

## How Firm a Foundation- June's Hymn of the Month 2023

By  
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One day, years ago, I received a phone call from my Mom. She was wondering if I knew the story behind the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." Her interest had been piqued because the song was used during the special service at Washington's National Cathedral. Since the National Day of Prayer had been prompted by an attack on America, she was wondering if the hymn had any American connection. Well, always wanting to keep Mom happy, I went right to work and soon discovered there are some interesting connections of this song to American history--plus, a mystery that has never been solved. So Mom, in the words of Paul Harvey, "Here's the rest of the story."

First published in 1787 in a hymnal, "Selection of Hymns," the song was mistakenly credited to the publisher, Dr. John Rippon. The true authorship is still a mystery, as well as the composer of the music, even though the tune is of the sturdy folk tunes of the South. Dr. Rippon's hymnal became very popular to the extent that an American edition was also printed by the Baptist churches in Philadelphia in 1820. By the time of the Civil War, "How Firm a Foundation" was a favorite in the North and the South.

What I find to be most interesting is that this song had a real impact on some important people. Because the hymn had been a favorite of his wife, Rachael, President Andrew Jackson requested it to be sung at his bedside shortly before he died, saying he wanted only to join his wife in Heaven. Robert E. Lee requested the song for his funeral "as an expression of his full trust in the ways of the Heavenly Father." Even Theodore Roosevelt recognized the importance of this song during a time of great need.

If ever there was a time that America needed a firm foundation, it is certainly now. The selection of this hymn for the special service was wise and interestingly American. I say that because from a hymn storybook published in 1906, by the American Tract Society in New York City, I discovered this prophetic closing:

The popularity of the hymn in America has been remarkable and promises to continue. Indeed, there are few more reviving or more spiritually helpful. It is too familiar to need quotation. but one cannot suppress the last stanza, with its powerful and affecting emphasis on the Divine promise—

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose  
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake*