can find the hymn book that I put together which has CDs that accompany it here: <https://store.demmelearning.com/hymns.html>. There are four CDs with 25 hymn tunes on each one.