

The Music Herald

“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

Colossians 3:16

“Full Trust in the Ways of the Heavenly Father”

The funeral service had been read. The body of the venerable Robert E. Lee was now being laid to rest. The hearts of all were brimming with love for the beloved chieftain, but none could find words to suit the solemn occasion.

Heavy rains and flooding had prevented many of Lee’s most distinguished officers from attending, but their place was abundantly filled with simple, ill-clad privates whose equally sincere devotion had once manifested itself on the battlefield and now did so in silent tears.

The long silence was at last broken when from their ranks a lone voice began to sing, “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord.” Instantly, the men took up the strain they knew so well, and the sound swelled to a multitude of voices. It was the favorite hymn of their beloved commander, as he put it, an “expression of his full trust in the ways of the Heavenly Father,” and they sang it with full heart and voice to its end until their general’s body was hid from view.

This immortal hymn has been a favorite of countless many over the years and is truly a marvel of hymno-

dy. It is almost entirely the words of Scripture and adheres very closely to the exact meaning of the Scripture texts in their original languages.

The hymn made its first appearance in a very modest way. In 1787, it appeared as hymn number 128 in Rippon’s *Selection*, which we looked at last month, perhaps the greatest gem to come out of that collection. Its title was “Exceeding Great and Precious Promises,” and its only attribution of authorship was the letter “K.”

Almost immediately after its publication, the hymn became immensely popular even though the author was for many years veiled in obscurity to all but those who were close to him. Over the years, several possibilities for the identity of “K” were offered, including some very plausible ones like George Keith, the son-in-law of John Gill, who often wrote hymns to be sung at the close of Gill’s sermons. But in the late 1800s, this puzzle was at last solved by firsthand accounts of those who lived in Rippon’s day, and evidence was brought to light that ascribed authorship to a man named Robert Keene.

Robert Keene was the precentor at Rippon’s church and, along with Thomas Walker, compiled the

“How Firm a Foundation” to the Tune “Geard”

This is the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” as it was first known, in Rippon’s congregation. This tune, “Geard,” composed by Robert Keene, was named for a Baptist pastor in the English town of Hitchin. Pastor Geard’s church was endearingly notorious in its day. The congregation knew only a very few tunes, and once when a long meter text was to be sung, the tune chosen for it was a short meter tune. When this was realized, to smooth it over, the congregation was led to do what was ever after called “puckering in,” squeezing the syllables of the eight-syllable-line text into the six-syllable-line music. Though this no doubt caused much good-natured consternation, the church and its pastor remained beloved and respected by all who knew them, as the title of this tune testifies.

Exceeding Great and Precious Promises

“Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises.” -- II Peter 1:4.

Geard 11.

K.

R. Keene

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system includes a Treble clef, an Air part, and a Bass clef. The lyrics are: "How firm a Foun - da - tion, ye Saints of the Lord, Is laid for your Faith in — his ex - cel-lent Word; What more can he". The second system continues the melody and lyrics: "say than to you he — hath said? You, who un-to JE - SUS, You, who un-to JE - SUS, You, who un-to JE-SUS for Re - fuge have fled." The third system shows the final notes of the piece.

From Rippon’s *Selection of Psalm and Hymn Tunes*, Performer’s Reprints, www.performersedition.com

tunebook that accompanied Rippon's hymnbook. As a musician, he wrote not only the text of "How Firm a Foundation," but also the tune to which it was sung in that day, a tune called "Geard" found in the tunebook, reproduced on page 1 of this newsletter.

Little else is known of his life, but he must have been a humble man. Since he would be the one leading the congregation in singing this hymn and since he had written its tune, it was no doubt his own humility that induced him to want only the letter "K" on this hymn.

He also must have been a man who knew and loved the Bible. The hymn is almost entirely the words of Scripture in poetic verse. Those who have studied this hymn have found no less than twelve passages from which he drew. Some of these would be obscure passages today except that they have been made famous by his hymn. We have put these passages side by side with the hymn below, where we also give the hymn in its complete original form, with all seven stanzas and with all its original words. You can see here how closely it follows the words of Scripture.

Perhaps the Lord has allowed the man to fade into obscurity so that the hymn itself and the truth of Scripture it contains would rise to prominence. Indeed, such has been the case. Though Robert Keene has been established as the author, his name is virtually unknown today and appears in very few hymnals, but his hymn is known and loved worldwide.

One place especially to notice is the last stanza. Notice the repetition of the phrase "I will not" in the second line and the threefold repetition of the word "never" in the last line. In Rippon's original book, there was a footnote after that stanza, saying that this wording was "agreeable to Dr. Doddridge's translation of Heb. 13:5." This footnote refers to an exposition of the New Testament called *The Family Expositor* written by another hymnist, Philip Doddridge. In this book, for the verse Hebrews 13:5, Philip Doddridge brings out the full force of the Greek original, in which the first phrase is a double negative and the second is a triple negative. In Doddridge's translation, the verse reads, "I will not, I will not leave thee, I will never, never, never forsake thee." Thus by preserving the force of these repeated negatives, Keene has accurately conveyed the full meaning of this passage, that it is doubly, yea triply impossible that God would forsake one who has "on Jesus leaned for repose."

Amazingly, this hymn that is more widely popular in America than in its native home of England. It is argued that this American popularity is due to the tune to which it was first sung in America, the well-known "Adeste Fideles," given on page 3 of this newsletter. Like Keene, the composer of this tune has faded into the background. For many years, the tune was labeled anonymous, but all who have read the evidence are now agreed that the composer was John Francis Wade, an English musician who lived and worked in France.

1. 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.

2. 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 thy Days may demand, shall thy Strength ever be.

3. "Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismay'd,
"I, I am thy GOD, and will still give thee Aid;
"I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
"Upheld by my righteous omnipotent Hand.

4. "When thro' 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.

5. "When thro' fiery Trials thy Pathway 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.

6. "Even down to old Age, all my People shall prove
"My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable Love;
"And when hoary Hairs shall their Temples adorn,
"Like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne.

7. "The Soul that on JESUS hath lean'd for Repose,
"I will not, I will not desert to his Foes;
"That Soul, tho' all Hell should endeavor to shake,
"I'll never — no never — no never forsake."

I Cor. 3:11 — For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

II Pet. 1:4 — Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises.

Heb. 6:18 — We might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.

Rom. 8:35-39 — Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Deut. 33:25 — As thy days, so shall thy strength be.

Deut. 31:6 — Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.

Isa. 41:10 — Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

Isa. 43:2 — When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.

II Cor. 12:9 — My grace is sufficient for thee.

Isa. 46:4 — And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.

Isa. 40:11 — He shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom.

Heb. 13:5 — I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

In 1832 in America, this text was attached to its most enduring tune. This is the tune to which it is most commonly sung today and to which Lee's men probably sang it at his funeral. That tune, called "Foundation" today, first appeared as "Protection" in a tunebook called *Genuine Church Music* published in 1832 by Joseph Funk in the Shenandoah Valley. Yet again, the composer is unknown, and in this case he to this day remains unknown. This tune is given on page 4 of this newsletter.

While men, both known and unknown, have come and gone, this immortal hymn lives on as an expression of "full trust in the ways of the Heavenly Father." As Lee and countless others have found, those who flee unto Jesus for refuge will find indeed a firm foundation laid for their faith in His excellent Word.

References:

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"How Firm a Foundation" to the Tune "Adeste Fideles"

It was with this tune that "How Firm a Foundation" first came to be known in America in 1792 and became immediately popular. The tune is sometimes called "Portuguese Hymn," but this is because in 1797 it was heard in the chapel at the Portuguese Embassy in London and was erroneously assumed to be a Portuguese melody. It has been well established now that the "Portuguese Hymn" was composed by Englishman John Francis Wade. This stirring tune is well suited for conveying this text and is thought to be one of the main factors in making the hymn so beloved in America.

How Firm a Foundation

ADESTE FIDELES 11s with repeat

Robert Keene

John Francis Wade

1. How firm a Foun - da - tion, ye Saints of the Lord, Is laid for your
 Faith in his ex - cel - lent Word; What more can he say than to
 you he hath said? You, who un - to JE - SUS for Re - fuge have
 fled. You, who un - to JE - SUS for Re - fuge have fled.

From *Trinity Hymnal — Baptist Edition*, Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, Inc., 2014.

“How Firm a Foundation” to the Tune “Protection”

Joseph Funk was the son of a German-Mennonite immigrant into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in the late 1700s and early 1800s. When he was grown, he settled in a little glen in the Valley where, from his log house beside a water spring he compiled music for his fellow Germans, giving his glen the name it still bears today, “Singer’s Glen.”

His first book of music in 1816 was entirely in German for the many German-speaking settlers in the Valley. His next book in 1832, *Genuine Church Music*, was in English and became the bridge for the German immigrants to begin singing in English, just as they had in German from his other book. These immigrants would have a large influence on future American music, and thus the book was of great importance. It was in this book that the tune “Protection” first appeared. It is thought to be an ancient melody never written down until this book.

Joseph Funk is venerated by the title the “Father of Song in Northern Virginia,” inscribed on his tombstone today. He had numerous descendants who carried on his music legacy, and his tunebook, called today *Harmonia Sacra*, is still printed and used today, especially among the German Mennonites of the Valley.

PROTECTION. 4 lines 11's.

11 meter

Treble

Alto

Tenor (Melody)

Bass

1. How firm a Foun - da - tion, ye Saints of the Lord, Is — laid for your Faith in his ex - cel-lent Word; What

more can he say than to you he hath said? You, — who un - to JE - SUS for Re - fuge have fled.

From *The Harmonia Sacra, 25th Edition*, Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1993.



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