

Hymn 642, Be Thou My Vision

There is only one Christian missionary who has a holiday named after him, which is celebrated around the world. He is known by his own distinct color – green. He was a Scotsman evangelizing Ireland in the fourth century, and his name was Patrick. The worldwide holiday is St. Patrick’s Day.

Patrick planted 200 churches, and baptized 100,000 converts. Four hundred years later, the Irish church was still enduring and producing hymns, prayers, sermons, and songs of worship. One day in the 8th century, an unknown poet wrote a prayer asking God to be everything he sees – his vision, and also asking God to be his wisdom, and his best thought by day, and his best thought by night.

It was not until 1,200 years had passed, in 1905 a scholar in Dublin, Ireland translated this ancient Gaelic poem into English. A second scholar took that English translation and crafted it into the rhyme and meter needed for it to be sung as a hymn. Appropriately, the tune chosen was borrowed from a traditional Irish folk song named Slane. Slane was an area in Ireland where the missionary Patrick had presented the locals, called the Druids, with the gospel of Christ.

With roots going back to the 4th century, this one of our oldest, and most moving hymns.

Even the title shows us this hymn is a prayer addressed to God. The whole hymn is held together with a unifying pattern of continuous prayer requests “Be Thou. The words “Be Thou” only appear twice in our version of the hymn, but in the original text the phrase “Be Thou” occurs more frequently. Remember each time we sing “Thou” we are requesting God to BE for us what each line asks. Each stanza requests a variation of this main desire – that God would ever hold the position of central importance in our lives.

The first stanza focuses on God as the one thing we see, everywhere we look. Two meanings of vision overlap here – that which we literally see, and also that for which we aim. Both that upon which we set our gaze with undistracted attention, and also that which guides and inspires our actions. Always God.

The second stanza expresses another aspect of God that we desire would fill our lives – His wisdom. The third stanza recognizes the Christian life as a battle, and our need for God to be our battleship and our sword, both our defense and our offense. In the fourth stanza, we express what we value – rather than gold, our treasure, our riches, our inheritance is God. The fifth and last stanza turns upward and forward to the ultimate future of heaven, with a summary of the whole hymn. God is the bright sun who illuminates, colors, and dominates everything we see. God is the heart of our own heart, the very center of who we are, no matter what suffering or joys come our way. Once more we repeat that God is our vision. It is a poem, a hymn, a prayer about the priorities of the Christian. We put first things first. We subordinate all of the rest of life to God. God is preeminent for us in

every day of our lives. Our minds go to a declaration of Christ in Scripture in Colossians 1:17-19, “*He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...*”

Let’s ask God to give us Christ-centered lives by both praying and singing all five verses of 642, *Be Thou My Vision*.
