

He Leadeth Me! O Blessed Thought

Hymn Story by Harry Eskew

We are fortunate to have the words of the author of this beloved hymn, Joseph Henry Gilmore (1834-1918), giving his story of how he came to write the words of "He Leadeth Me.":

As a young man who recently had been graduated from Brown University and Newton Theological Institution, I was supplying for a couple of Sundays the pulpit of the First Baptist Church in Philadelphia. At the midweek service—on the 26th of March, 1862—I set out to give the people an exposition of the 23rd Psalm, which I had given before on three or four occasions; but this time I did not get further than the words "He Leadeth Me." Those words took hold of me as they had never done before. I saw in them a significance and beauty of which I had never dreamed.

I was the darkest hour of the War of the Rebellion. I did not refer to that fact—that is, I don't think I did—but it may subconsciously have led me to realize God's leadership is the one significant fact in human experience, that it makes no difference how we are led, whither we are led, so long as we are sure God is leading us.

At the close of the meeting a few of us in the parlor of my host, good Deacon Wattson, who resided next door to the church, kept on talking about the thoughts which I had emphasized; and then and there, on a back page of the brief from which I had intended to speak, I penciled the hymn, handed it to my wife and thought no more about it.

It occurred to her months afterward to send the hymn to the *Watchman and Reflector*, a paper published in Boston, where it was first printed. In that paper it attracted the attention of William B. Bradbury, who slightly modified the refrain and set the hymn to the music which has done so much to promote its popularity. As I wrote the hymn, the refrain consisted of only two lines. Mr. Bradbury added the other two. In other respects the hymn stands just as I wrote it in Deacon Wattson's parlor, talking and writing at the same time.

I did not know until 1865 that my hymn had been set to music. I went to Rochester to preach as a candidate before the Second Baptist Church. Going into their chapel on the day I reached the city, I took up a hymnal to see what they sang, and opened it at my own hymn "He Leadeth Me." I accepted it as an indication of divine guidance and have no doubt that I was right.

The hymn has been translated into many different languages, perhaps more than any other modern hymn, as it appeals especially to the wanderer and the outcast, and I have received any toughing testimonials to the comfort and help it has rendered God's dear children. It was to that end, I take it, that He put it into my mind and heart when, as it must be seen, I hadn't the faintest conception of what I was doing.

One of my former students writes me that it is the favorite hymn of the Japanese Christians. The hymn was actually sung in a Chinese court of justice by a Chinaman who had never seen a white missionary, to show the presiding justice

what a Christian hymn was like. The man was on trial for renting a building to some Christians who had opened an opium refuge, and, having told the judge that at their meetings that Christians prayed and sang hymns, he was asked for a specimen hymn. He sang "He Leadeth Me."

One cannot easily locate today the exact site in Philadelphia where Gilmore's hymn was written. Years later the United Gas Improvement Company moved to the site where this hymn originated and on June 1, 1926, the company placed a bronze tablet on their building which gave the first stanza of "He Leadeth Me" with the following statement:

"He Leadeth me," sung throughout the world, was written by the Rev. Dr. Joseph H. Gilmore, a son of a governor of New Hampshire, in the home of Deacon Wattson, immediately after preaching in the First Baptist Church, N.W. corner Broad and Arch Streets, on the 26th day of March 1862. The church and Deacon Wattson's home stood on the ground upon which this building is erected. [Quoted by William J. Reynolds in *Companion to Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1976), p. 85] This plaque seems to have disappeared. It would be helpful if it were restored to its rightful place, calling attention to the origin of this beloved hymn that is sung around the world.

He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought

He leadeth me: O blessed thought!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Refrain

He leadeth me, he leadeth me,
By his own hand he leadeth me,
His faithful follower would be,
For by his hand he leadeth me

Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom,
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,
By waters still, o'er troubled sea,
Still 'tis his hand that leadeth me.

Lord, I would place my hand in thine,
Nor ever murmur nor repine;
Content, whatever lot I see,
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me.

And when my task on earth is done,
When by thy grace the victory's won,
E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,
Since God through Jordan leadeth me.