Let the Lower Lights be Burning

It was growing dark. The waves of the vast Lake Erie—almost a little ocean in itself—hissed and curled against the base of the inner lighthouse near Cleveland, Ohio. The lighthouse keeper’s job wasn’t always convenient. His job was to keep the great lighthouse inside the harbor lit and also to tend and light a line of smaller oil lanterns to guide ships into the channel toward the harbor. The inner harbor had been created as a safe haven where ships could flee when the sudden and dangerous Lake Erie storms arose. Despite the great lighthouse beacon, a ship would be dashed to pieces on the rocks without the little lights to lead them through the narrow, rock-lined passage.

You can imagine what it would be like to go out into the gathering blackness and painstakingly trudge from light to light, filling and lighting each lantern. It was a thankless task—the lighthouse keeper had been on this job for several years, and rarely had any ship needed to find the harbor at night. Why should he even bother? Maybe it was this discouraging thought, or his health, or an oversight, but, whatever the reason, the lights were not lit that night.

As the night deepened, a violent storm hurled itself upon Lake Erie that could toss great ships as if they were toys and smash them against the shorelines with terrifying, deadly menace. The storms on this huge lake are not to be trifled with.

As the tempest grew into roaring mountains of turbulent waves and screaming winds, a desperate captain tensed beside the wheel of his ship. Nearby stood an old pilot, also straining his eyes into the ominous blackness. Underneath, the ship heaved and creaked, and the wooden decks were slippery with water.

The captain squinted into the darkness. “Are you sure this is Cleveland?” he asked the pilot.
“Quite sure, Sir,” replied the pilot, his hands clamped fast upon the wheel.
“But where are the lower lights?”
“They are out, Sir.”
“Can you make it?”
“We must sir, or we’ll perish.”
There was nothing else they could do.

Desperately, the old pilot tried to find his way into the channel without the lights that should have been there—but the pitiless sea fractured and pulverized the ship against the rocky shoreline. Many lives were lost that night—all because of one man who did not do his job.
A young man named Philip P. Bliss read, with horror, the headlines and the story of how one man's careless negligence could be so deadly. But it was only when he heard D. L. Moody use it in a sermon that it struck Philip Bliss to the heart. Moody ended his stirring sermon with:

“Brethren, the Master will take care of the great lighthouse; let us keep the lower lights burning.”

As Philip told a friend afterwards, “…when I heard Mr. Moody use it as an illustration in his sermon that night, I cried out in my heart, 'Bliss, you are just as guilty as the man in the story. As a Christian, you are to be one of the lower lights shining brightly so that some poor soul tossed about on the sea of life may find safety and everlasting life in the haven that God has prepared.’”

The story stuck in his mind forcefully, and within a week Philip Bliss had written the hymn which we sing today: “Brightly beams our Father’s mercy / From His lighthouse evermore / But to us He gives the keeping / Of the lights along the shore.”

We are entrusted with responsibilities as well. Like the lighthouse keeper, people are depending on us to complete our jobs. Some responsibilities are an opportunity to be a witness for Christ. Do we keep our “lights” shining? Are we showing responsibility by shining for Christ in this dark world, sharing the way of safety with people who are drowning in sin and misery?

Bibliography:
- Crusade Hymn Stories by Billy Graham and the Crusade Musicians, edited by Cliff Barrows, pages 84-86.
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Philip P. Bliss, 1871

1. Brightly beams our Father's mercy. From His light-house ever more,
   But to us His eyes are watching, longing, To keep the harbor.
   Of the lights along the shore.

2. Dark the night of sin has settled. Loud the angry billows roar:
   Some poor sailor tempest tossed. Trying to make the harbor.
   For the lights along the shore.

3. Trim your feeble lamp, my brother. Some poor sail or tempest tossed.
   Eager trying to make the harbor. In the darkness may be lost.
   Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave.

   fainting, struggling seaman You may rescue, you may save.

Philip P. Bliss, 1871