

## March Hymn of the Month

*Just as picturesque scenes can bring peace and calmness to the soul, so does beautiful music*



["The Lord Is My Light" Orchestrated by Larry Beebe](#)



["The Lord Is My Light" Ring Tone](#)

### The Hymn



The dark hours of winter diminish in the month of March as the hours of daylight become noticeably longer. Similarly, the text of "The Lord Is

My Light" conveys how the darker aspects of life such as fear, sorrow, sin, and weakness are reduced by the increased brightness of the gospel of Jesus Christ which brings faith, strength, joy, and salvation.

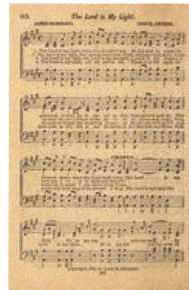
In the photo above, the sunlight turns a cloud into a rainbow, symbolizing how the Lord and his light can turn difficulties in our lives into beautiful blessings.

Of the many meanings of the word 'light,' some implied by the hymn text are 'guide,' 'spiritual illumination,' 'truth,' and 'enlightenment.' Substituting these synonyms gives food for thought, for example:  
The Lord is my guide.  
The Lord is my truth.

Those who have no physical sight are perhaps better able to appreciate the meaning of the hymn than the sighted. If we look at the text of the first verse from the perspective of physical blindness, the literal benefit of the presence of someone to guide, whether in the day or night is apparent. This perspective carries greater importance in the symbolism of spiritual blindness, which is relieved by the presence of the Spirit of the Lord as a guide.

In the second verse the author tells us in the figurative sense that faith is stronger than physical knowledge (sight), and will overcome doubt and troubles (clouds) to allow us to spiritually see Jesus reigning in glory, and understand his gospel and his ways (live in his light.) Once we have this knowledge, we cannot remain in 'darkness' or ignorance, the opposite

### The Author



The Author, James Nicholson, was born in Ireland about 1828. No information is known of his early life.

It is said that James emigrated to the United States of America at the age of about 25. His name

appears on a Philadelphia passenger list from 1850, which would be in that time frame. It seems likely that his emigration may have been connected with the great Irish famine in the late 1840s. The famine was caused by several years of potato crop failures due to blight. During the terrible famine period, with its resulting starvation and typhus outbreaks it is said that a million of the Irish people died and a million emigrated. At least one-half million documented Irish immigrants entered the United States of America, with many more undocumented. James established himself in Philadelphia. By his writing ability, it is evident that he was an educated man as well as a religious man, and he is believed to have become a Methodist minister.

He is said to have been a member of the Wharton Street Methodist Episcopal Church and that the composer William Kirkpatrick was at this church at the same time. It is likely that the two worked together and Kirkpatrick's association with John Sweney led to our hymn, "The Lord Is My Light" being written by Nicholson and set to music by John Sweney. James Nicholson wrote a number of hymns that were set to the music of either Kirkpatrick or Sweney, and published in their music collections.

It is believed that after almost twenty years in Philadelphia, James moved to Washington, D. C. and worked as a clerk in the Post Office Department for a time.

### The Composer



The Composer, John R. Sweney, was born at West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1837. West Chester is about 17 miles northwest of Chester, which is about 15 miles southwest of Philadelphia on the Delaware River.

His musical gift was evident at an early age and while still a boy he began to teach music in the public schools and lead Sunday school performances.

At age 19 he began a serious study of music under the celebrated German teacher, Professor Bauer.

John studied violin and piano and became a choir leader. He began teaching in Dover, Delaware at age 22.

When the American Civil War broke out, John led the band of the Third Delaware Regiment.

After the war, he returned to his birthplace, West Chester, and became Professor of Music at the Pennsylvania Military Academy, and received his Bachelor and Doctor of Music degrees.

He also served as music director of the Bethany Presbyterian Church for several years. It is said that the Sunday School organized by superintendent John Wanamaker at the Bethany Presbyterian Church was a model that many other churches followed.

John Sweney as the song leader benefited from the notable Wanamaker's support and became much in demand as a song leader for revivals and assemblies.

During his lifetime, it is said that John composed music for more than 1,000 Gospel songs,

of enlightenment.

The text is replete with scriptural references from the Bible, which apparently were of great familiarity to the author. The opening line, "The Lord is my light; then why should I fear?" is found in Psalm 27:1, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" Other phrases of the hymn text we recognize in Isaiah 12:2, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation."

The text of the third verse is reminiscent of Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Also, 2 Corinthians 5:7, "For we walk by faith, not by sight." An additional layer of meaning is referenced in Romans 5:11, "...but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement." The might of the Lord in accomplishing the atonement and resurrection is the means by which we conquer sin and death through his mercy. (I know in his might I'll conquer at length. My weakness in mercy he covers with pow'r...)

Part of the fourth verse may come from a combination of 1 John 1:5, "... God is light, and in him is no darkness at all;" and First Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see through a glass, darkly..." In the resulting line, "There is in his sight no darkness at all," the author reminds us of the difference between our imperfect mortal understanding and the perfect omniscience of the Lord. This gives confirmation of the wisdom of allowing the Lord to lead us along, as expressed in the refrain.

The fourth verse also includes an expression not commonly used: "my all and in all." We may have sung it often in this hymn without thinking about its meaning. Separating it into its grammatical components brings clarity, "the Lord is my all, and the Lord is in all." Or in other words, the Lord means everything to me, and is in my life and everything around me.

The title phrase, "The Lord is my light," is repeated often in the hymn text, appearing at the beginning of each verse and chorus. The repetition helps unify the verses, emphasize the message and assist with memorization. It is a technique used by other authors such as H. R. Palmer in "Precious Savior, Dear Redeemer."

In the late 1800s the horse was the prime method of transportation and accidents were common. Cures and preventions for diseases such as Typhus,

Diphtheria, Small Pox, and Tuberculosis had not yet been found.

James Nicholson's early death may have been a result of such a disease or accident as he passed away in November of 1876 at the age of 48, and was buried in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

"The Lord Is My Light"  
Text as published in the 1985 LDS Hymnal

The Lord is my light;  
Then why should I fear?  
By day and by night  
His presence is near.  
He is my salvation  
From sorrow and sin;  
This blessed assurance  
The Spirit doth bring.

The Lord is my light;  
He is my joy and my song.  
By day and by night  
He leads, he leads me along.

The Lord is my light;  
Tho clouds may arise,  
Faith, stronger than sight,  
Looks up thru the skies  
Where Jesus forever  
In glory doth reign.  
Then how can I ever  
In darkness remain?

The Lord is my light;  
He is my joy and my song.  
By day and by night  
He leads, he leads me along.

The Lord is my light;  
The Lord is my strength.  
I know in his might  
I'll conquer at length.  
My weakness in mercy  
He covers with pow'r,  
And, walking by faith  
I am blest ev'ry hour.

The Lord is my light;  
He is my joy and my song.  
By day and by night  
He leads, he leads me along.

The Lord is my light,  
My all and in all.  
There is in his sight

including the familiar tune for "There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today," and collaborated on approximately sixty music collection publications.

Many of these were collaborations with William J. Kirkpatrick from Philadelphia. Nearly all the leading songwriters of the day were represented in these collections and John Sweney is credited with discovering several of them.

He originally composed secular songs, but it is believed that in 1871 a spiritual crisis occurred and after that his music was primarily written for sacred texts.

John concluded his productive life, at the age of sixty-two, in April of 1899 at Chester, Pennsylvania.

John R. Sweney was also the composer of the hymn tune for "If the Way Be Full of Trial," which was the August 2013 Hymn of the Month. Most of the information here is duplicated from the previous article.





No darkness at all.  
He is my Redeemer,  
My Savior, and King.  
With Saints and with angels  
His praises I'll sing.

The Lord is my light;  
He is my joy and my song.  
By day and by night  
He leads, he leads me along.

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"The Lord Is My Light" is believed to have been first published in 1878 in a collection of sacred songs, 'Joy to the World,' compiled by the composer, John R. Sweney and others. The photos above and at the top of the next column are believed to be of the original publication. The text has also been published with an alternate hymn tune by J. W. Bischoff. The music by John Sweney that we sing today was composed in the gospel song style of the time in common or 4/4 time with verses in four part harmony followed by a refrain.

The text of the refrain has a different meter than the verses and the music has a hint of untraditional coloratura style. The variation of text and rhythm between the higher and lower voices creates additional interest.

The hymn is essentially the same today as it was when copyrighted by the composer in 1878. The tune is known as WANAMAKER and is said to have been named after John Wanamaker, the department store magnate and Sunday School Superintendent at the Bethany Presbyterian church in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, area where the composer, John Sweney, was in charge of music for a time.

The hymn was published in a number of Sunday school and Gospel songbooks of various denominations in the ensuing years and is said to have become part of a Sunday School song collection of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) by 1892. It was included in the 1948 edition of the LDS Hymnal with four additional verses added by the compilers. The style of the poetry in these verses is noticeably different than the original. In the 1985 edition of the LDS Hymnal these verses were removed, musical notation was updated and the music transposed to a lower simpler key. The hymn continues to spread its light to new generations.



Information in this article came from:

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Karen Lynn Davidson, Our Latter-day Hymns, pp. 118-119. (Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1988)

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