

Hymn of the Month

July 2007

ABIDE WITH ME

The phrase, “it is better to wear out than to rust out,” was coined by Henry F. Lyte in the early nineteenth century. Lyte was an Anglican priest known for his great preaching and poetry, as well as for his constant frail state of health. He suffered for many years from asthma and tuberculosis, yet continued through his illnesses to preach and serve his parishes to the best of his ability. His life, in fact, was testament to his most famous quip, as he worked tirelessly at his profession. Sadly, Rev. Lyte wore out at the young age of 54, leaving behind a small legacy of sermons and poems.

Henry Lyte was well aware of his tenuous health, which acutely worsened in early 1847, but never feared death because of his faith in the Lord Jesus. It is reported that he wrote the hymn, *Abide with Me* shortly before preaching his final sermon at his poor fishing parish of Lower Brixham, Devonshire, England. He died in France later that same year en route to Italy. The hymn, for which he also composed a tune, did not become popular until approximately a decade later when it was published in the landmark hymnal, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. At this time, a new tune was composed for the text by one of the editors named William H. Monk. This new tune, called EVENTIDE is still used today.

The idea for the hymn, *Abide with Me* came from both the author’s foresight into his own dwindling days as well as from the account of the two disciples’ encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. In their encounter, these two individuals invited Jesus to “Abide with us, for it [was] toward evening and the day [was] far spent.” (Luke 24:29). Similarly, Lyte’s text invites Jesus to dwell near us as we approach the sunset of life, but can also be extrapolated to include any time in our lives. While the “evening” of life will only occur once for everyone, the periods of “darkness” and fleeing comfort may plague us for weeks, months, or even years at a time. It is no wonder that this hymn is sung at many funerals and memorial services; not only as a beautiful reflection of God’s presence at the end of life, but also for His constant companionship for those who mourn their loss.

While many stanzas in this hymn deserve mention, perhaps the most compelling is the opening line and title. The term *abide* means to dwell or sojourn. This refers to more than simple attendance of the Almighty at our side. In singing these words, we are asking God to be an intimate companion in life’s walk, to take up refuge in our souls. While not a substitute for a belief in the saving atonement of Jesus’ death, this request affirms the Christian’s desire for constant companionship as it beckons the Lord’s eternal promise to never leave us nor forsake us. It is for this reason that we celebrate this hymn as Hymn of the Month. May we in our daily walk, whether in joy or sorrow, whether in times of prosperity and health or days of feeble infirmity, continue to enjoy the fellowship of the risen Christ, and even look forward to those final days when we shall forever dwell with Him as Heaven’s morning breaks.