



WATCHMAN, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said,
The morning cometh, and also the night. (Isaiah 21:11-12)

The Advent Season is filled with mystic wonder and magical excitement at the expectation of the Coming of the Christ-Child. The season is cold and grim in most latitudes, yet this bleak winter season is filled with brilliant colors, song, and warm fellowship among men and women. We labor during the seasons of comfort from Spring to Autumn, but then comes Winter with its harsh gales and dreary, snow bound skies. The leaves are gone from the trees, and the nights are longest of all the year. But, then, comes the most beautiful of all celebrations – Christmas – just in the middle of our depressing days, and we are warmed by its fires and good will; but we are more strongly uplifted by the awe of its spiritual meaning to us.

Sir John Bowring wrote this simple and inquiring hymn in 1825 while serving in Parliament, and was later Consul-General of Canton, China, and Governor of Hong Kong. The tune given in the 1940 Hymnal is that of Lowell Mason entitled, WATCHMAN, written in 1831. Another beautiful hymn tune is ST. GEORGE'S WINDSON by George J. Elvey in 1858; but my favorite hymn tune for this great Advent hymn is ABERYSTWYTH by Joseph Parry in 1879. This latter tune seems to capture more fully the mystery and awe of the occasion represented.

Watchman, Tell Us of the Night

Watchman, tell us of the night,
What its signs of promise are.
Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height,
See that glory beaming star.
Watchman, does its beauteous ray
Aught of joy or hope foretell?
Traveler, yes—it brings the day,
Promised day of Israel.

Watchman, tell us of the night;
Higher yet that star ascends.
Traveler, blessedness and light,
Peace and truth its course portends.
Watchman, will its beams alone
Gild the spot that gave them birth?
Traveler, ages are its own;
See, it bursts o'er all the earth.

Watchman, tell us of the night,
For the morning seems to dawn.
Traveler, darkness takes its flight,
Doubt and terror are withdrawn.
Watchman, let thy wanderings cease;
Hie thee to thy quiet home.
Traveler, lo! the Prince of Peace,
Lo! the Son of God is come!

Watchman, tell us of the night, What its signs of promise are. Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height, See that glory beaming star. Watchman, does its beauteous ray Aught of joy or hope foretell? Traveler, yes – it brings the day, Promised day of Israel. A long night of seemingly unending darkness prevailed from the last words of the Old Testament Prophet to the time of John the Baptist. The words of Malachi should have been a great encouragement were it not for the four centuries of silence from the Throne of God which followed. *1 For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. 3 And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts.* (Malachi 4:1-3)

The promise referenced in the first verse of this hymn was one of primitive, in fact, eternal, origin – a Redeemer prepared for us *before the foundations of the world* were laid. The promise was told to Adam and Eve at their tragic fall from grace, and repeated many times in Old Testament writings. Abraham, being blessed with the miraculous birth of his only begotten son in Isaac, well understood the promise by strong faith. The Traveler mentioned is you and me. Those who seek the Light and follow will come to Bethlehem at last. What could be a more appropriate manner of announcing the birth of the Light of the World than by a beautiful heavenly body – the Star of Bethlehem? It was the fulfillment of God's promise of a Savior.

Watchman, tell us of the night; higher yet that star ascends. Traveler, blessedness and light, peace and truth its course portends. Watchman, will its beams alone gild the spot that gave them birth? Traveler, ages are its own; see, it bursts o'er all the earth. Please note the antiphonal nature of the hymn. The Traveler first enquires of the Watchman in each stanza, and the Watchman then answers. It is most beautiful when sung by two different voices or groups. The question could have been posed by those traveling Wise Men, or by you and me. We are all *strangers and pilgrims who seeketh after a city not made with hands*. Just as the approaching Star seems to climb higher and higher in its approach, so does the approaching grace of Christ rise more and more glorious in the heart of the Christian in grace. Though the Star stopped over Bethlehem, untold multitudes observed it on its traverse across the skies. There is even a possible reference to the Star made by astronomers of the Korean observatory at Chumsongdae recorded on wooden tablets in Haen-sa Temple. It was a Light for the world and not for a speck of earth – and for all who would follow – even if only shepherds and Wise Men.

Watchman, tell us of the night, for the morning seems to dawn. Traveler, shadows take their flight; doubt and terror are withdrawn. Watchman, you may go your way; hasten to your quiet home. Traveler, we rejoice today, for Emmanuel has come! Men have feared the darkness from birth to adulthood, and from centuries of spiritual darkness to days of enlightened faith. But regardless the smothering darkness, morning is always coming. Those men and women who sat in darkness for the centuries of silence from Heaven, finally have seen a Great Light, and that Light is Christ. *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.* Isaiah 9:2 (KJV) and *The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up.* (Matt 4:16)

Darkness is the absolute absence of light and energy; but Light is energy and reality revealed. Christ is that Light, full of grace and truth. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We could almost substitute Light in the stead of Life for they are nearly the same. When our souls are exposed to the Light of Christ, without hindrance of hidden sin, the shadows flee and our hearts and souls are full of Light.

The quiet home of the Watchman is not reached until the last spark of the soul's fire on earth, but then comes the brilliant and blinding Light of the Eternal Sunrise. Though our journey here may be strewn with ditches and pitfalls in our seasons of years, we persevere until the Dawn of promised Light which lies just beyond the Eastern Horizon.

Just remember during your days of toil and tears under the sun that *weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.* (Psalm 30:5) The coming birth of Christ is our morning of joy that lies ahead (and behind).