

GUIDE ME, O THOU GREAT JEHOVAH

William Williams

As is common in most hymnbooks, our hymnbook contains only three verses to this hymn. However, there are two more verses ...

Lord, I trust Thy mighty power,
Wondrous are Thy works of old;
Thou deliver'st Thine from thralldom [*slavery*],
Who for naught themselves had sold:
Thou didst conquer, Thou didst conquer,
Sin, and Satan and the grave,
Sin, and Satan and the grave.

Musing on my habitation,
Musing on my heavenly home,
Fills my soul with holy longings:
Come, my Jesus, quickly come;
Vanity is all I see;
Lord, I long to be with Thee!
Lord, I long to be with Thee!

When you invest life and enthusiasm into some of the old hymns, they produce a great sound of praise. We have just been singing probably the most well-known of the Welsh hymns, "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land". It was written by William Williams.

William Williams wrote over nine hundred hymns, both in Welsh and English. He was born on 11th February 1717 at Cefncoed, a farm approximately three miles from Llandovery in Carmarthenshire. His father John was a farmer and the ruling elder in the non-conformist Congregational Church. His mother Dorothy was thirty years younger than her husband John and they had six children, - three sons and three daughters. William was the fourth child, and the only son to survive into adulthood, together with one sister Mary. He is known as William Williams (Pantycelyn) because after his father died his mother and the family moved to her parent's farm at Pantycelyn.

When William was seventeen he went to study to become a medical doctor. He attended Llwynllwyd Academy, Llanigon, where there were also men training for the ministry. It is where Howell Harris studied, - a preacher mightily used of God in the Welsh Methodist Revival in the 18th century.

On one occasion, in 1738, William Williams was making the journey home from the Academy, and he heard a man preaching in a churchyard in the small market town of Talgarth. He could see a crowd gathered around listening, and he went across and it was there he heard Howell Harris pleading with his hearers and warning them of coming judgement. That day, William Williams trusted Christ as his Saviour.

He finished his studies to become a doctor, but instead, he became a preacher of the Gospel, and along with Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland, became the three ‘giants’ mightily used by God in the Welsh Revival.

Harris and Rowland were both Anglican ministers, so Williams applied and became a curate (i.e. an assistant to the parish priest). He got into trouble though and was complained about concerning nineteen irregularities, mainly to do with him refusing to make the sign of the cross when baptizing infants, and also crossing parish boundaries in his Gospel preaching. Because of his indiscretions, - after the initial two years as a curate, - his path towards ordination was rejected, and he was dismissed from the Anglican ministry.

And so, he changed direction and in 1743 he attended the first Association of Calvinistic Methodists where he met George Whitefield who greatly encouraged him to preach the Gospel ... and that is what he did. He became assistant to Daniel Rowland, and was given the responsibility of overseeing many Methodist Calvinistic societies across the south of Wales. Over the next 48 years he travelled, - on horseback and foot, - some 150,000 miles, preaching, teaching and leading the meetings.

In the English Methodist (Arminian) movement Charles Wesley was presenting the truths of the Gospel in his many hymns, and it was suggested the Welsh Association would look for someone in Wales to do the same ... and William Williams’ gift was acknowledged, and he was chosen. He began writing his hymns in 1744, he wrote “Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah” in 1745, - first of all in Welsh, and then translated into English by Peter Williams in 1771 (no relation), and published in 1772. He wrote 155 hymns between 1744 and 1747. He kept writing more hymns until 1787, and his wife, - Mary Francis, - helped him write some of the tunes. He died 11th January 1791, a month short of his 74th birthday.

“Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah” ... The imagery William Williams uses is saturated in the Old Testament wilderness wanderings of the Hebrew people.

For most of the four hundred and thirty years they had spent in the foreign country of Egypt, they were prisoners and slaves. All hope of freedom and living in the Promised Land became a forgotten dream. They were living in a *nightmare!*

Then along came Moses, a young man who had been taken from his parents when he was a baby. For the first forty years of his life he had lived in the luxury of the palace, as the adopted son of the princess. Throughout those forty years though, the Lord worked it out he was taught in the Hebrew ways. He was fully aware of his background, and how he came from the nation of Israel, and their God was his God. And in His own perfect timing, the God of Israel separated Moses out of Egypt and he went to work in Midian as a shepherd.

One day, while tending his sheep, the Lord met and told him he would deliver the Hebrews out of Egypt. At first, Moses could not understand why God would send him back to Egypt, and to Pharaoh, and to the children of Israel.

But, over five hundred years earlier, God had promised the father of their nation, Abram, **Gen. 12:2** I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. God also told Abram, **Gen. 15:13** Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; **14** And also ... afterward shall they come out with great substance. ... **17:8** And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

... Did not Moses *believe* what God had promised? Many years had passed in between, but nevertheless, did he not *believe* in the covenant God had made with Abraham? God's word is true, and it is accurate, - and when He made the promise to Abraham He meant what He said and said what He meant ... God promised it, and it would therefore come to pass. And so, God was about to carry out that promise through him, , **Ex. 3:9** Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. **10** Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Despite the initial protestations of Moses, and despite the inhibitions of the children of Israel, and despite the opposition from Pharaoh, God's word came to pass as He had promised. And Moses successfully led the children of Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness on their way to the land of Canaan.

What a tremendous step of faith that was! Indeed, anything to do with God requires faith. It takes faith to believe in Him. Faith is required to trust in Him. You cannot see Him, and you cannot touch Him *but faith* makes Him more real than anything you can see or touch. ... Where does faith come from though? ... This kind of faith is a gift from God, - the faith to believe *comes* from Him!

Moses did not see God, but he knew God was speaking to him out of the burning bush. ... And Moses could not have done anything in the court of the Pharaoh if he did not believe God was with him. The children of Israel would have died and become extinct in Egypt if God had not stepped in and given to Moses the faith he, - under God, - would lead them out.

And the route God took His people was neither the straightforward or quickest route to Canaan, but He took them on a journey along which they would discover more about Him. ... Many of the children of Israel did not appreciate God's goodness in the wilderness for they griped and groaned about one thing after another ... about the sun being too hot, no food, no water, then when they got food it was the wrong type ... and they wished they had never left Egypt!

They foolishly and ungratefully hankered after the past and longed not for the future in the Promised Land. And, consequently, God judged them and many of them perished in the wilderness, - they never made it into Canaan.

Being a Christian is not for the feeble-hearted, - it is not for those who aren't prepared to commit themselves along the journey of faith in God. Your faith *is* a gift He gives you by His grace, - it is something we do not deserve and we never can earn, - we cannot boast it comes from anything we can generate ... but when God gives you the faith to believe, Paul explains your responsibility, **Phil. 2:12** *Wherefore, my beloved, ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.* **13** *For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.* ... Paul is not saying you achieve salvation by working for it, - for it is a gift from God ... But what he *is* saying is once you have it, you work by His grace to keep it for His grace keeps you through the wilderness, until you arrive in the Promised Land, **Heb. 4:9** *There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.*

There is only one way of reaching Heaven and that is God's way, - by remaining close to the Lord. You will never make it on your own ... Some of the Hebrews who left Egypt never made it to Canaan, - in fact, only two of them did, Joshua and Caleb. The Hebrews had to contend with many enemies along the way, and they had to confront issues which often seemed insurmountable ... but with the

flame of God before them in the night and the cloud of God with them during the day, they made it ... And that is what William Williams was alluding to,

I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.

When the children of Israel took their eyes off God and looked to the idols, they faltered and fell ... and God judged them for turning away from Him. Nothing would take them through the wilderness except His presence, **Ex. 33:14** *My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.* ... And Moses knew how precious those words were for he replied to the Lord, **15** *If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence.* ... Lord, we dare not take another step without You! We dare not travel on our own ... The chorus says,

My Lord knows the way through the wilderness,
All I have to do is follow.
Strength for today is mine all the way,
And all that I need for tomorrow.

King Solomon wrote, **Prov. 3:33** *he blesseth the habitation of the just.* **34** ... *he giveth grace unto the lowly.* **35** *The wise shall inherit glory* ... God will not take you anywhere He does not have for you to be! He will not take you through the wilderness if there is not a Promised Land on the other side. When He leads you through a barren desert, He is with you. When it gets tough, He will not abandon you,! Despite the distressing and traumatic terrain, He will, - as sure as He is the Sovereign God, - ... He will bring you out of the wilderness, and He will eventually bring you safe into the Land of Glory He has promised all His people.

And He will keep providing the ‘bread of Heaven’ along the way, - as much as you need and for as long as you need it. You may never have enough to store away, but you will have enough of His daily provision to keep and sustain you. You will never go hungry, - He will not starve you, - of His goodness ... The wilderness is the wilderness, and it demands hardship, but here is His promise to His people, **Gen. 28:15** *behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.*

What a promise! ... And there will even be the ‘crystal fountain’ in those places you would never expect it. ... Some of you might remember “Streams in the Desert”, written by Elizabeth Cowman ... Well, Isaiah spoke about those same streams in the desert, **Is. 35:6** ... *in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.* **7** *And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs*

of water ... **8** And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness ... **10** And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.

... As William Williams describes, we have to endure the wilderness first before we arrive on the shores of Canaan ... as the psalmist wrote, **Ps. 139:10** *Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.* ... As David wrote, **Ps. 23:2** *He leadeth me beside the still waters.* **3** ... *He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.* ... And as the prophet Isaiah wrote, **Is. 48:17** *Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God ... which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go.*

William Williams concludes with a great note of victory ... in the assurance God will deliver Him safely into Glory...

Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to Thee.

Isaiah declared, **Is. 35:1** *The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.* **2** *It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the LORD, and the excellency of our God.*

That is the destination of the Christian, - to see the glory of the LORD, and the excellency of our God. It is the journey in life you began, which God will fulfil when He brings you unto Himself.

Being a Christian is well-worth it for the final dividends are out of this world, literally! God the Father gave us His Son to be our Saviour. Jesus became the ransom which purchased our redemption ... an early version of the hymn began, "Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer" ... That is what Jesus did, - He *redeemed* us ... We were born into the slavery of sin, - as it were, - but He bought us back and handed us over to His Father. ... And that means we are children of the Heavenly King, - **Rev. 1:6** *And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father.*

As we consider these great truths from the Word of God, what is our response? Surely it has to be this ... it comes from one of those verses Williams wrote that is not in our hymn book, and it simply says this,

Come, my Jesus, quickly come ...
Lord, I long to be with Thee!