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Mormonbasics.com is humbled to bring you a commentary on the hymns published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This commentary is presented in a two-column format. The original text, as presented in the hymnbook published by the LDS Church, is in the left column. The comments on the right are provided by mormonbasics.com. We have even changed the color of the text so there won't be any question as to who wrote what.

Personal note from the commentator:

The hymns of the Church are sacred text. The Lord has made it very clear to us through his prophets that the singing of hymns is a form of prayer, and as such is sacred communication. Much of the sacred Spirit and reverence we experience in our meetings, especially Sacrament Meeting, comes from the Spirit that accompanies the singing of the hymns.

The hymns are written in poetic form, and as such are able to take certain licenses and liberties with the English language that cannot normally be expressed in any other way. It is certainly not the aim of this commentary to improve on the beauty of the poetic expressions found in our sacred hymns. As a teacher of English to those who speak other languages, I have found that many of the hymns have expressions that are difficult for some people to understand.

Because hymns are written to fit a set rhythmic pattern or meter, often the expression has to be condensed to fit in a small space, but still convey its intended meaning. It is the combination of the rhythm, text, and music that create such a powerful Spiritual experience when singing the hymns. My attempts to explain some of the meaning behind the text should not detract from the original meaning, nor should it replace the original meaning. Hymns, like parables, take on different meanings as the circumstances of our lives change. My commentary is only a starting point for (hopefully) a better understanding of the overall meaning of the hymn in this work. Anyone else writing this same commentary would have different perspectives and points to make. That is the nature of a commentary. I pray that what I say will, in some way, help in your understanding of this hymn. Since this is a personal study of the hymns, I will sometimes use the first person when writing the commentary.

Kelly P. Merrill

For the Strength of the Hills

1. For the strength of the hills we bless thee,
 Our God, our fathers' God;
 Thou hast made thy children mighty
 By the touch of the mountain sod.
 Thou hast led thy chosen Israel
 To freedom's last abode;

(Chorus]

For the strength of the hills we bless thee,
 Our God, our fathers' God.

2. At the hands of foul oppressors
 We've borne and suffered long;
 Thou hast been our help in weakness,
 And thy pow'r hath made us strong.
 Amid ruthless foes outnumbered
 In weariness we trod;

3. Thou hast led us here in safety
 Where the mountain bulwark stands
 As the guardian of the loved ones
 Thou hast brought from many lands.
 For the rock and for the river,
 The valley's fertile sod,

4. We are watchers of a beacon
 Whose light must never die;
 We are guardians of an altar
 'Midst the silence of the sky.
 Here the rocks yield founts of courage,
 Struck forth as by thy rod;

The "strength of the hills" refers to the safety the saints found in the mountain valleys of Utah. In Utah they were free from the persecution they faced in the United States. At the time, Utah was a territory, and not actually part of the United States of America.

We bless the Lord for the protection we receive here in these hills of Utah. We thank the God of our fathers for this protection from those who would hurt us. The Lord has made the Saint's children strong from their working and eating off the land (the touch of the mountain sod [grass/soil]). The Lord has led His children to this place of freedom, the last place the Saints could go to get away from the persecution. The phrase, "freedom's last abode" literally means "the last place freedom lives or the last home of freedom."

A "foul oppressor" is someone who is extremely offensive in the way they put someone down and tries to control them. At the hands of such people the Saints have suffered for a long time. The Lord has been our help in our weakness, and His power has made us strong. We walk among enemies (foes) who are far greater in number than we are, and are without mercy (ruthless). We are tired of our walk or time spent among them.

The Lord has brought us here to the mountains of Utah where we can be safe. The mountains act as a shield (bulwark) or protection from our enemies. The Lord has brought our relatives and friends (loved ones) from many countries (lands). They have all come to experience with us the rocks, the rivers, and the rich soil of the valleys.

The gospel of Christ can be compared to a light, like you would see in a lighthouse. This beacon, or beam of light that shows people where to go, is kept alive by the Saints of the Church. It is our obligation to keep it burning brightly, and never let it die. Here in the tops of the Rocky Mountains we are the protectors (guardians) of a sacred place, the temple (altar). Here in these mountains it is as though the very rocks give up fountains of courage, like the rock gave up water when hit (struck) with the rod of Moses. The idea being that just as the children of Israel were in need of water, and Moses struck the rock and the Lord made water gush out to give them water, so in these mountains, the people seem to gain courage, as though a prophet had struck the rocks and courage flowed out like water, ready to be consumed by the Saints.

MUSIC

Evan Stephens, 1854-1930

TEXT

Felicia D. Hemans, 1793-1835; adapted by Edward
L. Sloan, 1830-1874

SCRIPTURES

Psalm 95:1-7