

THE WORD IN

Song



Hymn of the Day Studies for

PROPER
SERIES B

THREE-YEAR LECTIONARY



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
Missouri Synod

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Sing Praise to God, the Highest Good

Lutheran Service Book 819 | study by Frank J. Pies

Introduction

No doubt you have asked it of yourself or talked about it with others. It is one of the most basic questions of humanity. It concerns the meaning and goal of life. In simple terms, it may be stated, “What is the ultimate purpose of my being, existing and living?”

If you were to answer this question solely on the basis of human intellect and logic, the focus would probably be an anthropocentric, man-centered one. If, however, you drew upon and listened to the revelation of the Triune God in Holy Scripture, the answer would be a theocentric, God-centered, Christocentric, Christ-centered one, the correct one.

- What are some of the things contrary to Scripture that people embrace as the main purpose of their lives?

Exploring the Scriptures

In the *LSB* catalog of hymns suggested for use in the Divine Service throughout the Church Year, “Sing Praise to God, the Highest Good” is selected as the Hymn of the Day on the basis of both the three-year and the one-year lectionaries for a total of five separate Sundays.

This frequency is a testimony to the hymn’s biblical content and its expression of the central truths of the Faith woven throughout the fabric of Scripture.

The Psalms appointed for these Sundays are in wonderful concert and agreement with each other.

- What activity is “good” and “befits” God’s people? See Ps. 92:1 and Ps. 33:1–3.
- What, therefore, are we called upon to do? Read Ps. 103:1. Why? See Ps. 115:1.

To praise God in the biblical sense is chiefly to proclaim His person and marvelous works, reciting to Him what He reveals and first says to us.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Jakob Schütz (1640–1690) was a learned man, a licensed attorney who practiced civil and canon law in the city of Frankfurt, Germany. Though not a public servant of the Church, he was devoutly pious and zealous for the Faith. He authored our hymn, which first appeared in his 1675 tract, “A Small Book of Christian Encouragement.”

- According to the biblical witness in Is. 43:7, 20–21; 60:21; Rom. 11:36; and Col. 1:15–16, what is the end purpose of all creation?

The Lord God has made everything for His own sake. He has redeemed and sanctified His people for His glory and praise. Our ultimate goal in life is Christ (Phil. 1:21), to live in His forgiveness and love, to live unto Him as children of the heavenly Father by the Holy Spirit, all to the glory, laud and honor of His holy name.

In keeping with this purpose, Scripture repeatedly exhorts us to praise and extol our God. To this end, the Hymn of the Day serves us admirably.

- What does Mark 2:13–17, the Gospel for Epiphany 8B and Proper 3B, show us about Christ’s divine love for sinners and His rescue of them?
- How does Christ’s unequivocal promise in verse 33 of the Gospel for Epiphany 8A, Matt. 6:24–34, relate to the Father’s tender care of His people?
- According to Mark 8:1–9, the Gospel for Trinity 7, how did Jesus view the crowd and supply their pressing need? What does this show us about Him and the Father’s gracious will for us revealed through the Son?

In the Small Catechism’s explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, the Christian confesses faith in God and in His unmerited kindness by which He gives and sustains life.

- How is this scriptural declaration in alignment with the end statement of the explanation: “For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him” (*LSB*, 322)?

- Christians sometimes think that their service in the church is not as important or valuable as that of the pastor or some other public servant. Why is this outlook wrong according to 1 Peter 2:4–5, 9–10? How does Schütz’s contribution as a hymn writer exemplify the “priesthood of all believers”?

- What does Rom. 12:3–8 tell us about the place and service of each member in Christ’s Body, the Church? What gifts and abilities have you received from the Lord for use in His kingdom?

Though Schütz’s hymn was warmly welcomed in the Lutheran Church as a strong, doctrinally pure paean of praise, Schütz himself eventually drifted from Lutheranism and espoused teachings contrary to the Word of God.

- What warning emerges from this sad turn of events in Schütz’s life? How are Christians kept steadfast in the truth of God’s Word? See Eph. 4:11–16.

Text

It is generally agreed that one of the most memorable things about the hymn is its lovely, grand refrain, “To God all praise and glory!” The repetition of this reverent summons to God’s elect summarizes the hymn and reinforces its theme, helping the singer remember that all praise and glory belong to God.

- What is the significance of the adjective “all” in the refrain? Why does all the glory belong to God? See Gen. 32:9–10; Ps. 96:1–9; Is. 42:8; 1 Cor. 4:7.

The first stanza begins with an invitation to praise God, followed by the announcement of His perfect character and the manifestation of His goodness and love in His works of creation and redemption. Stanza 2 elaborates further on the Lord’s goodness in the kingdom of His might, His left-hand rule.

Making the Connection

It is not difficult to understand how this sturdy hymn has become part of the repertoire of congregational praise and thanksgiving. It catechizes the baptized, teaching us why God is worthy to receive all praise and glory. It effects this divine praise, serving as a tool by which we acknowledge Him as the highest good and place Him in His rightful, honored position among us. This magnification of the Lord is the ultimate end of our lives as His created, redeemed, holy people.

In Closing

The Latin phrase *Soli Deo gloria* is widely used in the Church as another way of declaring, “To God alone be glory.” God grant us His Holy Spirit that our lives may more fully be punctuated S. D. G. and our lips ever shout and sing, “To God all praise and glory!”

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 819.

- What light do Mark 10:17–18 and James 1:17 shed on the goodness of God?
- What are some of the ways that God’s goodness and power are manifested in His creation and preservation of all things? See Heb. 11:3; Ps. 100:3; Ps. 145:15–19; Matt. 5:44–45.
- What works of the Lord are the highest revelation of His goodness and love? See Heb. 1:1–3; Rom. 5:6–11; James 1:18.
- What comfort do you derive from knowing that God’s “eye is never sleeping” and that “all things are just and good and right” in His ordering of everything?

Stanzas 3 and 4 praise God for blessing His people in the kingdom of grace, His right-hand rule. The final stanza artfully amplifies the hymn’s theme by calling upon the entire confessing Church to glorify God and proclaim aloud the wondrous story of Christ.

- When the distressed sinner acknowledges his need for divine mercy and humbly seeks the Lord, what happens (st. 3)? See Matt. 11:28; John 6:37.
- What beautiful biblical images in stanza 4 portray the Lord’s blessings bestowed upon His people? See Ps. 23:1; John 10:11–16; Ps. 46:1; Ps. 18:2; Is. 66:13.
- In directing us to “Cast ev’ry idol from its throne,” stanza 5 simultaneously declares the reason for such demolition. What is it? See Is. 42:8; 48:11.

- How do you praise God when He fills your soul with “healing balm,” when He stills “ev’ry faithless murmur” (st. 1), and cheers you with His peace?
- How is the Lord praised when you “proclaim / Aloud the wondrous story” (st. 5)?
- Because of sin, our praise of God in this world is imperfect; yet because of Christ it is acceptable and pleasing unto the Lord. Where will our praises be perfect? See Rev. 4:1–11; 7:9–12; 19:1–8.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, God of all grace, govern our hearts that we may never forget Your blessings but steadfastly thank and praise You for all Your goodness in this life until, with all Your saints, we praise You eternally in Your heavenly kingdom; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Thanksgiving to God, *LSB*, 310).

From East to West

Lutheran Service Book 385 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Christmas is a season of paradoxes: A virgin bears a son ... the Lord of creation finds no room in the inn ... God delivers His Son and the world sleeps ... angels announce it to shepherds ... the King born to sit on David's throne is welcomed by Magi ... the King of kings is born to be the servant of all. This Christmas hymn picks up many of these paradoxes and puts them into our mouths to sing. Though we want to reconcile these seeming contradictions so that things are nice, neat and tidy, the Church is called simply to confess them and own them by faith.

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings appointed for Christmas 2 and the Visitation are very different. Christmas 2 begins with Joseph, son of Jacob, bringing his family to Egypt for a surprise reunion (Gen. 46:1–7). The suffering of Joseph had a godly end — faith that trusts God's gracious will is vindicated (1 Pet. 4:12–19). Matt. 2:13–23 records another Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, being warned and taking Mary and Jesus to a safe refuge in Egypt while a crazed and fearful Herod orders a murderous rampage. In contrast to this, the Visitation begins with Israel's dead stump and the shoot God sends forth in His Son (Is. 11:1–5). It moves to the call to trust the Lord and remain patient in tribulation (Rom. 12:9–16). In the Gospel, Luke records the details of Blessed Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth (herself surprised to be pregnant with John the Forerunner). It culminates in Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:39–56).

- What do we find in common in both pericopes?
- How did God turn Joseph's suffering into good?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Little is known about Coelius Sedulius (c. 450), the author of this hymn. He probably lived in Rome. A convert to Christianity, he most probably remained a layman (though some suggest he was ordained). Though his writings were well known and popular, only two of his hymns survive. This hymn text is part of an acrostic poem of twenty-eight stanzas arranged according to the Latin alphabet. We have an eighth-century edition of the full text. The poem gave

The Hymn of the Day for both the Second Sunday after Christmas and the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin to Elizabeth is an old one. As we sing it, we add our voices to the myriad of those who came before us, who met the mystery of the incarnation with joyful faith.

- How do we fulfill the promise of these words today?
- Look out at the Church assembled on Christmas Eve and see there the assembly of nations at the manger. Where do we fit into the words?

- How did God protect His Son and the Gospel from His enemies?
- How does Mary's song tie the two events together?
- How did God vindicate those who trusted in Him?

Mary placed herself under God's merciful care when reason and emotion would have led her to panic and fear. We too face suffering and upset, things that defy reason or explanation, and inspire doubt and anxiety.

- Can we trust God in all things?
- Will God really work all things for our good?
- Is this what we meet in Bethlehem? Is this exactly the example of God working good from what the world would write off as something to be avoided?
- Joseph and Mary trusted in the Lord when everything else said to fear. They were moved by this trust to joy in God's promise. How do we meet life's challenges with the same holy joy in the Lord?

birth to two hymns: *LSB* 399, "The Star Proclaims the King Is Here" and *LSB* 385, "From East to West."

The hymn was well known, appointed in the prayer book of priests (breviary) for Christmas. *LSB* 385 is the second version, by translator John Ellerton (1826–1893). The translation is more thematic than literal.

- How does it feel singing a hymn that was sung for more than 1500 years prior to your singing it today?

Text

“From lands that see the sun arise / To earth’s remotest boundaries” became “From east to west, from shore to shore ...” when the Latin became an English text. Like the call of the psalmist, this hymn summons the singer to awaken to God’s merciful purpose hidden in everything that happens and to respond with the joyful praise of those who trust He knows what He is doing.

- How is Christ’s birth an event for the whole world and not merely for those who believe in it?
- “The holy child whom Mary bore” (st. 1) is not the Savior of the few but the Redeemer of the whole world. How does the appearance of the Magi emphasize this from the very beginning of the Gospel’s story?
- Note the paradox of Christ the King, who is born of a lowly virgin and laid in a manger (Luke 1:35; 2:7). What does this say about our Lord? His ministry? The promise of salvation?

The heart of the Christmas message is the great mystery of the incarnation. God takes flesh, wears a diaper and nurses at Mary’s breast. This is a scandal to many, a conundrum to some and a stumbling block to others. Note the way the hymn avoids explaining and instead confesses this great mystery.

- Can one confess Christ without explaining the unexplainable mystery of the incarnation?
- How do we confess this in the creeds?

Making the Connection

This hymn confronts us with the fact that Christmas is not just for Christians. We say it in the Nicene Creed: “who for us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven ... (LSB, 191). It is one thing to say it but another to meet it in the diverse faces of those who gather as the children of God. The cross is the means through which the many are made one and redemption is made for all people.

In Closing

So we meet the paradox. God comes in flesh through the Blessed Virgin Mary. He is come for all or He comes for none. The Virgin sees this glory and calls us to stand before the manger, recognizing God in flesh and blood, rejoicing in the grace given to us there, and trusting in Him for our salvation. Here is the shepherd the Father sent to save His people, and from east to west we come.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 385.

- Notice stanza 2; instead of explaining the how, why is confessed: “His fallen creatures all to save.”
- How do we own this mystery?

God cannot be contained in temples or buildings built with hands, but He has chosen to live in our flesh and bone — born like us in every way except sin. Mary is the “chosen vessel” (st. 3) of Christ’s humanity — He takes His flesh from her.

- Compare Luke 1:47–50 with stanza 3. How are they parallel? What is Mary’s greatness (Luke 1:49)?
- Early Christian heresies tried to downplay Mary’s role. Orthodox Christianity has refuted this, insisting that Mary is *Theotokos*, God-Bearer, Mother of God. How does this confess the biblical truth? Is this for Mary’s benefit or does this protect the truth of the Son of God and His incarnation?
- What kind of honor to Mary detracts from Jesus and dishonors her own words? What kind of honor rightly honors both Mary and Jesus?

Note the unlikely visitors to the manger: shepherds. This is no accident. Christ was born to fulfill God’s promise to shepherd His people (Ezek. 34). “He will tend His flock like a shepherd” (Is. 40:11).

- How important are shepherds to this story?
- What comfort comes from knowing Christ was born to shepherd God’s people and lead us home to Him?

- Can you get to the cross without the manger? Can you get the manger without the cross?
- Is there a Savior who is not born of the Virgin by the Holy Spirit? Is there a Savior incarnate for only the few? Does Christmas ultimately lead to Calvary?
- To call Mary blessed is to believe in Jesus her Son. In what way is Mary, who first believed in Christ, the mother of all believers?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose the virgin Mary to be the mother of Your Son and made known through her Your gracious regard for the poor and lowly and despised. Grant that we may receive Your Word in humility and faith, and so be made one with Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Visitation).

O Day of Rest and Gladness

Lutheran Service Book 906 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

We all have special days that we mark and remember. We observe birthdays, anniversaries, days that remind us of loved ones or memories. Countries have holidays that bind their people together. In the United States, we can think of the Fourth of July or Memorial Day. The Church also has special days. In fact, we have an entire calendar year full of them: the Church Year. Some days are “more special” than others, like Christmas or Easter, but the Church Year calendar is full of days we mark to remember and give thanks to God for His many and diverse blessings.

But there is one church day that is easy to overlook, even though it is the foundation and chief of all church days: Sunday. We can take for granted that Sunday is simply

the day we “go to church” and never think about it again. But there are depths of scriptural and theological meaning in that first day of the week. Christians have from the very first day of Easter been gathering on Sunday to be in the presence of Christ and receive His gifts. But Sunday is not a haphazard, arbitrary choice for a day of worship. Worshiping on Sunday connects us to every generation of Christians from every age and also to the very roots of the Bible.

- What days or holidays are especially meaningful to you? Why? How do you celebrate them?
- What sort of Sunday routines do you have? Early or late service? Brunch after church? Music to get ready with?

Exploring the Scriptures

There are many scriptural allusions and stories embedded in this hymn. The first is the theme of light. Read Gen. 1:1–5.

- How does the first day of creation open?
- How would you describe the scene?
- How does light enter? Where is God’s Word in all of this?

Another biblical theme in the hymn is rest. Read Deut. 5:12–15.

- What does God command the people of Israel to do on the seventh day?
- What reason does He give here in this text? (Notice this is different from Ex. 20:8–11.)
- How does Matt. 11:28–30 fit in for us as Christians?

Read Ps. 118:24.

- What day do you think this psalm has in mind?
- How does this “day” relate to Christ’s resurrection? To eternal life?
- How do we experience this new day?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Christopher Wordsworth (1807–85) is the chief author of this hymn text. (A modern author wrote stanza 3.) Wordsworth was a bishop in the Church of England in the 19th century. He was a rather prolific author and wrote books on church history, archaeology in Greece and biblical commentaries. He also wrote a book of hymns with one hymn for every Sunday of the Church Year (*The Holy Year*). “O Day of Rest and Gladness” takes up that theme of Sunday as the day of gathering and God’s actions for His people.

This hymn is placed in the *LSB* section for the “Beginning of Service.” It works well in that position since it explores the different ways God has acted and continues to act for His people on the first day of the week. Sunday is not

legislated as the mandatory day of worship for Christians in the New Testament era, but the hymn does a good job of laying out the “specialness” of Sunday for us as Christians.

- Why do Christians worship on Sunday and not on Saturday?

Text

The first stanza of this hymn is a description of what happens on Sunday for Christians.

- What gifts are mentioned that are given on this day?
- How do we receive these gifts?
- Read Is. 6:3. How does this stanza see this text as part of our worship?

- When do we sing “Holy, holy, holy”?

Light is the main theme of the second stanza. However, it is not light in general, but light in three Bible stories that happen on the first day of the week. These three stories, says the hymn, give a “threefold light.”

- What three stories are mentioned?
- We have looked at creation already. Read Matt. 28:1–10. How does light play a part in this text?
- Read Eph. 5:6–14. How does this passage connect resurrection and light?

Making the Connection

This hymn text is a meditation on God’s actions for us that focuses on Sunday. Sunday is, of course, the day of gathering to receive God’s gifts. The themes of light and rest play a prominent part in the hymn.

- How do you experience rest during worship?

In Closing

Sunday is a glorious day in the history of salvation. Creation, Christ’s resurrection and Pentecost all occurred on that “day of joy and light” (st. 1). But our hymn makes clear that the most wonderful thing about Sunday is that Christ is present among us now, renewing us with heavenly might. God’s people respond, singing, “Holy, holy, holy,” with all the company of heaven. Truly Sunday is “Most beautiful, most bright” (st. 1)!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 906.

- Pentecost is the third story of light. Read Acts 2:1–4. Where do you see light in these verses?

The third stanza describes “this blest day of light” from our perspective. The mighty light-bringing acts of God in the Scriptures are now present among us.

- What actions of God are mentioned?
- How do we mark our sanctuaries with lights (candles, etc.) that accentuate what this hymn proclaims?

The final stanza pictures God’s people on a journey toward “our rest ... / Our endless Sabbath day.”

- How does Heb. 4:1 describe that final destination?

- How does God shine His light on you?

Our life is a “pilgrim way” (st. 4), journeying toward our eternal life with Christ.

- In what ways does our gathering together on Sunday give us strength for the journey?

Prayer

Eternal God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, is our true Sabbath rest. Help us to keep each day holy by receiving His Word of comfort that we may find our rest in Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 4B).

Rise! To Arms! With Prayer Employ You

Lutheran Service Book 668 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

The nature of warfare between nations changes from century to century. Spiritual warfare, however, never changes. Satan is always the enemy, and every human being is always the target. How can we fight him? While it is true that many modern Christians use prayer to replace the life-giving Sacraments, we must not neglect prayer in response to that mistake. The prayer of a Christian is indeed a weapon

to be used daily against Satan's fiery darts (Eph. 6:10–20) and his ravenous appetite (1 Peter 5:6–11).

- How has Satan attacked you recently? Is there a particular weakness you have?
- Is it possible to use prayer as an effective agent against Satan's wiles?

Exploring the Scriptures

The great apostle St. Paul was quite familiar with the uniform of a Roman soldier, and he uses that image to conclude his letter to the Ephesian Christians (6:10–20). He likens the physical equipment of the centurion to the spiritual defenses which we now have through the waters of Holy Baptism, and he calls upon us to use them.

- Get a picture of a Roman soldier in uniform and identify the parts of that uniform with the spiritual weaponry Paul describes. Does all of this resemble modern U.S. military battle gear or police officers in riot gear?

In another one of his letters, St. Paul assures the Roman Christians that absolutely nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Savior (Rom. 8:31–39).

- When you pray, do you think about the fact that Jesus is sitting at the right hand of His Father and ours, and that He is continually interceding for us? How is this a comfort?

St. Paul also compares spiritual warfare to a footrace, wherein many compete but only one wins the prize (1 Cor. 9:24–25). He's not saying that only one person will be saved, but he is exhorting each of us to keep our own eyes on the goal of heaven.

- Do you ever feel as though you're dragging behind in such a race? How can you get a "second wind," as runners call it? See 1 Cor. 10:11–13.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Wilhelm Erasmus Arends (1677–1721) was a parish pastor in two small towns in Germany. He wrote this hymn a little over 300 years ago. He came from a school of Christian thought of his time known as "Pietism." This movement was a reaction against what was seen as a lack of Christian virtues among the Lutherans of Germany. While this is even now and always has been a problem for Christians (see Romans 7), the Pietists sought to deal with the problem by motivating through the Law and not the Gospel.

- Can this hymn, which calls us to prayer, be misunderstood and misused if we ignore the Means of Grace that Jesus has given us?
- Why is it important to call one another to more earnest zeal by using the good news of forgiveness rather than the Law? Do we use the Law at all when admonishing a brother or sister in Christ?

The Pietist movement was centered in the German city of Halle, and it is from this city that many missionaries were sent out, especially to North America. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711–87), considered by many to be the patriarch of Lutheranism in the United States, who started the first organized Lutheran synod in America, was a student of the school of Pietism.

- Can you detect missionary zeal in the words of the hymn?

Text

This hymn is filled with what we call "imperatives," another word for "commands." Note how we sing "Rise!" and then "Wield God's Word" (st. 1) and "Wisely fight" (st. 3). There's no doubt that we are being called to action in this hymn.

- Do these imperatives/commands stir you to do what they call for? Or do they prompt other reactions?

The first stanza has the clearest battlefield imagery, with a call to action and the realistic portrayal of Satan's viciousness. Note the striking similarity of this stanza with stanzas 2 and 3 of *LSB* 656, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

- What do Is. 7:14 and Matt. 1:21–23 tell us about having the Champion of champions on our side in spiritual warfare? He is Emmanuel/Immanuel!

The second stanza is the one that likens life in Christ to a footrace. One prepares for a footrace deliberately and for a long period of time; athletic skill doesn't just happen.

- Note how St. Paul uses both military and athletic images to make his point to Timothy. See 2 Tim. 2:3–5; 4:7–8; and James 4:1–10, especially verse 7.

Making the Connection

This hymn, coupled with a grand tune, calls us to deliberate spiritual warfare using all the weaponry that Christ has given to us.

- How can you "Wield God's Word" in your life to fight Satan and intercede for others?
- Is prayer a part of that study/knowledge of the Word of God?

In Closing

As was said before, the nature of warfare between and within nations changes from age to age, but the nature of spiritual warfare never does. The chief weapon against our adversary, Satan, is the Word of God and all the blessings that are contained in it. Jesus has conquered Satan by destroying his power (John 19:30; 2 Tim. 1:10).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 668.

The third stanza is an exhortation to be wise, first in terms of how long it will be until the Lord returns and second in terms of how short a time each of us has upon this earth. Arends was not limiting God's grace to just so many chances for each of us, but he was rightly suggesting that we humans are here for such a very short time, just as Moses taught in Psalm 90.

- What does Rom. 13:11–14 teach us about our allotted time here, and of the fact that God has set a time for His Son's return in glory? It is true that the "time is fleeting." Yet we need not despair, since we know what God in Christ has done for us to make us His own. See Rom. 8:1–2.

- How difficult is it to put temptation away from one's life? See Gen. 4:6–7.

- What is "heav'nly treasure" (st. 2)? How are the Sacraments (Holy Baptism, Confession and Absolution, the Lord's Supper) to be used in this spiritual warfare? Remember also that "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" are sung prayers as well as being confessions of the faith that saves us (Col. 3:16).

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, Your Son, Jesus, triumphed over the prince of demons and freed us from bondage to sin. Help us to stand firm against every assault of Satan, and enable us always to do Your will; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 5B).

Lift High the Cross

Lutheran Service Book 837 | study by Paul J. Cain

Introduction

- ℣ God forbid that I should glory,
- ✠ **save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

One of the authors of this hymn, Michael Newbolt (1874–1956), intended “Lift High the Cross” be used as a processional hymn. The 1916 version of the text calls for the versicle and response above to be said when first entering the chancel at the beginning of Divine Service.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read John 12:27–36 and John 3:14–21.

- What is the purpose of Jesus’ death?
- What kind of death was He going to die under Jewish law (cf. Acts 7:54–60)? Under Roman law?
- What do these two texts have in common? What is the Old Testament connection here?

Read Heb. 13:10–21.

- “Sacrifices Pleasing to God” is the description of this section of Scripture in the English Standard Version. How were sacrifices done before? Why is Jesus the end to those sacrifices? How is His sacrifice acceptable to God? How are we acceptable to God?
- What sacrifice of sanctification do Christians offer in thanks to God?

Read Is. 11:1–16.

- Why is David’s father Jesse mentioned in verse 1?
- What parts of this chapter speak to Jesus’ earthly ministry? Which sections speak to Jesus’ return on the Last Day and what life will be like then?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

“Lift High the Cross” in its current form in *LSB* is the work of both George W. Kitchin (1827–1912) and Michael R. Newbolt.

Kitchin wrote a four-stanza hymn (now used as the refrain and stanzas 1, 2 and 6) for use at a Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Festival in Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire, England in June 1887.

- Does your congregation have a processional cross? If so, how is it used?
- What crosses are visible in your congregation’s sanctuary?
- What does it mean to “lift high the cross?”

- What is the importance of a signal, ensign or flag on a battlefield (cf. v. 10)? How does the cross have a similar function for Christians?
- Reconsider verses 12–16. What is the gathering mission focus in these verses?

Read Matt. 16:24–28.

- What *would* it profit a man if he gained the whole world for the price of his soul?
- Where does Jesus of Nazareth reign as King of the Jews?
- How does the dialog in Matt. 16:21–23 put Jesus’ later words here in context?
- Why was the cross offensive to Peter? Why is it offensive to the world? Why is it sometimes offensive to us?

Read Acts 11:19–30; 13:1–3, the appointed Second Reading for St. Barnabas.

- How did Barnabas lift high the cross?
- What challenges and opportunities did he and the early Christians face?

Newbolt’s revision first appeared in the 1916 *Supplement of Hymns Ancient and Modern* with an original tune. The revision turned Kitchin’s first stanza into the refrain. Several of Newbolt’s twelve stanzas survive as stanzas 3, 4 and 5 in *LSB* (they were stanzas 4, 8 and 9 respectively in Newbolt’s revision).

- Does this hymn’s text remind you of “Onward Christian Soldiers”? Why?

- Do you think the author(s) had in mind Roman Emperor Constantine’s vision as recorded in *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius, *In hoc signo vinces* (In this sign you shall conquer)?

Lutheran Service Book provides Leopoldo Gros’ Spanish translation of a five-stanza version of the text with refrain.

- How does the inclusion of a Spanish translation return the hymn to its original 1887 purpose?
- How does the hymn anticipate on earth the song of the whole Church in heaven?

Text

Stanza 1 echoes the militarism of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and the Church Militant. The Church is at war with the devil, the world and the sinful human flesh of Christian sinners/saints. This stanza, due to a current bias against male, royal or military imagery, is often omitted in other hymnals.

- What is lost if this stanza is omitted or reworded?
- Why is victory important in the battle against the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh?

The vision of Constantine is clearest in stanza 2. “The hosts of God” can refer to angels and archangels and all the company of heaven as well as singers here on earth.

Making the Connection

The cross is an ideal image to communicate the love of Christ, for Calvary is where the forgiveness of sins was won. This hymn is sung in the context of Divine Service, where the forgiveness of sins is delivered in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Holy Gospel and Holy Communion through the Office of the Holy Ministry. Forgiven by Christ,

In Closing

Some congregations may have a sign that reads “You are now entering the mission field” that is visible when leaving the church parking lot. In addition to being an ideal processional hymn, “Lift High the Cross” is a natural recessional hymn, sending a congregation off to enter the mission field.

- Sing or read aloud together LSB 837.

“All newborn soldiers of the Crucified” (st. 3) is rich with the language of the rebirth of Holy Baptism, including “the seal of Him who died” “on their brows.”

- Who are the hosts of God?
- What is the “seal” of “All newborn soldiers of the Crucified”?

In stanza 4, Jesus draws believers to Himself as He is lifted up. Salvation is as narrow as the cross alone, but also as wide as His arms open in welcome.

Stanza 5 presents the salvific worldview of the entire Scriptures, including Isaiah, Matthew and Revelation, of God blessing Israel so that Israel would be a blessing to people of all tribes, nations and languages for the sake of their salvation. The Christian Church, the new Israel of the Lord, proclaims salvation in Christ to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, “all nations” (Matt. 28:19), “everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39).

- How is the cross exclusive? How is the cross inclusive?

Stanza 6 concludes “our song of triumph” with praise to Christ alone for victory because of the cross, lifted high in thanksgiving and witness.

- How is the cross both the source of our triumph and our song of triumph?
- *LSB* recommends that the refrain be sung in unison and the stanzas in harmony. How does this musical arrangement amplify the hymn’s message?

Christians return to their vocations and tell the good news about Jesus. The name of Jesus is important because there is no other name under heaven that saves.

- Where was forgiveness won? Instead of returning there and then, where is forgiveness delivered?

Prayer

Almighty God, Your faithful servant Barnabas sought not his own renown but gave generously of his life and substance for the encouragement of the apostles and their ministry. Grant that we may follow his example in lives given to charity and the proclamation of the Gospel; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Barnabas, Apostle).

Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid

Lutheran Service Book 500 | study by Gifford A. Grobien

Introduction

In the Small Catechism, the three articles of the Creed are categorized as “Creation,” “Redemption” and “Sanctification,” respectively (*LSB*, pp. 322–3). Sometimes this leads us to think that creation is the work only of God the Father, redemption is the work only of God the Son, and sanctification is the work only of God the Spirit. But this is wrong! These categories have to do with the works of God, not splitting God up into three categories. God the Holy Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — is active in all of His works for mankind. All three persons work to create, redeem and sanctify.

Exploring the Scriptures

The Scriptures speak extensively about the person of the Holy Spirit. Read Gen. 1:1–3, the first place He is mentioned.

- What is happening in this passage? Who is referred to?
- How does God create? Does it seem like the Spirit is actually doing anything in this passage?

Many other passages refer to creation, and some expand on the work of the Holy Spirit. Read Ps. 104:24–30.

- What is the Spirit’s role in creation in this passage? Does this help explain what the Spirit is doing in the Genesis passage?
- Does this passage describe only what happened in the beginning, or is this creative work ongoing? How does this relate to the Explanation of the First Article of the Creed?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Poet John Dryden published this hymn translation in 1693. It is actually a paraphrase; he rendered the medieval Latin hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* (“Come, Creator Spirit”) in his characteristic style of rhyming couplets. The Latin hymn was popular and often translated. In fact, *LSB* includes three other paraphrases of the text: hymns 497, 498 and 499.

Today’s hymn is a prayer to the Holy Spirit, calling upon Him not only as sanctifier, but as the one true God who creates and redeems, along with the Father and the Son.

- Do you often think of the Holy Spirit as “Creator”? What does it mean that He is Creator? What does He do as Creator?
- Think of the Explanation to the First Article of the Creed in Luther’s Small Catechism. What are the benefits we receive from God as His creatures?
- Is what we think most of the Spirit giving, namely, faith, also properly part of God’s creation?

Although we have emphasized the creative work of the Holy Spirit, that is not His only work. Read Eph. 1:13–14 and Rom. 8:8–17.

- What is the work of the Spirit according to these passages?
- What are the different ways that the Spirit causes us to persevere in salvation?

Finally, let’s try to connect the hymn to the Gospel for the day, Mark 4:26–34.

- Does the Holy Spirit have anything to do with Christ’s preaching? What about His preaching in parables?
- In the parables about the growth of grain and the growth of a mustard seed, Christ compares the kingdom of God to this kind of growth. How does this suggest a comparison between the creative work of the Spirit (like the growth of seeds) with the redeeming and sanctifying work of the Spirit (like the spread of the kingdom of God)? How is all of this work, in a sense, *creative*?

- Briefly compare Dryden’s translation with the other renditions. What differences in style do you notice? Are there different emphases in content? If so, what are they? How does the couplet style serve and shape the themes of the hymn?

Veni Creator Spiritus dates from the ninth century. Historically, it was sung at Vespers, services of ordination and for church building consecrations.

- When is “Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid” usually sung in your congregation?
- How do the themes of “Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid” relate to the themes of Vespers: the completion of daily work, rest and approaching night?

Text

Although this hymn has been often translated, Dryden highlights the Spirit’s creative work by calling Him “Creator Spirit” in the first line and title. Besides His work in creating the world, which we studied earlier, He creates faith and spiritual gifts in the Christian.

- How does Dryden express this truth in stanza 1?
- Where in the hymn as a whole does Dryden refer to the creation of spiritual life and the flourishing of the gifts of that spiritual life?

Making the Connection

“Creator Spirit, by Whose Aid” extols both the divinity and work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is the presence of Christ in our lives, not only working faith and sanctification, but assuring us of this salvation.

- Share with the group a few lines in the hymn that express the way the Holy Spirit is working these things in your life.

In Closing

God’s work of creation, redemption and sanctification is accomplished by all three persons of the Holy Trinity. In this hymn, we have considered especially how the Holy Spirit is involved in the works of God. As Creator, He is present and moves over all creation as the Giver of physical and spiritual life. As Redeemer, He preaches the truth of Christ and assures you of your salvation, calling to remembrance through the Word all that Christ has said and done as Redeemer. As Sanctifier, He gives you a variety of gifts to strengthen you in your faith and life — especially the forgiveness of sins, which is at the heart of Luther’s explanation of the Spirit’s sanctifying work.

The striking phrase “May we Your living temples be” at the end of stanza 1 refers to 1 Cor. 3:16–17.

- What is a temple? What makes a temple holy?
- What makes us holy: our own works and actions or the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit?

The phrase “Your sev’nfold gifts to us supply” (st. 3) speaks of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are listed in Is. 11:2–3.

- Read these verses. What are the gifts of the Spirit mentioned here? (If you only found six, there’s no problem with your Bible. The seventh gift comes from the ancient Greek translation but is not in the Hebrew versions.)

In stanza 4, Dryden says, “To You, O Paraclete, we raise / Unending songs of thanks and praise.” *Paraclete* is a Greek word that means “advocate,” “helper” or “comforter.”

- In John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26; and 16:13–15, what is the work of the “Helper,” or Holy Spirit?

We believe and confess that the Holy Spirit is God, one of the persons of the Holy Trinity.

- Discuss why the Holy Spirit’s divinity is necessary for the work that He does in your life.
- How is the truth of His divinity a great comfort to you in your situation today?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 500.

Prayer

Almighty God, You gave Your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon Himself. Grant that we, Your adopted children by grace, may daily be renewed by Your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For spiritual renewal, *LSB*, p. 312).

O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth

Lutheran Service Book 834 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

The first of the Ninety-five Theses states: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Mt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957], 31:25). As Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on Oct. 31, 1517, he inadvertently began what today we call the Protestant Reformation. One of his primary concerns was with the sale of indulgences, which in his mind cheapened the grace of God and trivialized the treasure of Confession and Absolution, thus distorting the Church’s Gospel mission and witness. The good news of God’s grace held such importance for Luther that he was willing to defy the Emperor

at the Diet of Worms in 1521 with his statement, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me, Amen!”

Such a confession and prayer echoes in the lines of this Reformation hymn, “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth,” which points out the path for our continuing bold mission and witness to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- Discuss how the meaning of repentance — turning to God and changing the way you think and act — determines the nature of our mission and witness to Jesus.
- Are there any areas you can think of in which the Church today stands in need of reformation?

Exploring the Scriptures

Martin Franzmann’s text makes use of the work of each person of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to draw out what each divine person has done and continues to do for our good. Read John 1:1–7.

- How does the phrase “All things were made through him” (v. 3) shape your thinking about life and creation?
- If darkness cannot overcome the light (v. 5), what prevents people from seeing the truth? Hint: What do we love more?

Who can fathom the depths of God’s love in becoming one of us (Rom. 11:33)? By sharing our flesh and blood, Christ did what we were unable to do. Read Heb. 2:14–15.

- How was the author of our salvation able to “destroy the one who [had] the power of death” (Heb. 2:14)?
- Describe the bondage from which we have been set free by His death.

Ultimately, only the Holy Spirit’s work of restoration will allow the Church to fulfill its task of bringing good news to a sick and dying world. Without His presence, “the way of peace they have not known” (Rom. 3:17).

Read Rom. 15:5–6.

- What Scriptures in particular give you endurance and encouragement?
- What kind of thoughts and words glorify God and advance the Church’s mission and witness?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Martin H. Franzmann (1907–1976) was called in 1946 to teach at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1955, he joined the department of Exegetical Theology there. He was known for his traditional stance on biblical inerrancy and inspiration over against historical criticism, as well as his commentaries on Romans and Revelation. Five of his original hymns and one of his translations are found in *Lutheran Service Book*. Today’s hymn was written for the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in 1967.

- What uniquely qualifies a student and teacher of the Scriptures to compose new hymns for the Church?

- The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is Oct. 31, 2017. Discuss two or three Reformation themes that still energize us today.

Text

Even as the first stanza expresses the aimlessness, futility, and brokenness of life, consequences of the fall, it offers a powerful refutation of the false claim that would lay responsibility for sin and death on God. Call to mind Michelangelo’s well-known painting of the creation, in which the “living finger” of God the Father gives life to the yet lifeless figure of Adam.

- Discuss the phrases and word pictures that demonstrate God's design and intention for mankind.
- In stanza 2, we discover the results of insisting on our "fatal" and "rebel will." What evidence do you see today that man's rebellion is still fatal?

Stanzas 3 and 4 capture in vivid terms how God spared no expense to win us back to Himself. He breathed our poisoned air, and drank the dark despair that strangle our "reluctant breath."

The hymn was written during the height of both the Vietnam conflict and the arms race of the Cold War. How does repeating the phrase "how beautiful the feet" (st.

3) — a direct reference to Is. 52:7 — bring a sense of hope and promise?

The final stanza evokes the "high doxology" of heaven heard in Rev. 5:12–13: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! ... To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" To this our lives aspire even now in "these grey and latter days" by virtue of the Spirit's breath.

- What are some things that would characterize your personal, family, and church life if these were among "those whose life is praise"?

Making the Connection

As we give thanks to God for restoring His Church, there are many gifts for us to rejoice in.

- What means does the Spirit use to make the Church once again "the bringer of good news to men" (st. 4) today?

- How does God bring comfort and hope to us who still inhabit our "hall of death" (st. 3) and "house of doom" (st. 2)?

In Closing

Every Lord's Day in each Divine Service, whether we feel it or not, God the Holy Spirit breathes afresh and anew on humble and repentant hearts through Word and Sacrament the very life and love that God desires for us to experience and share with our neighbors. God's people gather where He has promised to bring us back to Himself.

- Read aloud or sing together LSB 834.

Prayer

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in You, mercifully grant that by Your power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany).

Evening and Morning

Lutheran Service Book 726 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

We work hard to distance our lives from suffering, yet it still comes near us. Some face it with anger and resentment; others with grim resolve. Some seem to meet suffering with surprising joy and peace. How can we learn to meet suffering and trials with faith? Where do you obtain that peace and joy which are not diminished by the troubles of this mortal life?

If you knew of the life of hymn writer Paul Gerhardt (1607–76), you might find him a model for maintaining the holy joy of faith amid trials. Although his life was marked with personal suffering and loss during the Thirty Years' War, his hymns radiate joy. Despite a pastoral vocation lived out among persecution and conflict, his heart overflowed with faith and the peace that passes understanding.

Exploring the Scriptures

The readings for today all speak to the storms of life and the God who is with us in these storms and even stills them. Read Ps. 107:28–32.

- How do verses 28–30 preview the Gospel for the day?
- How might the disciples have benefited from these words prior to entering that boat with Jesus?

Now read Psalm 124. Notice how our enemies are described in this psalm as a raging flood that seeks to sweep us away and kill us.

- When have you felt like this was happening to you? What were the enemies that threatened you?
- In what context might Israel have seen these images of enemies, raging waters and escape?

Job is the classic example of faith under duress. Read some of Job's questions during his trials and God's answers (Job 38:1–11).

- Is God's answer simply a dismissal of Job and his hurt?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Paul Gerhardt wrote 12 stanzas of hope and confidence in God's mercy while living through the destruction of war, the terror of death and disillusionment in his personal life. He has been called the greatest of the Lutheran hymn writers, and truly his gift flowed from a strong and vibrant faith in

God's grace and benevolent will. Read through his other hymns and you find a constant strain of joy and peace no matter how difficult the circumstances of life. In this hymn, he invites us to see suffering through the eyes of faith and trust in God.

- Today we focus on one of his lesser-known hymn texts, "Evening and Morning" — a hymn that sings of "Joys e'er increasing / And peace never ceasing" (st. 3).
- Do you believe in fate? In destiny? In divine providence? Is there a difference?
- If we cannot escape from suffering in this life, what resources has God supplied the Christian to help us respond to suffering and trials in our daily lives?
- We do not believe God abandons us to face life's sufferings alone. How have you experienced God's providential care during moments of struggle?

- Does it sometimes seem that God is oblivious to our struggles?
- When God speaks of "limits" in verse 10, what did that mean for Job? What does it mean for you? Has God placed limits upon our enemies and on what we must endure?

Read Mark 4:35–41. This is the account of Jesus stilling the storm. Take note of the details Mark includes.

- Was Jesus asleep because He was oblivious to the storm, or might there be another reason?
- How did the disciples interpret Jesus' sleep during the storm? What was their fear (v. 38)?
- Was Jesus castigating His disciples (v. 40), or was He urging them to bring their faith to bear upon their doubts and fears?
- What does Jesus identify as our greatest resource when struggles and suffering cause us to fear?

What is the typical response to suffering or tragedy?

- We often cry out, “Why?” Does knowing why help us to respond to the terrible events in life?
- Think of a moment when you felt wounded by life’s struggles and cried out to God. Were you seeking explanation or consolation?

Text

As you read through this hymn, notice the concrete images used by Gerhardt. This is not about feelings or sentiment, but the consolation that is real and genuine. Take note of his first-person perspective.

The first stanza begins from the perspective of God the Creator (Job 38:1–11). The times and seasons of life and the physical blessings of life are all God’s works to us. The Lord is the source of all that is good.

- See how His “Comfort in sadness” is identified as one of His treasured gifts to us. Is this of greater or lesser importance than the physical blessings?
- The old saying goes, “There but for the grace of God go I.” How much of God’s preventative grace do we see? How much is hidden?

The second stanza reads like a prayer. Look at the various petitions expressed here: We pray for God to listen, forgive, calm, cleanse and guide us.

- How can our errors (sins) contribute to our fears in times of struggle? Are we tempted to believe that sufferings are God’s punishment for our sins? Is this consistent with or in conflict with the cross where Jesus paid for all our sins?

Making the Connection

Scripture reminds us that God’s mercies are new to us each morning. We must be reminded of this, because our tendency is to focus on all that is wrong. Scripture also reminds us that it rains on the unjust as well as the just. In other words, mercy is different from justice. Though we often think we want justice, God offers us mercy. This mercy is the greater gift, though it is often hidden in moments of suffering, trial and trouble.

In Closing

In the Our Father, we pray, “Deliver us from evil.” Though we mean “do not let evil (suffering) touch our lives,” we know that as long as we wear this flesh, we will face struggle and endure suffering. If these will not go away, what does God supply us to deal with them? The hymn reminds us that the gifts of God in the midst of the storm are His presence, mercy, pardon, calm, guidance, joy and peace in Christ. He will not leave or forsake us — ever!

- Another hymn from this era states, “What pleases God, that pleases me” (*LSB* 719:1). Here we sing to God, “As it may please Thee.” What Scripture comes to mind in all of this?

We find the things that afflict us “for a little while” (1 Peter 1:6) and the eternal treasures prepared for us in Christ contrasted in stanza 3. First Peter 1:3–9 speaks to this very well.

- How does faith enable us to see beyond the moment (whether sorrowful or joyous) to eternity?
- What is the storm mentioned here? How are the struggles of life like storms? What is the sunshine that follows them?

The final thought (st. 4) is one of praise and thanksgiving. Read through the words to see what God desires from us for all that He has done to deliver us from the storms of this life.

- What is the gift God prizes? Think how our Lutheran Confessions echo this when they say that the true worship of God is faith (Ap IV).
- In the last line, we are reminded that the temple of God was a place of incense. Israel was comforted by seeing the smoke of the incense rise. What did seeing smoke and smelling incense bring to mind? Does this imagery still work for us today? Read Psalm 141. Have you ever seen incense used in a worship service?

- How does God deal with suffering? Does He not come to take on our sufferings in Jesus Christ?
- How does God’s mercy shine in the darkest moments of our lives?
- What does God desire from us except the faith that receives this mercy (“A heart that believeth” [st. 4])?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 726.

Prayer

Almighty God, in Your mercy guide the course of this world so that Your Church may joyfully serve You in godly peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 7B).

When All the World Was Cursed

Lutheran Service Book 346 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

On a cross-country driving trip, a tourist decided to venture off the main highway to drive through the countryside for a while. He thought he knew where he was and he was enjoying the change of scenery. After an hour or so, he began driving back towards where he thought the highway should be, but after driving awhile, he grew concerned. Not wanting to drive around randomly, he stopped when he saw a farmer working close to the side of the road. "Excuse me, sir. Can you give me directions to the highway?" The farmer gladly answered, "Sure. Just drive up this road for a couple miles. Make a right at the Johnson's farm. Then take a left where their barn used to be. After that it's just past the big

field of sorghum. That will take you right to the highway." The driver thanked the farmer and hoping he could figure it out, drove down the road muttering, "Johnson's farm ... where the barn used to be. They could really use some signs around here."

- What is the purpose of a sign?
- What "signs" pointed people to Jesus as the Messiah?

Today's hymn focuses on one of the signs that directed people to Jesus the Messiah: John the Baptist. His work prepared others to meet their Savior when He first appeared and his words help prepare us to see Jesus today.

Exploring the Scriptures

John the Baptist is an important figure in the Gospels and an important figure in our Advent preparations.

Read part of the story of John the Baptist in John 1:6–9, 15–17, 23–31.

- Why did God send John the Baptist? What did John say about Jesus? What do we receive from Jesus that we receive from no one else?
- How does John describe himself?

Read about the Baptism of Jesus in Matt. 3:1–12.

- What did John call the crowds to do?

- Why did John not want to baptize Jesus? Why was Jesus baptized? What happened after His Baptism? What does this signify?

John's story does not end with this amazing Baptism. Read what happened next in John 1:29, 35–37.

- What did John call Jesus? What does this mean? What effect did this have on his disciples?

Read Luke 1:41–44.

- When did John first meet Jesus? What does this tell us about faith?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Pastor Johann Gottfried Olearius (1635–1711) wrote and published this hymn while serving at St. Mary's Church in Halle, Germany. He wrote it specifically for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24). While this hymn summarizes themes from John the Baptist, Olearius demonstrated a pastoral concern by putting those who sing this hymn into the story. We are invited to hear the Baptist's message and we pray that we hear John's invitation to follow the Savior.

- How important is it that we consider how a biblical story applies to us? When we do this, do you think we are honest about what we really might have done in a similar situation?

Later in life, pastor Olearius was called to positions of leadership in the regional church. He also served as a theology teacher. In the last years of his life, he faced challenges when he became completely blind.

- How might John the Baptist's message have helped pastor Olearius endure affliction? How can it help people who struggle with challenging situations today?

Text

At first glance, this hymn may seem to simply summarize the story of John the Baptist. But it really does much more than that. It places the story in its historical and theological context and reveals some of the deeper meaning of these events. It invites us into the Gospel narrative.

- What is “Moses’ condemnation” that is spoken of in stanza 1? In what sense was Moses’ message a blessing? In what sense was it a curse (see also Gal. 3:10)? How is John’s message different from Moses’ message?

Following the Gospels, this hymn tells us some details of John’s life. Read Luke 1:13–17, 39–45.

- How is John like Elijah? How is he different?
- How was John able to recognize Jesus while both were still in the womb?

Making the Connection

In the first of his Ninety-five Theses, Martin Luther writes, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (AE 31:25). This hymn invites us to hear John’s message and, like his disciples, respond by following Christ.

In Closing

By our Savior’s invitation, we come to His table in repentant joy to receive His body and blood. As we come, we prepare to receive our Lord by singing John’s words: “Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world” (*LSB*, p. 163). At the table we receive the very thing that John showed his disciples — Jesus, the Lamb of God, the world’s Redeemer.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 346.

While John is often remembered for baptizing people in the Jordan River, this is not the most significant thing in his ministry. Read John 1:29–36.

- Why are John’s words about Jesus more important than his baptizing?
- Whose sins does Jesus’ work take away? Why is this a critical point for us to understand? Is there anyone not included in Jesus’ work?
- How does John model discipleship and humility in dealing with those who were following him?

- Is John’s message really something that we “receive, rejoicing” (st. 4)? What should we do when we hear John’s message?
- John the Baptist faithfully focused attention away from himself and onto Jesus. How can we do the same?

Prayer

Almighty God, through John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, You once proclaimed salvation. Now grant that we may know this salvation and serve You in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life; through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist).

In the Very Midst of Life

Lutheran Service Book 755 | study by Scott R. Schilbe

Introduction

We don't have to look too far beyond ourselves and our loved ones to understand that death surrounds us. The pressures of feeling age limiting our bodies or of seeing our loved ones mentally or physically decline burden us with feelings of hopelessness. We feel hopeless because we can do nothing to escape the situation. Our bodies, not to mention the natural disasters we witness through television and the internet, point us to the reality that the present world is fading away. We truly are living in the midst of death's vale.

Exploring the Scriptures

In the Bible are many accounts of individuals who felt death surrounding them and their families.

- Read Luke 7:1–10 and Mark 5:21–43. In each account, identify the person feeling burdened and the serious situation that was faced.
- According to 2 Cor. 1:8–10, for what beneficial purpose can God use our burdens?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

According to tradition, stanza 1 existed before Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote stanzas 2 and 3. These two additional stanzas clearly confess the Christian's refuge during gloomy times of life: Jesus and His mercy.

Discuss how Luther's call to take refuge in the holy and all-merciful Savior becomes more personal after reflecting upon the following significant situations of Luther's life:

- His conflicts with the Roman Catholic Church and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire after posting the 95 Theses, conflicts resulting in his condemnation after the Diet of Worms.
- Luther's family tragedies, especially living under the threat of deadly disease in 1527, and enduring the death of two daughters, Elisabeth in 1528 and Magdalena in 1542.

Text

This hymn provides interesting ways of describing death. In stanza 1, death is described as an enemy, a snare eager to trap us into fear and despair. However, repentant of our sinfulness, we flee to the only hope, the only holy God. Because of our holy and merciful Savior, we have nothing to fear.

Today's hymn, "In the Very Midst of Life," forces us to confront living in a sinful world, while also providing assurance that our holy and mighty God is the only one who eternally saves us from it.

- In your life, do you feel that the "Powers of hell" (st. 2) overtake you? How?
 - To what refuges do you think people turn in times of need? Are these refuges outside the church?
 - How does Heb. 2:14–15, 18 help you when you struggle with sin and death "In the very midst of life"?
 - How does a faith that rests on Jesus speak in situations of apparent despair and tragedy? Read Lam. 3:22–33.
 - Despite the unpleasant reality of living on earth, what eternal hope do Is. 51:11 and Rev. 21:1–4 offer you?
 - How did Noah witness the snare of death surrounding him? Read Gen. 7:21–24.
 - How did God deal with Noah's environment? Read Gen. 8:1.
 - How did Noah react to his situation? Read Heb. 11:7; Gen. 8:10.
- In stanza 2, death is portrayed as a valley through which we currently walk.
- How do the famous words of Ps. 23:4 help you realize that "death" is much more than the moment of physical death?
 - What, according to Paul, is the source of this "vale" (Rom. 8:20; Rom. 5:12)? Who is your hope while living in this vale (Rom. 5:15–17; Ps. 23:4)?
- In stanza 3, death is portrayed as utter woe. Again, Luther indicates that death is more than physical death; it is utter devastation.
- Contemplate times of your life when you've felt deeply distressed.
 - Briefly review Jesus' passion. How did Jesus Himself experience utter woe and devastation? For what reason did Jesus experience it?

Making the Connection

As you examine the hymn, note that each stanza begins by sounding the realistic note of despair, yet each stanza ends by clearly pointing the singer to the merciful Savior. In this way, the hymn text parallels our natural feelings when confronting a crisis. It first gives voice to our hopelessness but then provides needed focus by pointing to Jesus.

The hymn guides us as we cope with suffering either in our lives or in the lives of others. It guides us to Jesus and to His atoning work. And it also guides us to repent of our fears and to cling to the ways in which God preserves us.

In Closing

Indeed, we constantly endure the sadness of living in a sinful world. This hymn helps us confront that reality, while at the same time it helps us look beyond that reality and cling to Jesus. Our holy and righteous God does show His mercy to us and saves, preserves and keeps us!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 755.

Examine these two hymn phrases and discuss the related questions.

- “We mourn that we have greatly erred” (st. 1). In what ways do you express your contriteness over sin?
- “Lord, preserve and keep us / In the peace that faith can give” (st. 3). By what means does God preserve you in the faith?
- Choose a perplexing phrase from the hymn and discuss its meaning.

Prayer

Almighty, everlasting God, Your Son has assured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal death. Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit that our faith in Christ may increase daily and that we may hold fast to the hope that on the Last Day we shall be raised in glory to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Hope of eternal life in Christ, *LSB*, p. 313).

Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head

Lutheran Service Book 647 | study by John T. Pless

Introduction

This post-Reformation hymn breathes the confidence of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, that “this Church alone is called Christ’s body, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by His Spirit. Paul testifies about this when he says, ‘And gave Him as head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:22–23)” (Ap VII and VIII 5, p. 144).

From her divine head, the Body of Christ has life through the forgiveness of sins. Luther was bold to assert the fact of Christ’s headship against the false claim of the papacy, “The pope is not, according to divine law or God’s Word, the head

of all Christendom. This name belongs to One only, whose name is Jesus Christ [Colossians 1:18]” (SA IV 1, p. 268).

Today’s hymn calls upon Jesus as “the Church’s head,” confessing Him to be the “foundation” and “rock” which provide security for our life in the world.

- When we discuss the Church, why must we always begin and end with Christ?
- What do you pray for when you pray for the Church? How does this hymn guide and shape our prayers for the well-being of the Church?

Exploring the Scriptures

The key text behind this hymn is Eph. 2:19–21.

- How does Paul describe what God has worked in Christ in verses 19–20?
- What is the nature of Christ’s authority and dominion in verse 21? Also see Matt. 28:18.
- Who made Christ “head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22)?
- What does this passage say about the future of the Church?

Read Matt. 16:13–19. This text is the Holy Gospel appointed for St. Peter and St. Paul, Apostles. It is the account of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus’ promise to the Church.

- How do the disciples respond to Jesus’ question regarding the identity of the Son of Man?

- Jesus makes the question more pointed: “Who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). How does Peter answer? Hermann Sasse once said something to the effect that every true creed in Christendom is simply an expansion of Peter’s confession. How does the Apostles’ Creed unpack Peter’s confession of Jesus?
- What is “this rock” of verse 18? What does Christ promise to do with this rock? How do the words of Jesus comfort struggling believers faced with what appears to be a failing church?

Read Eph. 4:3–6, 15–16. The letter to the Ephesians is the great epistle on the Church’s unity.

- List the “ones” in verses 4–6. How do we confess the oneness of the Church in the Nicene Creed?
- According to verses 15–16, how is the oneness of the Church expressed?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written by a Lutheran pastor and poet, Johann Mentzer (1658–1734). Mentzer was born in Jahmen, Silesia. After completing his theological studies in Wittenberg, Germany he was appointed pastor in Merzdorf, Germany, where he served until being called to Hauswalde, Germany in 1693. In 1696, he was called to Kemnitz, Saxony, where he remained until his death in 1734.

His life was marked by suffering and affliction. Mentzer’s contemporaries commented favorably on the consoling power of this hymn.

- This hymn embraces both praise and supplication. How is Christ praised in this hymn? What does the hymn implore Christ to do for the Church?
- What are the most consoling aspects of this hymn for Christians under persecution or stress?

Text

Confessing the Lord Jesus to be the Head of the Church and her only foundation, the hymn describes the posture of God’s faithful people as bowing in trust and waiting for salvation. This trust is well founded, for it is built on Christ’s Word, the “rock secure” which will not pass away. It is a

characteristic of Mentzer's poetry that he draws together numerous biblical images.

- Which images in stanza 1 are drawn from these texts: Ps. 95:6; Gen. 49:18; Matt.7:24–27; Matt. 16:18?
- Why will the Church endure? See 1 Tim.3:15.

In stanza 2, the hymn writer pictures the Church as a “little flock” confessing Christ’s name, and so implores Him to continue to guard and keep His people in unity with Himself.

- How does stanza 2 reflect the promise of Jesus in Luke 12:32?
- Read John 10:1–16. How do the sheep have unity with the Shepherd?
- There is urgency in the supplication that God would preserve in purity His Word and Sacraments, for these gifts “remain our only strength and comfort.” How does false teaching destroy the strength and comfort of the means of grace?

Making the Connection

Luther characterized his evangelical theology as a “theology of the cross” in contrast to the ever-prevailing “theology of glory.” The theology of the cross finds God in the suffering of Christ, in His lowliness to be our Savior. A theology of glory attempts to discover God in human strength and achievement.

In Closing

In light of our study of this hymn, reflect on Luther’s words in his 1533 treatise on “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests,” “For the church confesses in the Lord’s Prayer that it sins and errs; but it is forgiven everything. ... It remains a submissive sinner before God until the day of judgment and is holy alone in Christ its Savior by grace and the forgiveness of sins” (AE 38:171).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 647.

Stanzas 3 and 4 speak of the Christian’s life — a life hallowed by the radiance of God’s Word (see Ps. 119:105) and lived in the humility of repentance and faith under the cross and in the hope of heaven.

- How do stanzas 3 and 4 echo the Small Catechism’s explanation of the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer?

In his treatment of the Third Petition in the Large Catechism, Luther writes, “For where God’s Word is preached, accepted, or believed and produces fruit, there the holy cross cannot be missing [Acts 14:22]. And let no one think that he shall have peace [Matthew 10:34]. He must risk whatever he has upon earth—possessions, honor, house and estate, wife and children, body and life. Now, this hurts our flesh and the old Adam [Ephesians 4:22]. The test is to be steadfast, and to suffer with patience [James 5:7–8] in whatever way we are assaulted, and to let go whatever is taken from us [1 Peter 2:20–21]” (LC III 65–66, p. 416).

- How is this thought reflected in stanzas 3 and 4?

- How is this hymn a sung “theology of the cross”?
- How is its message against contemporary temptations in the church to embrace a theology of glory?

Prayer

Now pray together the Lord’s Prayer and conclude with this collect: Almighty God, grant to Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above, that Your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve You and, in the confession of Your name, abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For the Church, *LSB*, p. 305).

O Christ, Our True and Only Light

Lutheran Service Book 839 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

This hymn by Johann Heermann (1585–1647) is the Hymn of the Day for all three years for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, as well as for Proper 9 (July 3–9) of year B. It is primarily associated with the famous call of Isaiah 60 (“Arise, shine, for your light has come”) as God’s beacon of salvation for all nations, as well as with the beginnings of Jesus’ earthly ministry, His choosing of the first disciples and especially His rejection at Nazareth. The hymn is a

prayer for the mission of the Church, that the light of Christ may enlighten and shine on all who are yet enslaved by the spiritual blindness of the fallen nature.

- How is Jesus “our true and only light”? Are there other false lights?
- What is the darkness that we pray Christ will enlighten and overcome?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Is. 60:1–3. The gracious good news of salvation is announced as light shining in darkness. The darkness of spiritual blindness and death is described in the previous chapter. Read Isa. 59:9–10. The fact that thick darkness covers the earth and all people emphasizes the universal fact of the fallen nature of all people. Sin and death are our lot until we are released and freed from their slavery by the gracious action of God. His salvation is as universal as our need, in that “nations” (60:3) shall come to the light.

- Define sin according to 1 John 3:4.
- Sin is not only wrong acts but also a condition. According to Eph. 2:3 we are sinners also by our very _____.
- How is sin described in the following passages? Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:11.
- What is the light the prophet speaks about? See Luke 2:32; John 1:9.

- Who is speaking and who is being spoken about in Luke 1:78–79? See John 1:6–8.

Read John 8:12. Jesus declares Himself to be the light of the world, and that those who follow Him will live in the light.

- How do the following passages describe the follower of Christ? Matt. 5:14; Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9.

Read Eph. 5:8–14. According to this passage we not only were *in* darkness, but *were* darkness; and now we not only walk *in* light but *are* “light in the Lord.” Read John 12:35–36.

- How does darkness and light describe us as sinners and saints in our daily life?
- What is the “fruit of light” (Eph. 5:9)?
- What are “the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11) that we cannot mention without shame?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Heermann wrote this hymn in the midst of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). But Heermann seems to be looking beyond the current disruption and destruction of peaceful daily life to the realm of people’s spiritual condition. We are told that the hymn is modeled on a prayer in a booklet by Philipp Kegel (Hamburg, 1592), a prayer for those who have never yet known Christ as well as those who may be misled by false teachers.

Interestingly, it is doubtful that Heermann knew that Kegel’s prayer reflected one by a Jesuit priest seeking the return of misled Protestants! Heermann’s hymn and prayer sings from the light of the truth of pure doctrine as contained in the Lutheran Confessions.

“Mission and Witness” is a main aspect of the Church’s work, especially as it is directly related to our Lord’s “final sign” to be fulfilled before His return: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

- Everyone agrees to the necessity of reaching out with the Gospel to the unchurched, to those who have never heard. To what extent do we agree, however, to reach out to those who are being misled by false teachers?
- What are some false religions or teachings today?
- Should these false teachings be addressed by the pastor in his sermons?

Text

Stanza 1 identifies Jesus Christ as Isaiah’s “light” (Is. 60:1). This is true of Christ according to both natures. We confess Him as the divine Son of God in the words of the Nicene Creed, “Light of Light, very God of very God,” and the incarnate Son, Jesus, says of Himself, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). It is He who “enlightens,” that is, reveals the truth to His disciples. See Luke 24:45.

The second stanza’s claim that they are “lost in error’s maze” or in “Some dark delusion” certainly may come to some people as a surprise.

- What is the difference between the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers and enlightens sinners and the Son of God who opens and enlightens minds?
- Aware of his sin, how did the prophet Isaiah describe his condition at his famous confrontation with Holy God, Isa. 6:5?
- How is this spiritual lostness different from that referred to in the last phrase of the last stanza of *LSB* 700, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”?

Stanza 3 is our prayer for every sinner, that they be gently called to salvation, peace and rest.

Making the Connection

This hymn should, among other things, draw together the concerns for both the truth of sound doctrine and outreach to the lost. For it is only as we believe, teach and confess the truth that we have any power for reaching the lost with the glorious Gospel of salvation. There may be other ways and other messages that “reach” or draw people, but the question is always, to what end? If the issue is looked at as merely a question of “marketing,” one will certainly want to downplay the “negative” diagnosis of our audience as those who are lost, in darkness or in error. If, however, the issue is

In Closing

Prayer

Almighty God, in Your kindness You cause the light of the Gospel to shine among us. By the working of Your Holy Spirit, help us to share the good news of Your salvation that all who hear it may rejoice in the gift of Your unending love; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Mission Observance).

- With what “gentle” word do 1 Peter 2:25 and Isa. 53:6 refer to people who do not know Christ?
- How does Matt. 11:28 suggest we should approach and invite unbelievers to Christ?
- According to Heb. 9:9–14, what is it that gives the conscience peace and rest?

Stanza 4 speaks of the “darkened” and “cold,” the “wand’rers,” and those who “walk apart.” This seems to identify those who are led astray by false teaching or doctrine. Those who “walk apart” are distinguished from others, that is, those who “walk together,” which is the definition of the word “synod,” walking the same road (of confession). We continue to pray and work for the unity of the Church across so-called “denominational” lines to agreement in the truth.

Stanza 5 speaks of the grand goal of the unity of the “*una sancta*,” the one holy Church of every time and place, at the final marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end.

- To what extent should ecumenism, or work for outward unity, insist on doctrinal agreement?
- Read John 10:16 and 1 Cor. 1:10. To what extent is the unity of the Church a reality?

bringing people to repentance and saving faith, we need to face up to the truth of the spiritual condition of all people according to our common, fallen nature, and then deliver the glorious good news of God’s gift of salvation.

- What, according to Matt. 28:19–20, are the two primary means by which we are commanded to “make disciples”?
- What do we call the orderly system or arrangement by which the Church attempts to teach “all things” as the years pass by?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 839.

Prayer

O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 9B).

Jesus, Priceless Treasure

Lutheran Service Book 743 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

The Lutheran Confessions describe the priceless treasure that has come to us in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. “Since the promise can only be received by faith, the Gospel (which is properly the promise of forgiveness of sins and of justification for Christ’s sake) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ. The Law does not teach this, nor is this the righteousness of the Law. For the Law demands our works and our perfection. But, for Christ’s sake, the Gospel freely offers reconciliation to us, who have been vanquished by sin and death. This is received not by works, but by faith alone. This faith does not bring to God confidence in one’s own

merits, but only confidence in the promise, or the mercy promised in Christ” (Ap IV 43–45).

Today’s hymn is addressed to Jesus, the source of true and lasting joy, and alternately to all counterfeits, which are renounced in no uncertain terms.

- Given the natural belief that we can and must do something to save ourselves, discuss the fact that there are ultimately only two religions in the world: the religion of the Gospel and the religion(s) of Law(s)?
- What earthly treasures are people willing to fight and die for? How does new life in Christ change our perspective?

Exploring the Scriptures

Given Peter’s bold statements — “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16); followed by “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matt. 16:22); to the night of Jesus’ betrayal, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” (Matt. 26:35); and finally post-resurrection, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (John 21:17) — how would we expect him to describe the treasure of grace in Christ?

Read 1 Peter 1:17–19.

- Discuss how the image of the lamb would remind Peter’s readers of John the Baptist’s cry, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).
- What phrase does Peter use to describe what we were *not* redeemed with? What significance do such things have in our lives as believers?

Almost everyone nowadays has insurance on things they hold that are of value. What “insurance policy” does God offer us?

Read Rom. 8:35–39.

- What sort of things threaten to separate us from the love of Christ? What makes us “more than conquerors” (v. 37) in the midst of these troubles?
- What has God done to persuade you that even the most terrifying things we might imagine cannot separate us from His love?

At one point in Jesus’ ministry, many of His disciples left Him because of His “hard sayings.” Peter has another opportunity to stake his claim in Christ.

Read John 6:66–69.

- How does someone get to the place where he has evaluated various truth claims and can say with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (v. 68)?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Franck (1618–77) published this text after the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), during which his hometown suffered invasion from both Saxon and Swedish armies. Franck embarked on a distinguished civic career as an attorney, city councilor and mayor. He wrote both secular and religious poetry, including 110 religious songs.

- How can we encourage believers to embrace their vocation in this world as service to Christ?

Text

The first two stanzas express a creative tension between boundless confidence in Jesus as my “truest friend” and “purest pleasure” and a sense of distance from God. Though the very worst of this fallen world combine to seek our ruin, however, we children of God find safety when resting in Jesus’ arms.

- How has this fallen world hurt or disappointed you? In the midst of these difficulties, how did you come to know the truth that “Jesus will not fail me” (st. 2)?

- A sense of God’s distance or absence could be seen as a sign of weak faith. What other explanations could you offer to help a friend?

Stanzas 3–6 address the realities that confront us in rather vehement, even violent, terms. Satan, death, earthly treasure, empty glory, pain or loss, evil world, sinful life, fear and sadness — all are told in no uncertain terms: Hence!

Making the Connection

Consider Franck’s hymn in light of Peter’s first epistle:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him,

The dangers of being deceived by the evil world and blinded or bound by sin are recognized and dealt with almost in the spirit of an exorcism. “Get thee far behind me, / Come not forth again” (st. 5), Franck writes.

- In the face of evil, are believers ever tempted to think of themselves as weak, helpless victims? What kind of therapy does Franck offer those struggling in this way?

you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6–9)

- Why does God allow trials and fiery tests to come your way?

In Closing

- Read aloud or sing together *LSB* 743.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, our support and defense in every need, continue to preserve Your Church in safety, govern her by Your goodness, and bless her with Your peace; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 19B).

The Church's One Foundation

Lutheran Service Book 644 | study by Robert E. Smith

Introduction

The Romans were excellent engineers. Today ancient Roman roads still bear traffic, their aqueducts still bring water to European cities and the bridges they built still allow people to cross rivers. They understood well the importance of a well-laid foundation.

In ancient times, construction of important structures began with the laying of the cornerstone. Builders carefully selected this stone, shaped it for beauty and to have the correct angles. They took time to place it in the right location so that the rest of the foundation would be properly aligned. Cornerstones not only bore the weight of the structure, they joined two walls together. Finally, a dedication ceremony included a sacrifice to the gods to grant success.

Exploring the Scriptures

Samuel Stone's beloved hymn, "The Church's One Foundation," tells a love story: the marriage of Christ and His Church. He brings together images located throughout the book of Ephesians.

Read Eph. 5:25–27.

- Why did Christ give Himself for the Church? How did He give Himself for us?
- How does Christ make His bride holy?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

As Anglican priest Samuel J. Stone (1839–1900) visited the members of his parish, he noticed how pious they were. Many recited the Apostles' Creed in their personal life as well as during worship.

Stone wrote twelve poems to aid them in their devotions and published them in a booklet, *Lyra Fidelium* (1866). "The Church's One Foundation" was the ninth poem in it. The hymn was written to explain the phrase "The holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints."

- Do you sing hymns during Bible study? Your family devotions? Personal prayer time? What does a hymn add to these occasions?

Stone was concerned about the spread of challenges to Christianity within the Anglican communion. Bishop John Colenso of Natal, South Africa, believed the Old Testament was fiction and taught that all people would be saved and

St. Paul compares the one holy Christian and apostolic Church to a temple, where the teaching of the apostles and prophets is the foundation and Christ is the cornerstone. Read Eph. 2:19–22 and 1 Peter 2:4–10.

- How are we "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20)?
- How are we joined together to become a temple for God's Holy Spirit?
- How are we a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9)? What are we called to do together?

- When a groom sees his bride at the altar, what does he see? When Christ looks at His baptized bride, what does He see?

Read Eph. 4:1–6.

- How do we live together worthy of our calling as God's holy Church?
- What things unite all Christians of all times, places, nations and languages?

that the Sacrament was symbolic and not the body and blood of Christ. He also permitted polygamy in his African parish. Stone supported Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, South Africa who deposed Colenso. Echoes of this kind of conflict are present in the hymn.

- In the twenty-first century many non-Christian religions, false teachings and deceptive philosophers compete to lure faithful believers away from the faith. Read Eph. 4:11–16. How can we avoid false teachers and cling to our holy Christian faith?

Text

"The Church's One Foundation" explores the doctrine of the Church. The first two stanzas focus on the invisible Church. All Christians belong to this Church, whether living on earth today or with Jesus in heaven.

- Read the first two stanzas of the hymn. According to this poem, how did the Church come to be? How does it describe the Church?
- Read Eph. 1:3–14. How can we be sure that we are a part of the invisible Church?

Even though the Church of God is the fellowship of “the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd [John 10:11–16]” (SA III XII 2, p. 283), the visible church seems to the world “oppressed, / By schisms rent asunder, / By heresies distressed” (st. 3). As saints and sinners at the same time, Christians often hurt each other.

Making the Connection

In our world where Christians are criticized, where schools teach our children to forsake the teachings of Scripture, where society approves of sinful behavior that God condemns, it is easy to feel alone. But you are not alone. God calls us to live together in His one holy Christian and

In Closing

You are a living stone, built on Christ our cornerstone, the apostles and the prophets into God’s holy temple. There the Holy Spirit comes to live. In Baptism, we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection. By God’s Word, our faith is strengthened, we are “built up” to become more and more like Jesus. When we confess our sins before God, our pastor forgives us our sins for Christ’s sake. In the Lord’s Supper, Jesus gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink. He gives us the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. He strengthens us so that we can strengthen our brothers and sisters in Christ, show the mercy and love of Jesus to all and share the good news that God wants to give all of this to all who believe it.

In the midst of the church on earth are false Christians who tear at the fabric of her unity. Heresies present false gospels and false christs that lure people away from their faith. From time to time, Christians feel harried and depressed and join the martyrs at the throne of God to cry out, “How long?”

- Read 2 Peter 3:9–13 and Rev. 6:9–13. Why hasn’t Christ returned yet to bring an end to sin, sorrow, grief, death and to judge those who did evil?
- Read Rev.7:9–17. What is the “vision glorious” that helps the Church Militant wait “the consummation / Of peace forevermore” (st. 4)?

apostolic Church. We are here to love each other and care for each other.

- Read Rom. 12:9–21; Rom. 15:1–2; Gal.6:1–2; and 1 Thess. 5:12–18. How does God want us to support each other?

- Read together the Small Catechism’s Third Article of the Creed (*LSB*, p. 323).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 644.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 11B).

Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds

Lutheran Service Book 465 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

The basketball stadium is hushed and quiet. The home team had been down by twenty points at halftime against a vastly superior opponent. But now with one second left the game is tied. A home team favorite player is at the foul line with one foul shot left. If he makes it, there will be victory and rejoicing. If he misses, there will be dejection and sadness. He shoots and he makes it! The team goes crazy, jumping up and down and so do the stands. All the fans start yelling and cheering and stomping so that the whole stadium vibrates and rocks with the happiness of a great victory.

Exploring the Scriptures

One of the most important and beautiful parts of the Book of Revelation is its picture of heavenly worship. Read Rev. 5:11–13.

- Who is being praised in these verses?
- What kind of lamb is pictured in verse 12? Who is that lamb? When was He slain?
- Who are the creatures in these verses who are giving praise to the Lamb and the one on the throne?
- Does that include us? When do we join in?

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not simply a resuscitation. It does not simply mean He is alive again. It is an event that brings great blessings to us. Read Rom. 8:11.

- What Spirit dwells in us?
- What did that Spirit do to Jesus?
- What promise does this verse give to us?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Rev. Paul Strodach (1876–1947) was a Lutheran pastor who was instrumental in putting together a Lutheran hymnal from the 1950s, *Service Book and Hymnal*. Part of his work on this hymnal included writing the text for this Easter hymn and joining it to the very familiar tune “Lasst uns erfreuen.” Though he died before the hymnal was published, this Easter hymn has gained great acceptance in the Lutheran church and beyond.

It is a poor analogy, a very weak picture, but today’s hymn wants us to see Easter, our Lord’s magnificent resurrection from the dead, as something like the story above. “Christ has triumphed! He is living!” Heaven is filled with joy and that joy filters down to us, the Church on earth, as we join in the singing and praise of Christ’s triumph over death and sin.

- How is the story above like Easter Sunday? How is it unlike Easter Sunday?
- How does Christ’s victory at Easter affect us?

The Scriptures testify that Christians are members of the Body of Christ. We are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. We have been raised in our Baptism with Christ in His resurrection. This shapes our lives as Christians. Read Col. 3:1–4.

- What does verse 1 say has happened to us as Christians?
- What are “the things that are above” that we are to seek and set our minds on?
- How have we died in Christ?
- What promise does verse 4 make about our future?

Read 1 Cor. 15:51–57, especially verse 57.

- Verse 57 tells us that God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Victory over what?
- When has Christ won that victory?
- What fact about our future fate does Paul assure us comes from the victory of Christ?

- One of the great strengths of the Lutheran church has always been congregational hymn singing. What are some of your favorite hymns in *LSB*?
- The church has never stopped writing hymns. Every age produces its own great hymnic testaments to the faith. Do your favorite hymns tend to be older hymns from the early centuries of the church or newer ones like this one?

Text

The center of this hymn is the stirring phrase repeated throughout the stanzas: “Christ has triumphed! He is living!” This simple double exclamation ushers the singer into the heart of Easter joy. The Scriptures proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection as a victory over sin, death and the devil. Christ had to die to pay for sin, but He also rose to defeat sin and death for us. Easter is the great conquest of Christ over our enemies.

Read Ex. 15:1.

- What victory is being celebrated in that verse?
- How does that victory compare with Christ’s triumph? How are they the same and different?

Making the Connection

The connection between earthly worship and heavenly worship is a profound and important thought. This hymn invites us to repeat the songs of angels here on earth. We do this literally in some parts of the liturgy (the Gloria, the Sanctus) and in general throughout our worship when we praise Christ and His grace.

- What comfort does it bring you to know that heaven and earth are joined in the same worship?
- What moments of worship make you feel “closest to heaven”?

In Closing

The resurrection of Jesus is so much more than a winning three-point shot. It is the victory of God made flesh over every sin, death and the devil. Christ lives and is with us every day. We sing with heaven in praise of Him in our worship. We truly have reason to sing with all creation: “Christ has triumphed! He is living!”

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 465.

A major theme of this hymn is the idea that heaven rejoices at the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The selections we looked at above from the Book of Revelation are good examples of this joy. Stanza 2 goes on to invite us to join in that heavenly praise.

- What reasons does stanza 2 give us to praise Christ and His victory over death?

Easter is not only a victory and a reason for praising God, it is a present reality in the life of the believer. Christ lives and is with and in the Church and the individual Christian. Stanza 3 turns our focus to our daily lives and how Easter transforms them.

- What petitions does the hymn address to our Lord?
- How do we also “conquer” as Christ has conquered?

Sometimes we can miss the full message of the resurrection when we think of Easter as only “Jesus died and rose and went to heaven.” This hymn reminds us that Christ is living and present among us: “Now still He comes to give us life / And by His presence stills all strife.”

- How does Christ come to us now and give us gifts?
- What difference does it make when we face death to know Christ is not only living but present with us every moment?

Prayer

Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord’s resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Easter Day).

Entrust Your Days and Burdens

Lutheran Service Book 754 | study by Randy Wurschmidt

Introduction

Life is messy. This life, lived in this world, marred by sin, your sin and everybody else's sin, is unpredictable and sometimes stormy, even chaotic. Just when you think you've got everything under control, something happens that messes up all your plans. The car won't start. You are fired from your job. You are diagnosed with cancer. A loved one dies suddenly and tragically. "This wasn't part of my plan!" you cry.

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD" (Is. 55:8). What are God's ways, then? Who or what can we count on? Should we seize each day as it comes and simply hope for the best?

Exploring the Scriptures

The starting point for this hymn is Ps. 37:5, "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act." The hymn's author, Paul Gerhardt, used the German text of this psalm to form an acrostic, so that the first word of each hymn stanza is the next successive word of the psalm verse. Read Psalm 37.

- According to the psalm, why should we stop worrying about evildoers and wrongdoers?
- What will happen on the Last Day to all those who prospered in this life, but had no faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Paul Gerhardt (1607–76) is one of the Lutheran Church's great treasures. You likely know some (or many!) of his hymns. "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth" (*LSB* 438), "Evening and Morning" (*LSB* 726) and "Now Rest beneath Night's Shadow" (*LSB* 880) are among his best known. (If you have time, scan the index in your hymnal, p. 999). Pastor Gerhardt knew suffering firsthand. The Thirty Years' War, political and religious strife in the parish, and subsequent job loss were sources of conflict and anxiety for him. By 1669, Gerhardt had lost his wife and four of his five children.

And yet, despite these hardships, Gerhardt left us some of the greatest hymns of comfort ever written — hymns which preach the peace of Jesus that comes through the forgiveness of sins, hymns in which Christ crucified is at

the center, changing our focus from "woe is me" to "I thank You, my heavenly Father." He found that meditating on the Scriptures was helpful in dealing with the suffering around him.

Or is there something more concrete and more eternal in which we can place our trust? You know the answer: Entrust your days and burdens to God, who is the beginning and the end; His Word will stand forever (Is. 40:8). Where do we turn when things seem out of our control? Where do we look when everything is going wrong? "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Peter said. "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

- We turn to Jesus.
- Do you have any favorite passages of Scripture for those times when nothing seems to be going right for you? Why do you think these help at such times?

St. Paul has much to say about relying on the Lord to know and provide what we need. Read Phil. 4:6–13.

- Are there times in your experience when God has provided for your needs in an unexpected way?
- Read the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer and its meaning in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 323–4). Compare this to the passage from Paul above.

the center, changing our focus from "woe is me" to "I thank You, my heavenly Father." He found that meditating on the Scriptures was helpful in dealing with the suffering around him.

- What are the side effects of only worrying about yourself? How is this different from loving your neighbor?
- Why do you think God would allow unpleasant things to happen to you?

Text

In the First Article of the Creed (back to the Small Catechism!), we confess our belief that "God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, *and still takes care of them*" (*LSB*, p. 322; emphasis added). We sing this same belief in the first stanza: that God is

in charge of sky, sea and land; that God not only guides the tempests, but that He also guides you. Therefore, since we believe this, it also informs our prayers and our anxieties (or lack of anxieties).

- In the second stanza, we sing, “Rely on God your Savior,” rather than on our own thoughts and cares. Why is self-inflicted worry pointless? What would be a better solution than fretting?
- Jesus has something to say about being anxious in His Sermon on the Mount. Read Matt. 6:25–34. According to Christ, why should we not worry so much about the things of this life?

Making the Connection

In Luke 11:1–4, we read Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. Though it is shorter than the familiar one from Matthew, it still includes these words: “Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation” (Luke 11:3–4). With these petitions, Jesus teaches us to trust in Him to provide for our daily needs, He promises to hear our prayers for forgiveness, and He keeps the evil one at bay.

And then Jesus says this: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). We don’t ask ourselves or our hearts for guidance, for our hearts will only lead us astray. We don’t seek our will for our lives, but God’s will. We knock at the door

In Closing

Entrust your days and burdens to the loving hand of God. It’s not Law; it’s Gospel. It is a promise. For God has made you and all creatures, the heavens and the earth, and He still takes care of them. He gives you your daily bread. He protects you from all evil. You will sometimes doubt this; you will certainly fail to feel it. But that doesn’t make it untrue, for He has promised to hear you, to forgive you, to save you and, on the Last Day, to bring you to heaven to praise Him there.

If you haven’t done it already, sing through the entire hymn together. Then take it home, sing it in your devotional time, sing it before you go to bed, learn it and take it to

Stanzas 4–6 point us out of this life and into the next, where we will neither hunger nor thirst, and where every tear will be wiped away. In this way, we avoid being caught up in the moment, and instead we are always thinking of the bigger picture. In other words, this life isn’t what it’s all about — eternal life is. Sing through these stanzas.

- How does it change your perspective to know that there is life beyond this life?
- When we get so wrapped up in what’s happening to us at any given moment, how does that become, in fact, idolatry?

of His Church, for it is there that we find Him: in the water, in the bread and wine, in the words spoken, preached and sung.

It won’t stop the suffering, for as long as we carry our crosses in this life, there will be times of suffering; but relying on God will make it bearable. For Jesus is with us, and through our Baptism, we are both buried with Him and also raised to new life. In His body and blood, He strengthens our faith. In His Word, we hear the forgiveness of sins.

- Consider how God has acted in your life, even when things have not gone the way you would have liked. In what ways has your faith been strengthened?
- How does the liturgy help you know that God is for you and not against you?

heart. “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act” (Ps. 37:5).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 754.

Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God, the protector of all who trust in You, strengthen our faith and give us courage to believe that in Your love You will rescue us from all adversities; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 12B).

Christ, the Life of All the Living

Lutheran Service Book 420 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

It may seem odd that a Lenten hymn should be the hymn of the day near the end of July. But today we commemorate St. James the Elder, the brother of the Apostle John, a son of Zebedee. When we recall Jesus' prediction of James' destiny, however, it becomes clear why we should meditate on a hymn describing our Lord's passion and its greater meaning.

Exploring the Scriptures

James and John's request reveals how self-centered we can be, even the best among us (Mark 10:38–39). It surprises us to read this about those closest to Jesus. It did not, however, surprise Jesus. He didn't reprimand them but gently brought the conversation around to the beautiful description of His way of love and servanthood. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). It is that service, life and ransom that is so thoroughly described in our hymn.

- In one word, what is the goal of Jesus' innocent atoning death according to the following passages?
 - John 1:4
 - John 6:33
 - John 10:27
 - John 14:6

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Written in 1659 by Ernest Christoph Homburg (1605–81), this text does more than merely report certain details of our Lord's crucifixion; it probes the deep and personal faith the author experienced being converted from a troubled secular life.

An omitted stanza of the original hymn speaks pointedly to the proud request of James and his brother (Mark 10:37). Sing or speak this entire stanza:

That Thou wast so meek and stainless
Doth atone for my proud mood;
And Thy death makes dying painless,
All Thy ills have wrought our good;
Yea, the shame Thou didst endure
Is my honour and my cure:

- Read Acts 12:1–5. How was James martyred?
- What words of Jesus describe James' eventual suffering and martyrdom (Mark 10:38–39)?
- What is the hope stated in the very first line of the hymn in the face of any and all suffering and death?

- In stanza 1 of the hymn, which phrases describe our Lord's vicarious atonement, that *His* death was for *my* life?
- How does that compare with Is. 53:5? With 1 Peter 2:24?
- What details of Matt. 27:28–31 describe the "pain and scorn" that were heaped upon Jesus?
- What detail of Christ's suffering do we learn from Matt. 26:56 and Mark 14:50? In what words is this reflected in stanza 3 of our hymn?

1 Corinthians 15:57 is the basis for our hymn's refrain. What words describe St. Paul's response to the fact that Christ's resurrection has defeated sin and death, and fulfilled the Law for us?

Thousand, thousand thanks shall be,
Blessèd Jesus, brought to Thee.¹

- What are some of the troubles of "secular life" in our day and age?
- How does the death of Christ relate to our troubles?
- In what ways does our pride lead us away from faith in Christ?
- How does dying become "painless" by faith in Christ?

Text

The first four stanzas describe the physical and verbal abuse of Jesus by His accusers and the soldiers.

¹ David Thomas, ed., *The Augustine Hymn Book* (London: Pitman, 1923), 402:4, 127, accessed February 23, 2018, books.google.com.

Stanza 3 mentions Christ enduring “the curse of God.” Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13).

Stanza 5 addresses a person’s personal involvement and the great exchange that because of Christ’s suffering I am freed “from pain,” the false accusations of Christ mean my security, Christ’s lack of comfort means comfort for my soul.

- Read Ps. 27:12. What words in stanza 5 refer to this?
- We still experience pain, worry and discomfort. What does stanza 5 have in mind to make its amazing claims that we are freed from this?

Making the Connection

Remembering that this hymn was chosen as the chief hymn for the feast of St. James the Elder, in contrast to our common, sinful selfishness or ego the main theme is in the words of Jesus, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–45).

In Closing

The date of the commemoration of St. James the Elder is July 25. The hymn chosen for this commemoration is a wonderful Lenten hymn. Though it may seem odd to sing a hymn from the season of Lent in the middle of summer, we know that every day of the Christian life is characterized by repentance and faith because the struggle against sin, though it has been decisively defeated by Christ on the cross, is still a daily battle of living in the forgiveness of our sins. In the same way, in Holy Communion, even though every Sunday is a celebration of Easter, as St. Paul said, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). For it is the Lord’s death that is our ransom, our true pride and the cause of our “thousand, thousand thanks” to God.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 420.

- Stanza 6 treats of Jesus’ crucifixion as “atonement.” What is “my doom” that His sacrifice prevents?

We are so used to giving thanks mainly for blessings received, for the good and pleasant gifts of God and things in life. Stanza 7, however, concludes our hymn with thanksgiving “for all that wrought my pardon.” List the seven things for which we give thanks in this stanza.

- What is “that last triumphant cry” (John 19:30)? Why is it called “triumphant”?

The extent of your service and the troubles or sufferings endured in serving people who, many times, do not appreciate our service must always be with the love and the mind of Christ.

- How does the service and passion of Jesus inspire or motivate our service to others?
- How does the suffering and death of Jesus encourage us in our sufferings and troubles?

Prayer

O gracious God, Your servant and apostle James was the first among the Twelve to suffer martyrdom for the name of Jesus Christ. Pour out upon the leaders of Your Church that spirit of self-denying service that they may forsake all false and passing allurements and follow Christ alone, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. James the Elder, Apostle).

O God, You resist the proud and give grace to the humble. Grant us true humility after the likeness of Your only Son that we may never be arrogant and prideful and thus provoke Your wrath but in all lowliness be made partakers of the gifts of Your grace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For humility, *LSB*, p. 312).

Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer

Lutheran Service Book 918 | study by Tim Pauls

Introduction

I wouldn't eat lima beans if they were the last food on earth. Actually, that's not true. If lima beans were the last food on earth, that's when I'd start to maybe consider the possibility of maybe eating lima beans. Maybe.

Though just in case you're a lima bean farmer, I'll hasten to add that this is my hang-up, not yours. Or the bean's.

You probably have favorite foods. You probably have a least favorite food that you'd never eat, either. It may be a bean or a sprout or lutefisk. You draw the line somewhere. We all do.

So, think of a food that you absolutely would not eat. Now, here's the question: When would you ever eat it?

Here's the answer: You'd eat it when there was nothing else to eat, and it was a matter of life and death. Hunger makes us far less picky.

Our hymn for this study takes us back to Israel's wandering through the barren wilderness, between the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land. In so doing, it reminds us of what it means to be at the mercy of God.

- If you were among those Israelites in the Book of Exodus, what do you think would be the most difficult part of the journey?
- Is it a blessing or an act of desperation to put yourself at the mercy of God?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament lesson for today gives us an account of one of those days in the wilderness. Read Ex. 16:2–15. Keep in mind that it's only been about a month and a half since they left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and watched the Lord wash Pharaoh's army away.

- Why are the people grumbling against Moses, Aaron and the Lord? In verse 3, for what would they exchange their freedom, and of what do they accuse Moses?
- What did the Lord promise to do to these grumbling, ungrateful people in verses 4 and 12?
- In verse 10, how did the people know that the Lord had not abandoned them?

John 6 contains another passage about miraculous food and feeding: Jesus feeds 5,000 men with five loaves of

bread and two fish. The Gospel lesson for today takes place the following day, when the crowds have tracked Him down on the other side of the lake.

Read John 6:22–35.

- According to verse 26, what do the people want from Jesus?
- What does Jesus want to give them instead (v. 27)?
- What is the work of God that Jesus gives them in verse 29? Is this God's work or their work? See Eph. 2:8–9.
- The manna was the sign that proved God's mercy and Moses' authority in the wilderness. What sign does Jesus give the people in John 6:32–35?
- What does Jesus have in common with the cloud in Ex. 16:10?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

"Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer" is one of the finest examples of Welsh hymnody. It was written in Welsh by the itinerant preacher William Williams (1717–91) in five stanzas. It was later translated into English and reduced to three stanzas. Though denied ordination into the priesthood of the Church of England, Williams took all of Wales as his parish. He traveled perhaps as much as 3,000 miles a year for 45 years as a Calvinistic Methodist preacher (*Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion*, [CPH, 1992], 806).

- Which is significant in this hymn about the Lord's guidance through life's journey: Williams' experience as an itinerant preacher or Holy Scripture?
- Reading this hymn, would you have known that the author was a traveling preacher in Wales?

Text

This hymn begins by praying, "Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer."

- The Lord guided Israel in the wilderness in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. How does He guide you? See Ps. 119:105.
- God's guidance is far more than instructions from afar. What does John 1:14 say about His Word, and what does Jesus say about Himself in Matt. 28:20?

We are called “pilgrims” in this hymn, bound for the promised land of heaven.

- The Israelites were set free from slavery in Egypt. Read Rom. 6:17–23. From what have you been set free?
- If we are pilgrims passing through, what does this mean for our faith and life on earth? See Heb. 11:13 and 1 Peter 2:11.
- Read John 6:35. How are we sustained on our way to the promised land?

The second stanza calls upon God to “Open now the crystal fountain.” This is in reference to another event in the wilderness wanderings in Exodus 17. Once again, the people were grumbling, this time because of thirst instead of hunger.

- Read Ex. 17:6. How did God provide water for the Israelites?
- To whom did this event point (1 Cor. 10:4)?

Making the Connection

The blessing of wilderness life is that you find yourself at God's mercy. While we sometimes regard that as a last resort, it's a good thing. The Lord is merciful and He promises His help. As He guides you through the barren wilderness of this sinful world, He provides you with all that you need to live forever.

- Read John 6:47–51. What is the bread that God gives you so that you might have eternal life?

In Closing

Given my aversion to lima beans, I can understand the Israelites' grumbling about God's gifts of manna, quail and water — not because their grumbling is good, but because I'm a sinner too. In their case, their grumbling got in the way of two important truths: They were only *passing through* the wilderness on the way to the far better Promised Land, and the food God provided would keep them alive in the meantime.

You are passing through this wilderness on the way to heaven, and you'll be tempted to grumble plenty along the way. The devil will especially tempt you to grumble against the Means of Grace — because that is where God is present with you, and that is how He feeds and sustains you with

- Read John 4:14. How does Jesus compare Himself to that rock as He talks to the Samaritan woman?

The second stanza also refers to the “fiery, cloudy pillar” by which the Israelites were led.

- Was that pillar just a sign, or something more? What does Ex. 13:21 say?
- How is the Lord likewise present with you to be your strong deliverer, your strength and shield? Read Rom. 6:4 and 1 Cor. 11:23–26.

Stanza 3 begins by speaking of the river Jordan. For Israel, their journey through the wilderness began with the crossing of the Red Sea and ended when they crossed the Jordan into Canaan. See Josh. 3:14–17.

- To what is crossing the Red Sea compared in 1 Cor. 10:1–2? How did your pilgrimage as one of God's people begin?
- “Crossing the Jordan” for the Christian is sometimes a euphemism for death. It is the crossing from this sinful world to heaven. What is Jesus called in stanza 3 of the hymn?
- This title for Jesus is taken from Hos. 13:14 and alluded to in 1 Cor. 15:55–57. In Christ, how certain is heaven for you? Why?

- Where does the Lord give you this bread? Read 1 Cor. 11:23–24.
- How does the Lord use water to give you life? Read Rom. 6:3–4.
- Do you ever grumble or grow weary at God's means for keeping you alive in Christ? How does He respond?

His grace. Don't listen to the devil; instead rejoice that the Lord promises heaven for you. For Jesus' sake, that promised land is yours.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 918.

Prayer:

Merciful Father, You gave Your Son, Jesus, as the heavenly bread of life. Grant us faith to feast on Him in Your Word and Sacraments that we may be nourished unto life everlasting; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 13B).

Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor

Lutheran Service Book 534 | study by John G. Fleischmann

Introduction

Jesus is our King. That is the emphasis of the readings, prayers and hymns for the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

The Explanation to the Small Catechism reminds us that there are three kingdoms over which our Lord reigns: the kingdom of power, which is the world; the kingdom of grace, which is the Church; and the kingdom of glory, which is heaven (*Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, Question 212).

Centered on the Holy Eucharist, this hymn praises Jesus for His reign in the Church through the Means of Grace and His reign at the right hand of God in heaven.

Exploring the Scriptures

This hymn uses the wonderful worship imagery that is given to the Church in the Book of Revelation.

Read Rev. 1:5–6.

- What has God made us to be? Explain.
- What does the phrase “to him be glory and dominion forever and ever” mean?

Read Rev. 5:11–14. Here we have an illustration of the antiphonal worship that takes place in heaven.

- What is Jesus worthy to receive?
- Why?
- Where in the liturgy do we sing these words?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was penned by the Rev. George Hugh Bourne (1840–1925), an Anglican priest and warden of St. Edmund's School at Salisbury.

The author desired to provide students with post-Communion hymns that would delve into the Eucharistic mystery. “Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor” was one of seven hymns included in a private publication in 1874. It was first offered to the Church in 1889 in the supplement to *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

The imagery used by Bourne links the glories of heaven to the Eucharist on the altar in a beautiful way.

- How do hymns help you to better understand deep theological and biblical truths?
- As you read the stanzas of this hymn, how do they build upon each other?

- How is Jesus present in the world today?
- When is a person brought into the kingdom of grace from the kingdom of power?
- How does Jesus reign in the Church today?
- When does the kingdom of grace become the kingdom of glory? How does this tie in with the theme of the Last Sunday of the Church Year?

Read Rev. 7:9–17. The heavenly worship continues.

- Who is worshipping the Lamb?
- Who are those in white robes? Why are they singled out?
- What are the promises given about the kingdom of glory? What will God ultimately do?

Read Col. 1:13–20, the Epistle for this day.

- What has Jesus done for us (v. 13)?
- What do we learn about Jesus in verses 15 and 16?
- Of which kingdom do verses 17 and 18 speak?
- How did Jesus reconcile all things to Himself?

Text

Stanza 1 begins by acknowledging that the Christ of Holy Communion is the same Christ who rose and is now reigning in heaven.

- What are the things that Jesus does for the Church at God's right hand now?
- How does Jesus lift up your head?
- What is the connection between Holy Communion and the phrase “Jesus, true and living bread”?

Stanza 2 makes the connection between the bread and wine on the altar and Jesus' lowly birth at Bethlehem. To the world, neither are spectacular or miraculous: the birth of a child; common bread and wine.

However, with the Word of God, bread and wine on the altar are no mere forms! They are the very body and blood of Jesus, given and shed for us!

- How do the angels hail Jesus here?
- What is the significance of the phrase “Branch and flow’r of Jesse’s stem”?
- What part of the Communion liturgy speaks of us joining our voices with the angels?

Stanza 3 takes us to the altar: the cross. It is there that the Paschal Lamb was slain for the redemption of the world.

- What comfort does the phrase “In its fullness undiminished / Shall forevermore remain” bring to you?
- According to the last line of this stanza, what is the effect of this once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus? See Heb. 10:10.

Making the Connection

This powerful hymn draws out the biblical imagery of heavenly worship and applies it to the Holy Eucharist. As each stanza builds on the previous stanza, the words crescendo to the point where one can almost hear the angels joining their voices!

In Closing

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 534.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You reign among us by the preaching of Your cross. Forgive Your people their offenses that we, being governed by Your bountiful goodness, may enter at last into Your eternal paradise; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 29C).

Stanza 4 makes the connection between the wilderness wandering of the children of Israel, the reign of Christ in heaven, and the lowly bread and wine on the altar.

- Read 1 Cor. 10:1–4. How did the Lord provide for the children of Israel?
- Read John 6:31–34. How does Jesus feed us in our journey to heaven?
- Read Ex. 17:1–7. How did God provide water for the children of Israel?
- How is Jesus the “Stricken rock with streaming side”?

This final stanza culminates with the heavenly worship of the Lord by all creation.

- How do we worship “with loud hosanna” as we celebrate the Eucharist?
- What certainty does the phrase “Ris’n, ascended, glorified” bring to you as you receive Holy Communion?

- How do the “praise songs” of today differ from the worship in Revelation and the words of this hymn?
- How does this hymn assist you in better understanding what takes place as you receive Holy Communion?

O God, My Faithful God

Lutheran Service Book 696 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

This hymn is a prayer for strength and guidance in the daily living of the Christian life. As such, it is about the doctrine of sanctification. The term “sanctification” has both a wide and narrow sense. In the wide sense, it includes all that the Holy Spirit does in creating faith in the heart and the living of a holy life. Luther, in the Large Catechism, speaks of sanctification in the wide sense simply by quoting the creed as the method and means by which the Holy Spirit makes a person holy, namely, by the Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Exploring the Scriptures

The first thing that should be said is that sanctification, or holy living, is God’s will for His people. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). As such, God also produces this as a gift through the means of grace.

“From this evidence the following is certain: as soon as the Holy Spirit has begun His work of regeneration and renewal in us through the Word and holy Sacraments, we can and should cooperate through His power, although still in great weakness. This cooperation does not come from our fleshly natural powers, but from the new powers and gifts that the Holy Spirit has begun in us in conversion. St. Paul clearly and eagerly encourages that “working together with Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain” [2 Corinthians 6:1]. But this is to be understood in no other way than the following: the converted person does good to such an extent and as long as God by His Holy Spirit rules, guides, and leads him” (FC SD II 65–66, 532).

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written by Pastor Johann Heermann (1585–1647) during a most difficult time in his life, between 1623 and 1630, when he was plagued by various bodily afflictions. It is a prayer, a genuine cry of faith from the Christian’s heart, based on the confession of God’s promised faithfulness and goodness. As a preacher he was also concerned with speaking the truth without unnecessarily offending the weak. We also have received from his pen the hymns “O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken” (LSB 439), and “O Christ, Our True and Only Light” (LSB 839).

In the narrow sense, however, sanctification is the internal spiritual transformation of the believer. It begins with faith and only thereafter issues good works.

- How important is living a Christian life compared to simply believing in Christ?
- How do justification and sanctification differ?
- Does sanctification play a part in obtaining salvation?
- Is sanctification in this life perfect or imperfect?

It should always be remembered that, whereas justification, or salvation, is totally the gift and work of God without our cooperation, sanctification involves active cooperation. But the good works of Christians are done not in the hope of gaining salvation, but as a response out of love and thanksgiving for God’s gift of salvation.

Many Christian people complain, “I just can’t be patient.” Yet the truth is that this is part of the “fruit of the Spirit.” God desires to give and work in the Christian’s heart, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22–23).

- Does failure in holy living necessarily affect a person’s salvation? Can it ever?
- The essence of the marriage vow is, “I promise to be faithful to you.” Is it possible to keep this vow perfectly? Is unfaithfulness forgivable?

What is it about illness or other afflictions that move us to prayer possibly more than usual?

Text

The first stanza clearly states the basis for the prayer, confessing God’s faithfulness (James 1:17; Ps. 36:9). The prayer for “a healthy frame” is for physical health and strength. Sin is identified as the root cause of illness or trouble. Everything depends on the forgiveness of sins (James 5:14–16).

Stanza 2 continues as a prayer for strength to do everything required by “My calling,” that is, my vocation or station in life. The “success” promised is in the confidence that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

- To what extent do we take our health for granted and neglect giving thanks to God for His gifts?
- What are some of the duties of your vocation or station in life?

Whereas the first two stanzas are concerned about actions, stanzas 3 and 4 are concerned about the power of words and speech. Words that “later need recalling” and “idle speech” recall the ability of the tongue to inflict damage on the neighbor (Rom. 15:1–3; James 3:2–10). But words can be gracious and kind, serving to strengthen the neighbor (Eph. 4:29; Prov. 15:1).

Not that, however, “hard” words are never to be spoken. Part of the preacher’s task according to St. Paul is to “rebuke” (1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 4:2). The task is to speak with God’s grace attached, that is, always in hope that words of discipline will benefit the other.

- Think of a time you said something to someone that you later wished you had not said. Did you (or could you) later do something about it?

Making the Connection

Holy living, or the everyday life of the Christian, rests in his or her connection with and confidence in the faithfulness of God. It includes receiving the benefits of this life with thanksgiving and being a blessing to the benefit of others. While our sanctification is never perfect in this life and even can seem to disappear in the face of trials and troubles, God calls us to daily repentance, returning to our

In Closing

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). We will never be perfect in this life. That’s why we have the daily forgiveness of sins. But we do live “set apart” (holy) as God’s people to bring His light and forgiveness and joy to others.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 696.

- What are some situations when you “must and ought to speak” “hard” words or “rebuke”?

The final two stanzas put the Christian life in perspective, that of our mortality and our hope for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come (1 Cor. 7:29–31; Heb. 13:14; Rom. 8:18–25).

Stanza 5 is a prayer that God would keep us faithful, even unto death (Rev. 2:10), even looking forward to that day as “a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works” (Heb. 4:9–10).

That our bodies should have “A quiet resting place / Within a Christian grave” and “sleep in peace” views death from our point of view. But is death such a “sleep”? Read 1 Thess. 4:13–18, especially the last phrase of verse 17.

Beyond death, Christian hope looks forward to the day of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. That “final day” will see “all the dead” waking (Matt. 25:31–32). And we will hear the Lord’s voice, as Jesus promised, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25). The hymn ends with a note of joy for those who have been baptized into the name of God.

- How does a biblical faith comfort and give confidence to you even concerning the death of a loved one or your own death?

Baptism where He calls us forth every day anew. In this grace we look forward to our eternal rest and the joy of life everlasting with the Lord.

- How does this hymn and prayer comfort or encourage you?
- What is more important, faithful living of the Christian life or reaching the goal of a Christian death?

Prayer

O Lord, grant that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by Your governance that Your Church may joyfully serve You in all godly quietness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity).

Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones

Lutheran Service Book 670 | study by Robert A. Sorensen

Introduction

Because of the unique role she played in the history of salvation, the Church has long afforded a special place of honor to Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus. In order to highlight her importance in God's unfolding plan of redemption, numerous church fathers have contrasted the Virgin Mary with Eve. Writing in about AD 180, Irenaeus of Lyons did so in these words, "And just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed that man was stricken and fell and died, so too it was through the Virgin, who obeyed the word of God, that man resuscitated by life received life" (Irenaeus of Lyons, "Proof of the Apostolic Preaching", ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, [Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1952], 69).

While we recognize Mary's unique role in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation — the fact that she embraced and

faithfully fulfilled her task of bearing and raising the Son of God — Lutherans are leery of getting carried away in her praise. We take pains to avoid worshipping Mary (or any other saint), lest we put a creature in the place of the Creator and give to another that which is reserved for God alone. At the same time, we Lutherans have retained the observance of honoring Mary with a holiday. Accordingly, it is fitting that we clarify our doctrine and attitudes about questions such as these:

- According to the Bible, what is a "saint"? In light of what the Bible says about the saints, what should be our attitude towards the great heroes of the faith?
- Which attitudes towards the Virgin Mary seem extreme, going too far to one side or to the other? See if you can cite specific examples.

Exploring the Scriptures

The Epistle lesson appointed for this holy day is Gal. 4:4–7. After reading this passage, carefully answer the following questions.

- How does this passage support the Small Catechism's explanation that Jesus Christ is both "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary" (LSB, p. 322)?
- How does John 1:1–4, 14–18 reinforce this understanding that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human? Where does the Nicene Creed convey the same idea?
- Why has the Church insisted upon both of Christ's natures, that is, Jesus' full divinity and complete humanity? What is at stake?

Now turn to the appointed Gospel lesson for today, Luke 1:39–55. After reviewing this passage, discuss the following questions.

- For what reasons does Elizabeth call Mary "blessed" (vv. 42–45)? Is Mary uniquely blessed by God or have all Christians been blessed just as she was?
- What does Mary mean when she says, "from now on all generations will call me blessed" (v. 48)?
- At numerous places Mary's song of praise (vv. 46–55) emphasizes the idea that God gives grace to the humble and lowly but opposes the proud and mighty. How should that theme shape our attitude towards Mary and the rest of the saints?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The hymn under review today was written by one of the editors of the 1906 *English Hymnal*, namely, John Athelstan Laurie Riley (1858–1945). Thus, this text may be understood as being of a more recent vintage. But there is more to the story. As will be shown, this hymn borrows much from the traditions of both the Eastern and Western branches of the church.

Riley's most obvious borrowing is the tune. This hymn is set to *Lasst uns erfreuen*, a melody that has been a favorite

since its appearance in Germany in the early seventeenth century. In this regard, note that three other hymns in *LSB* (465, 493, 816) share this musical setting.

More pertinent to this present discussion, however, are the words and structure of this hymn's text. In this regard, Riley's expertise in ancient Greek and Latin as well as his role as translator of ancient hymns for the aforementioned Anglican hymnal are important.

In simple terms, this hymn is structured as follows. The first stanza is addressed to the various orders of angels,

urging them to praise the Lord. Here, Riley is indebted to the nine ranks of angels systematized by the *Celestial Hierarchy* of the Greek father Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. 500).

The second stanza is a paraphrase of a Greek Orthodox hymn known as the *Theotokion*, the “Hymn to the Mother of God.” This chant is also part of the Greek Orthodox tradition and dates from no later than the fifth century.

Stanza 3 shows a less direct borrowing. It calls upon the souls in heaven — those of the faithful departed, prophets, patriarchs, martyrs and so forth — to join in the eternal triumphant song.

Finally, the last stanza wraps things up by inviting the saints on earth, also known as the Church Militant, to join in the heavenly praise.

- Are you familiar with the doctrine that our earthly worship actually unites with the worship of the angels and saints in heaven?
- How can that understanding inform people’s appreciation of their Sunday worship? How might it shape one’s sense of reverence and awe?

Text

As was mentioned above, this hymn’s first stanza addresses the various angelic orders in heaven, exhorting them to give praise to God.

- Which names of the various angelic orders are familiar to you? What terms are new to you?

Making the Connection

Though this hymn certainly sets into high relief the unique role played by Mary, it does not offer her praise or adoration. Instead, it depicts her as one of many saints who worship God before the throne in heaven. She is afforded unmistakable prominence, but only because of what God has done for and through her. Hers was the singular honor of bearing the eternal Word made flesh, the God-man Jesus Christ.

In Closing

When we praise another Christian rightly, we are in fact praising God — the Father who created him, the Son who has freely given His redeeming grace to her and the Spirit who dwells within. Understood this way, we can remember and offer thanks for so many things that God has accomplished through His people.

- Read together “Mary’s Hymn of Praise” (Luke 1:46–55).
- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 670.

- What does the Bible say about the different angels, especially with regard to their divinely appointed tasks? See Gen. 3:24; Ps.91:10–12; Is. 6:1–3; Matt. 18:10; and Heb. 1:14.

In this hymn’s second stanza, Mary is singled out. She is addressed as the “bearer of the eternal Word.”

- To which Bible passage (previously read in this lesson) does this hymn refer when it speaks of Mary as bearer of “the Word”?
- In this connection, see also Luke 1:31–33.

Stanza 3 makes reference to others who are now part of the heavenly court. These are the souls of those who departed in the faith, as well as the patriarchs, the prophets, the Twelve, the martyrs and the saints triumphant.

- How many of these characters appear in the vision described in Rev. 7:9–15? How about the scene depicted in Rev. 5:8–9?
- How about Luke 13:22–30?

The concluding stanza turns its address to the earthly realm, calling us also to join in the heavenly chorus.

- Can you think of any parts of our liturgy or hymns that do this very thing, inviting us to sing the very words that are being sung in heaven?

Having now considered the holiday established for St. Mary, as well as that feast’s hymn of the day, answer these questions.

- Do we Lutherans make too big a deal of the different saints’ days or not enough?
- What kind of balance needs to be struck and maintained in the observance of St. Mary’s day, especially for evangelical-Lutheran Christians?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose the virgin Mary to be the mother of Your only Son. Grant that we, who are redeemed by His blood, may share with her in the glory of Your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Mary, Mother of Our Lord).

Lord, Help Us Ever to Retain

Lutheran Service Book 865 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

A couple of tablespoons of salt stirred into a glass of water quickly disappear. The salt is not visible, but the taste is still there. Now, how to make the salt once again visible?

Fill a metal spoon with the salty water, then heat the spoon over a candle. The water disappears and the salt is left behind.

There is so much in God's Word to teach: the history, the people, the places, the customs. There are the long books and the short books, the clear books and the obscure books. How does one make it simple and concise?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read the Psalm appointed for this day, Psalm 14.

- Which of the Ten Commandments does this psalm reflect?
- Compare verses 1 and 7. Which verse would you categorize as "Law," and which would you identify as "Gospel?"

The Six Chief Parts of the Small Catechism provide the Christian with a worldview, a way of making sense of life according to the Word of God. Each of the Ten Commandments, the three articles of the Apostles' Creed, the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, and the explanations of Baptism, the Office of the Keys, and the Lord's Supper all serve as "hooks" to hang your life on.

Read the appointed Epistle, Eph. 5:22–33. St. Paul packs an amazing amount of theology into a few verses.

- How many parts of the Small Catechism do you find reflected in these verses?

Now we move on to and read the Gospel for the day, Mark 7:1–13.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The Lutheran Reformation was well underway by the time Ludwig Helmbold (1532–98) was born. His father manufactured woolen goods in the central part of Germany. Helmbold earned both bachelor's and master's degrees and during those years held positions in education, first as a headmaster and then as a lecturer. In 1563, the outbreak of the plague resulted in the deaths of more than 4,000 citizens in Erfurt and closed the university in that city. When

- There are many places to start in Scripture. What is your first memory of God's Word?
- Where was the first place you were taught God's Word? Home? Church? Sunday school? Elsewhere?

In putting together a book of instruction for the Christian faith, Martin Luther finally had to make some decisions. In effect, Luther had to say, "It's all important. There is so much to learn. This is what we need to see and know. This is what we need to taste first."

- The Pharisees and the scribes were well educated in the Old Testament. What is it, though, they are missing?

In the Explanation of the Small Catechism, we learn, "There are three kinds of laws in the Old Testament: the moral law, which tells all people their duty toward God and other people; the ceremonial law, which regulated the religious practices in the Old Testament; and the political law, which was the state law of the Israelites" (*Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, p. 55).

- Which one of the three kinds of laws are the Pharisees and scribes concerned with? How do they go beyond even that?
- Which kind of law does Jesus bring to bear on the Pharisees and the scribes?
- If the Pharisees and scribes would realize that it is not the defiling of their hands they should be concerned with but the defiling of their hearts, what tough question would they then have to answer? How does Jesus fit into all of this?

the university reopened two years later, Helmbold was appointed dean of the philosophy department.

In 1566, a year after serving as dean, Helmbold received a most prestigious appointment. Emperor Maximilian II, a Roman Catholic, crowned Helmbold, a Lutheran, as poet laureate. For four years, Helmbold held this position until the weight of the intense personal hatred and criticism leveled at him for being a steadfast Lutheran caused him to resign his position.

This resignation provided Helmbold, at age 39, the opportunity to pursue becoming a Lutheran pastor. For almost 30 years, Helmbold served as a faithful pastor in his hometown. His pen was rarely still, for Helmbold authored more than 400 writings, some of which concerned children and their Christian education.

- Who is the most memorable Sunday school teacher, pastor or school teacher in your life who opened up God's Word to you?
- Though citizens of the United States rarely suffer physical persecution because of their religious beliefs, have you ever experienced what Helmbold did — intense hatred and great criticism of your Christian faith?

Text

It may be a bit surprising to actually find — and sing — Luther's name in a hymn. Helmbold's concern was great for Christian education, and he held in high esteem the structure and content of Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Already considered the "Scriptures in miniature," the catechism was condensed to just four hymn stanzas by Helmbold.

Stanza 1 summarizes many things Luther said about imparting God's Word to youth. In the introduction to the Large Catechism, Luther writes:

Making the Connection

At the heart of Lutheran theology is Christ and Him crucified. Time and time again in all its parts, the Small Catechism brings us back to Jesus. This takes clear, concise, "salted" teaching.

- Read 2 Tim. 3:14–17. What important observation does Paul make about Timothy's life in Christ? Which words

In Closing

The Small Catechism is a most useful tool for explaining and sharing the Christian faith. St. Paul writes, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Col. 4:6).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 865.

This sermon [the Large Catechism] is designed and undertaken to be an instruction for children and the simple folk. Therefore, in ancient times it was called in Greek *catechism* (i.e., instruction for children). It teaches what every Christian must know. So a person who does not know this catechism could not be counted as a Christian or be admitted to any Sacrament, just as a mechanic who does not understand the rules and customs of his trade is expelled and considered incapable.

Therefore, we must have the young learn well and fluently the parts of the catechism or instruction for children, diligently exercise themselves in them, and keep them busy with these parts. (LC Shorter Preface 1–3)

Beginning with stanza 2, Helmbold follows the outline of the six parts of the Small Catechism.

- Which words in stanza 2 mirror the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) and the Trinitarian outline of the Apostles' Creed (Matt. 28:18–19)?
- How, in stanza 3, does Helmbold connect the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) and Baptism (Rom. 6:3–4)?
- Stanza 4 concludes with the topics of Confession and Absolution (Ps. 119:67; Gal. 6:1; Matt. 16:19; 18:15) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16–17). What is at the heart of both?

does Paul use to tell us Timothy's knowledge of doctrine was structured and well organized?

- Using the Divine Service as an example, how and where does the liturgy also teach the Six Chief Parts of the Small Catechism? Why is it important for children, from infancy onward, to be in Sunday morning worship?

Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, defend Your Church from all false teaching and error that Your faithful people may confess You to be the only true God and rejoice in Your good gifts of life and salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 16B).

God Has Spoken by His Prophets

Lutheran Service Book 583 | study by Aaron A. Koch

Introduction

You'll sometimes hear people say that God spoke to them or told them what to do in a particular situation. Some preachers will say that God gave them a particular message to share. But we must be careful and "test the spirits" here as Scripture reminds us (1 John 4:1). The Smalcald Articles, one of our Lutheran Confessions, say this:

"Therefore, we must constantly maintain this point: God does not want to deal with us in any other way than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Heb. 1:1–2.

"Long ago" refers to the time of the Old Testament; and the "fathers" are our ancient fathers in the faith, such as Abraham, Moses and Elijah.

- What are some of the "many ways" in which God spoke to our fathers? (See Gen. 15:1; Ex. 3:1–6; 1 Kings 19:11–13.)
- How were all of these ways that the Lord came to the fathers/prophets tangible and external?
- Were there also false prophets in the Old Testament? On the basis of Jer. 23:16–17, 21–22, 25–26, discuss some of the characteristics of these false preachers.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In preparation for the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (a predecessor to the current English Standard Version commonly used in churches of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod), the Hymn Society of North America asked for hymns to be submitted to celebrate this event. "God Has Spoken by His Prophets," written by George Wallace Briggs (1875–1959), was one of the submitted hymns chosen and later published in a collection titled "Ten New Hymns on the Bible" (1952).

- Why is it natural that the Word of God should inspire music and be the subject of our hymns?
- How does God's Word provide the very content of what we are given to sing? (See Ps. 51:15; Psalm 136.)
- Are there any times in the year when your congregation has a special focus on the gift of God's Word in Divine Service?

Whatever is praised as from the Spirit—without the Word and Sacraments—is the devil himself" (SA III VIII 10, p. 281).

God always comes to us and speaks to us through His external outward Word, given in the Holy Scriptures of the apostles and prophets.

- How can we test if a message is from God, or if it's from the devil or the sinful heart of man?
- Where should we be looking for God to speak to us?

"These last days" in Hebrews 1 refers to this present age of the New Testament in which we are living. God's ultimate and complete revelation of Himself has come to us in the person of His own Son.

- With what title is Jesus referred to in John 1:1–3, 14? How is Jesus the embodiment of all of the Scriptures?
- With what actions in Christ's life has God "spoken" of His love toward us?
- In what way is Jesus the "final Word" of God, beyond which we shouldn't be looking for any more special messages or revelation from Him?

Text

Note how the three stanzas of this hymn correspond to the three persons of the Holy Trinity. All three persons are present and involved in the work of God's revelation throughout every age of history. Even in Old Testament times, we confess in the Nicene Creed that it was the Holy Spirit who "spoke by the prophets." And God the Father continues to speak "His Word unchanging" (st. 3) down to this very day.

Read 1 Sam. 15:29.

- Why is the Word that God has spoken by His prophets unchanging?
- Since "God is king," "eternal," "the first, and ... the last" (st. 1), does that make it easier to trust in His Word? Why? (See also Rev. 22:6.)

Read Heb. 1:3.

- What phrase does stanza 2 borrow directly from this verse? What does it mean?
- What other words or phrases are used in stanza 2 (including some borrowed from the creed) that emphasize Jesus is equally God with the Father?
- How does Jesus reveal our God to us (st. 2)? (See John 12:44–45.)

Making the Connection

Stanza 1 refers to the eternal God and His Word as a “firm anchor” in the midst of “the world’s despair and turmoil.”

- How does God’s Word give you hope and certainty in the midst of the changes in your life?

In Closing

Our God is not silent. The psalmist’s prayer is heard: “If you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit” (Ps. 28:1b). Our Lord speaks to us, but not through the inner voice of our heart and spirit. He spoke to His people of old through the prophets whom He sent. And He still speaks to us through the external voice of His Spirit-filled Word, guiding us by His preached Law and Gospel. Since Jesus is the embodiment of the Word and the fulfillment of all the Scriptures, all true messages from God will be centered on Christ and what He has done — how He has redeemed us by His holy cross. As St. Paul said “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). May God grant us always to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus the Savior and to be guarded against anything that would lead us away from Him who is the Word made flesh!

Read John 6:63 and 2 Tim. 3:16.

- According to these verses, where is the Holy Spirit located for us? (Remember that the words for “breath” and “spirit” in the Bible are the same.)
- How then is God “speaking to our hearts again” (st. 3) in this day and age?
- How does God’s Word breathe new life into us in the way that God first breathed life into Adam?

Stanza 3 reminds us that God is still speaking by His Spirit, “in the ageless Word declaring His own message, now as then.”

- You certainly hear God’s voice in your own individual reading of Scripture. But what place has He given for you to hear Him speak to you, audibly and out loud? (For help, see Rom. 10:14–17.)

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 583.

Prayers

Almighty God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, chose Bartholomew to be an apostle to preach the blessed Gospel. Grant that Your Church may love what he believed and preach what he taught; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Bartholomew).

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (Grace to receive the Word, *LSB*, p. 308).

By Grace I'm Saved

Lutheran Service Book 566 | study by Robert A. Sorensen

Introduction

The word “grace” has a broad range of meanings. For example, when someone is overdue with a credit card or mortgage payment, we sometimes hear about a lender willing to extend a “grace period.” We often hear references to the prayer that precedes a meal as “saying grace.”

When this word “grace” is used in connection with the Bible and Christian doctrine, however, it has a very specific

meaning. Given the central place this word occupies in our Lutheran understanding, it is crucial that we be able to answer questions such as these:

- In simple terms, what does the Bible mean when it uses the word “grace”?
- Do any of the examples above use the word in this specifically biblical and Christian sense? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

All three of today’s appointed Scripture Readings address the issue of our fallen human condition and our resultant standing before God. They make clear that we are not able to claim any merit or worthiness before God.

Let’s look first at Deut. 4:1–2, 6–9, today’s Old Testament Reading. It simply identifies the obligations God’s people owe Him by virtue of their covenanted status.

- What is the one thing God most desires from His people? How well do we give Him what He seeks?
- What are some of our most common failures?

In today’s Gospel, Mark 7:14–23, Jesus identifies the root cause of our failures to live up to our high calling as God’s

people. His words make clear that our problem is as personal as it is deeply seated.

- What is the root cause of our ethical lapses and offensive behaviors?
- Is this root cause a flaw in the way God created us? Explain.

After reviewing Eph. 6:10–20, consider these questions:

- What external forces assault the individual Christian and the Church? According to 1 Peter 5:8, what is the goal of such attacks?
- Have you ever felt as if you were undergoing such an attack? If so, when and how?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this famous hymn, Christian Ludwig Scheidt (1709–61), was not a pastor; he was a layman. His professional life was devoted to academic pursuits; he worked as a librarian and a university lecturer.

Despite the many changes in his life’s circumstances — Scheidt worked in a variety of institutional settings in both Germany and Denmark — the constant in his life was a steadfast faith in Christ. By his early 30s, he had published this classic hymn, “By Grace I’m Saved.”

Though successful in most of his professional endeavors, Scheidt experienced great heartache in his personal life. His wife bore eight children, and all died in childhood.

- Can you relate to the aforementioned trials and tribulations of this hymn writer?
- Or does a story about a couple losing eight children to childhood diseases sound more like the product of an age gone by? Explain your answer.

After their last child died, Scheidt discovered that his wife had committed adultery. Over against his desire to reconcile the marriage, the couple was finally divorced. Scheidt remarried but did not have many good years with his second wife. After suffering ill health over his last years, he died at age 52.

- What does it say about Scheidt that he wished to reconcile with his wife after her adultery rather than divorce her?
- How would you relate his desire to forgive rather than divorce to the hymn “By Grace I’m Saved”?

Text

Both in the original German and in the English translation, the first words of each stanza set the tone and theme. These words are “By grace.”

- In the biblical sense, exactly what is grace? What do Eph. 2:1–10 and Rom. 11:6 contribute to your formulation of an answer to this question?
- How does this concept of grace shape our Lutheran understanding of our status before God?

The second stanza of this hymn says, “Our works and conduct have no worth.” Carefully, taking into account the context, consider the following questions.

- Does this statement mean that all human conduct and attempts at goodness are worthless? In other words, is our striving to do good works a waste of time? Why or why not?
- What do Matt. 5:16 and John 15:1–8 contribute to this discussion?

Stanza 3 begins with these words: “By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, / Came down to earth to bear our sin.” This line beautifully encapsulates both the manner and goal of Jesus’ ministry.

Making the Connection

This hymn powerfully underlines both the nature and effect of God’s grace. In order to reinforce our understanding of the term “grace” — the undeserved, divine favor bestowed on us for Christ’s sake — please answer the following questions.

- “By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, / Came down to earth to bear our sin” (st. 3). Can you think of a Bible passage besides the ones referred to above, or perhaps a part of the catechism or liturgy, that testifies to the same truth?

In Closing

In its explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, the Small Catechism has a long list of all the things that our heavenly Father has given and still provides for us. This list includes our body and all its members; food, clothing and shelter; wife, children, land and animals; and so forth. The catechism’s explanation then continues with this line: “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me” (*LSB*, p. 322).

This last sentence emphasizes the undeserved nature of grace. Even more important to a Christian understanding of grace is the idea that God has not merely given us bodies, lives and daily needs; He has given us His own Son, that we might have forgiveness and the hope of eternal life in Christ. God’s grace is indeed amazing, far beyond our lowly capacity to comprehend it.

- With what other words and images does Scripture describe Jesus’ saving work? What are some of your favorite expressions of the Gospel message?
- What do Titus 3:4–7; Col. 1:13–14; 1 John 3:8b; and John 6:37–40 have to say in this regard?

The concluding two stanzas aver that only Christ’s grace can avail in “tribulation’s furnace” and at the hour of death. In fact, the hymn concludes on a rather triumphant note, exulting: “My heart is glad, all grief has flown / Since I am saved by grace alone.”

- Have you memorized any Scripture promises that make similar points? In other words, what Bible passages would you recite if you were in a foxhole?
- Some passages that fit the bill include the following: Psalm 23 (especially vv. 4–6); John 10:27–30; and Rom. 8:31–39. What is it about these verses that make them so comforting?

- “By grace, in spite of fear and trouble, / The Father’s heart is open wide” (st. 5). Describe a moment of forgiveness, reconciliation or divine grace you have experienced, either as a witness or as a participant.
- “By grace! On this I’ll rest when dying; / In Jesus’ promise I rejoice” (st. 6). Have you witnessed a Christian brother or sister exhibiting this kind of faith in the face of death? Or have you perhaps heard a story of such steadfastness?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 566.

Prayer

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserved only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Lent 4C).

If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee

Lutheran Service Book 750 | study by John G. Fleischmann

Introduction

There are some who believe that once a person becomes a Christian, all problems disappear.

Holy Scripture paints a much different picture. Often, it records that those called by God endured tremendous suffering.

Through their trials the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and others clung to the promises of God, knowing that He would deliver them eternally.

As we cling to God's promises in Christ, we too receive strength, protection and comfort. Jesus sanctified our suffering by entering into it when He took on our flesh. Now He uses it to draw us closer to Himself.

- What is the cause of all suffering?
- What is the worst kind of suffering that one can endure?
- What are some of the struggles you face today?

This hymn, sung on the observance of the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist as well as at Christian funerals and other times, lifts our eyes from our suffering to the promises and assurances that we receive from God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Exploring the Scriptures

This hymn is based on passages of tremendous hope in the Bible. Read Ps. 55:22; Prov. 3:5–6; and Is. 41:10.

- What is their common theme?
- What is the source of this hope?

Read Rom. 6:1–5, the Epistle for the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist.

- What two things does Baptism do? See verses 3 and 5.
- What other assurances does Baptism give? See the Small Catechism, *LSB*, page 325.
- How does this help you when faced with life's issues?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The writer of this hymn, Georg Neumark (1621–81), had gone through an extremely difficult time in his life. Not only was the bloody Thirty Years' War in progress (1618–48), but he had personally lost everything.

Nomadically walking the country with an uncertain and bleak future, he was rescued when the Lord brought Pastor Nicholas Becker into his life.

Pastor Becker, who learned of his desperation, was able to arrange for Neumark to become a tutor for a local magistrate's family in Kiel, Germany. This provided Neumark with stability and gainful employment.

It was at this time that Neumark composed this hymn.

- Can you think of a time in your life when you were desperate?
- How did the Lord bring healing to you?
- What was your response to Him when you were delivered?

Text

This hymn is truly a hymn of great hope and encouragement.

The first stanza addresses the singer with a pastoral voice, encouraging him to place his hope in the Lord and His will. "He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee, / And bear thee through the evil days."

- What comfort do you receive from this reminder of God's "No Matter What" promise?

Stanza 2 speaks of the enormity and futility of earthly suffering. Our "never-ceasing moans and sighs" are evidence of the grave struggle that we endure, birthed by sin. Near its end, the stanza speaks of our "cross and trials." In Christian theology, a "cross" is different from generalized suffering caused by sin.

- Read Matt. 14:1–12. Why did John the Baptist suffer?
- Read Rev. 6:9–11, the first lesson for the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist. Who was seen "under the altar"?

- Can you think of other biblical accounts in which God’s children suffered because their faith in God conflicted with the world?

Stanza 3 encourages us to be “patient,” for “our inmost wants are known / To Him who chose us for His own.”

- What does Gal. 5:22 tell us about patience?
- When were you chosen as God’s own?

Stanza 4 shows that the Lord brings gladness and allows for sadness in our lives.

- What do you think Neumark meant when he penned, “He comes to thee all unaware / And makes thee own His loving care”?

Making the Connection

The Church has cherished this hymn over many centuries. It has comforted countless Christians as they wept beside the graves of loved ones, or faced the enormity of life’s issues. It still clearly speaks the hope that we have in God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The same hope given in this hymn can be found in the Confession and Absolution of the Divine Service (*LSB*,

In Closing

The journey of life is filled with joys and sorrows. Sometimes the suffering can steal our joy, causing us to withdraw, or even tempt us to turn away from the Lord.

This hymn is a wonderful sermon assuring us that when we suffer, God is present. It reminds us that our difficulties are quite temporary when compared to the eternal joy that awaits those baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. It is this hope and comfort, given us by the Holy Spirit, that empowers us to “Sing, pray, and keep His ways unswerving” (vs. 7) no matter what life throws at us. For “God never yet forsook in need / The soul that trusted Him indeed” (vs. 7).

Stanza 5 shows us that our suffering can be great, using the words “fiery trial” to describe it. Read 1 Peter 4:12–16.

- What does Peter have to say about these “fiery trials”?
- What hope does Peter give?

Ponder the words of stanza 6. Then read Mary’s words as she sings the Magnificat in the presence of Elizabeth (Luke 1:46–55).

- What theme do you see in both?
- What deep hope does Neumark share in the last two lines?

The final stanza ends with a succinct summation of the entire hymn.

- What are the ways that Neumark lists to face the trials of life?

p. 184). There, we exchange the words, “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 124:8).

- What does this tell us about the power of God in our lives over any issue that we face?
- Where is God’s power over all suffering most clearly shown?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 750.

Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God, in this earthly life we endure sufferings and death before we enter into eternal glory. Grant us grace at all times to subject ourselves to Your holy will and to continue steadfast in the true faith to the end of our lives that we may know the peace and joy of the blessed hope of the resurrection of the dead and of the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (In times of affliction and distress, *LSB*, p. 317).

Praise the Almighty

Lutheran Service Book 797 | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

In recent years many churches have popularized anthems for worship known as “praise songs.” Actually, one would be hard pressed to find a hymn worth the name that *isn't* a “praise song.” A good hymn to Christ is not only filled with happy thoughts; the reality of sin and death are featured in them as well, along with the grand victory of the cross of Jesus.

- Do our souls always praise the Lord God? Do we praise Him for *all* things? How do we know that our praises are acceptable to Him? See Rom. 8:26–30; Heb.10:19–25.
- What is the relationship of text/words to melody in a hymn? Could some hymns be better matched when their words and tune are compared?

Exploring the Scriptures

The last five psalms in the Book of Psalms each begin with the Hebrew word “Hallelujah!” (meaning “Praise the Lord!”). Hence, they are called the “Final Hallel” psalms. This hymn, “Praise the Almighty,” is a loose paraphrase of Psalm 146, the first of that group of five psalms.

If we take political campaigns too seriously, we might begin to believe that electing just the right candidates

will bring about a golden age of purity, wealth, peace and well-being. However, verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 146 put that idea out of reach. But grand assurances are given to those who cannot well defend or even speak for themselves. See verses 7–9.

- Which sorts of people are included in that group in our own day and time?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Daniel Herrnschmidt (1675–1723) came from a small town in southwestern Germany and spent time there as a parish pastor. He concluded his career as a professor at the University of Halle, in Halle, Germany, the center of the Pietist Movement among German Lutherans. This school of thought began over concern that people weren't being taught or encouraged to lead a devout, Christlike life. While this inconsistency is a concern of every child of God in any age (Romans 7), the Pietists sought to address it wrongly when they tried to motivate by means of the Law rather than the Gospel. Yet the Pietists had their strengths, and this hymn is an example of a zealous song of praise from the sincere heart of a teacher and pastor.

- When any one of us is prompted to write down a prayer or song of praise, even a few words long, is that a valid confession of faith? Why must the Scriptures be our guide in such confessions or prayers?

Text

Our prayer as Christians for steadfastness in faith to the point of death is expressed clearly in the first stanza of this hymn. See Ps. 104:33–34.

- Will the song of faith always sound beautiful to the ear, that is to say, hit the right notes and always be on key?

In stanza 2, we are reminded again of the limited nature of earthly help. Certainly God has established governments and other authorities for our benefit and protection (Romans 13), but they all must yield to Christ when it comes time to answer concerns over eternal life.

- How does Jesus teach that the powers of this world have clear limits? See John 18:35–38; 19:10–11.

Stanza 3 encourages us to trust above all things in God, who alone can keep us in faith in Him until our lives end, and who will not let any of His children slip away. See John 10:27–30.

- Jesus fulfilled Psalm 1 perfectly. How do we now follow in His steps in the words of this, the first of the 150 psalms?

The poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3) are those who know their sin all too well and cry for mercy from God Himself. They cry for mercy and God Himself answers them with the assurance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus (Gal. 6:14). Stanza 4 addresses this desperate need.

- How is it that widows and the fatherless need this assurance in a way unknown to those who have not been widowed or orphaned?

Herrnschmidt concludes the hymn with a fifth stanza done in a doxological (“glory words”) mode. The final address of praise is to the three persons of the blessed Trinity. Just as the psalmist ends Psalm 146 with a final “Hallelujah!” so does the hymn writer exhort the singers to join “with angels

and archangels and with all the company of heaven” (*TLH*, p. 25) in praising and glorifying the one true God.

- In Rev. 5:11–14, the final word is “Amen!” How can we express our agreement and unity with this word that means “Let it be so!”?

Making the Connection

This grand hymn of praise calls us to laud and magnify the Lord’s name not just when we are in a happy and jubilant mood, but also when we are indifferent to thoughts of praise, or even when we are crushed by the effects of sin in this world.

- “Yes, I will laud Him until death” (st. 1) truly seems to include every chapter of life! Can you think of times

when, though shattered with grief, you’ve been called to sing to Christ — even through tears?

- “Penitent sinners, for mercy crying, / Pardon and peace from Him obtain” (st. 4). How does this hymn teach us that our greatest need is for reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ Jesus, our Lord?

In Closing

Never forget that every hymn worth the name is a hymn of praise. Whether or not the tune is “happy” or “sad,” if the tempo is “upbeat” or not, the name of God is to be praised for the fact that He has rescued us from our sins. The God of Jacob (Ps. 146:5) has promised to hear us and to rescue us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 797.

Prayer

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 18B).

Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness

Lutheran Service Book 849 | study by Paul Robert Sauer

Introduction

How would you describe yourself to a stranger? What would be the most important things to highlight? How do you boil down all of your interests and passions into just a few short descriptive words?

Who is Jesus? It is a question that Jesus Himself asks the disciples (Luke 9:18–20), and after some stumbling about Peter answers, “The Christ of God” (v. 20).

Today’s hymn seeks out other biblical descriptions of who Jesus is, in an attempt to fill in the picture of “Jesus,

the divine Messiah” with “Jesus, the man who walked on this earth and did great things,” so that a complete picture of Jesus, who is both truly human and truly divine, can emerge.

- What images come to mind when you think about Jesus? Are they mostly divine? Mostly human? A mixture?
- Who do “others” today say Jesus is? In the face of confusing and conflicting images of Jesus, where do we go for answers?

Exploring the Scriptures

In today’s Epistle, 1 Cor. 13:1–13, St. Paul speaks about how “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (v. 13).

- Why might love be considered the greatest of these three?
- Is love simply an emotion? In what way does Jesus’ incarnation reinforce the greatness of God’s love?

Incarnation is at the heart of this hymn. Read John 1:1–14.

- How is Jesus’ incarnation described by St. John? What image is used?
- What does this incarnation give birth to (vv. 12–13)?

In today’s Gospel, Luke 18:31–43, Jesus breaks the darkness of a blind beggar by giving him sight.

- To what does Jesus attribute the man’s restoration of sight (v. 42)? What does the beggar do with sight restored?

In our churches there is rightfully a strong emphasis on the forgiveness of sins offered through Jesus Christ. Read Luke 4:16–21.

- How does Jesus describe His mission (by quoting from Isaiah)?
- Is the Christian life simply about forgiveness of sin? What else is included in the Gospel (Good News) that Jesus brings?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In 1986, Lutheran pastor Rusty Edwards (b. 1955) opened his Bible with the intention of creating a Bible study on the actual life and unique ministry of Jesus:

What on earth did Jesus really do? As I prayed, studied, and thanked God for the life of Jesus, I began to write down some of his works. The list grew longer. Suddenly, I gazed down at the list and the list looked almost like a hymn. (Rusty Edwards, “Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness,” *CrossAccent* 15, no. 2 [2007]: 39)

Edwards then set aside the Bible study and composed “Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness,” a celebration of the marvelous works of the incarnate Son of God.

- If you were to describe Jesus to a friend, would you focus more on His theological importance or on His historical life?
- What do the historical life and works of Jesus contribute to our understanding of His theological importance?

Edwards titled his hymn after his favorite image of Jesus — the one who breaks the darkness in the world.

- What is your favorite image of Jesus? Why?
- Did Edwards leave out images of Jesus that you would include if you were writing the hymn? Which ones?

Text

This hymn is deeply descriptive of the life and works of Jesus. It is filled with biblical imagery. Yet Jesus is not explicitly mentioned by name until the third stanza.

- If stanza 3 were removed from this hymn, would it be as powerful? Would you still know who the hymn was about? How?

The hymn begins by celebrating the freedom that is brought by the “light” (John 1:4–9) who breaks the darkness. Out of that light comes freedom and all its benefits (described in st. 1). Read John 8:34–36.

- What is the slavery that John speaks of? Is it physical? Does it manifest itself in physical ways?
- How is creation itself affected by the freedom brought by the liberating light (st. 1)?
- Stanza 1 concludes with a reference to “the very Bread of peace.” What is this a reference to?

Making the Connection

This hymn calls to our attention the many works of the incarnate Son of God.

- What difference does it make to you to have a God who became one of us?

In Closing

The incarnation of the Son of God has changed everything. God is not content to allow His people to live apart from Him and His presence. God continues to come to His people through His Word, through the bread of life (Communion), and through water (Baptism).

Ultimately the incarnate Word draws us back to God through His role as Redeemer, “the One who makes us one” (st. 3) both with God and with each other as fellow members of the Body of Christ.

In the second stanza humanity (the children), the spiritual realm (demons), and the whole of creation (burning sand) are made whole by the one who is “living water.” Read John 4:7–15.

- Where do we go to get the living water?
- Is a celebration of Baptism present in this stanza? Why or why not?

The hymn concludes with the explicit identification of “the One” as the incarnate Word. We have been moved from table (Communion) to font (Baptism), and now the hymn concludes with a focus on the grace that table and font bring. Edwards saves the best for last. Read John 3:16–17.

- Why did God send Jesus? What is the greatest of the works done by the incarnate Son of God?
- Where is our unity found (Eph. 4:4–6)?

- How do we encounter the incarnate Word today?
- In what ways can we bring the incarnate Word to others (1 Cor. 12:27)?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 849.

Prayer

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayers and having set us free from the bonds of our sins deliver us from every evil; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Quinquagesima).

Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle

Lutheran Service Book 454 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

By all outward appearances, the cross of Jesus is not triumphant, beautiful or glorious. The cross looks like defeat, weakness and great suffering and death. No one who judged by common sense would say the spectacle of Jesus dying on the cross was anything but horrible. Yet, the Scriptures and the Christian faith point to the cross as the greatest, most wonderful moment not only of Christ's life but also of ours. It is the supreme moment of Christ's power and the pinnacle and foundation of our life and hope. It is a moment of great victory and salvation.

Exploring the Scriptures

The core scriptural idea of this hymn is expressed in the final phrase of the first stanza: "Tell how Christ, the world's redeemer, / As a victim won the day." The message of salvation is not just that Christ saved us from sin; it is that He saved us "as a victim." Christ saved us from sin and death by suffering, by being beaten, by dying, by lying lifeless in the tomb. Christ won a great victory by becoming, for our sakes, a lifeless, dead human being, by suffering and being weak. That contrast and mystery is at the heart of the Gospel.

Read Is. 53:5. This passage mentions both what will happen to Christ and to Christians.

- What will happen to Christ according to this passage?
- What will happen to Christians?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this hymn is known as Venantius Honorius Fortunatus (c. 530–609). He was a prodigious writer of verse, much of which has been lost over the centuries. Two hymns survived, this one and "The Royal Banners Forward Go," both of which have to do with the crucifixion. This hymn became very well-known and has been widely used within the Church.

Both hymns were inspired by the appearance of a supposed relic of the cross in the monastery where Fortunatus lived. This shard of wood was regarded as a real piece of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Fortunatus was commissioned to write a hymn in honor of this relic. "Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle" is that hymn. While we rightly reject the idea that such relics were genuine and, more importantly, that such relics ought to be honored, the version

of Fortunatus' hymn which we sing in *LSB* 454 points to the saving work of Christ that He accomplished on the cross.

- What words occur to you as you meditate on the cross?
- How many are positive (focused on salvation and forgiveness) and how many are focused on the sufferings of Christ?
- How are these groups of impressions and words related to each other?

- How are the two related?

Read John 17:1. In John's Gospel, Jesus' "time" or "hour" usually means His crucifixion and burial and resurrection.

- Here Jesus asks His Father to glorify Him, since His hour has come. When does the Father glorify Jesus?
- Is His death on the cross a moment of shame or glory for Jesus?

Read Gal. 6:14.

- What does Paul say is the only thing he will boast about in this life?
- Why is this true for Paul and for all of us?

of Fortunatus' hymn which we sing in *LSB* 454 points to the saving work of Christ that He accomplished on the cross.

- Why do you think relics were so popular through the ages?
- What real, tangible evidences of Christ and His love for us does the Bible really point us to?

Text

This hymn is first and foremost an invitation to sing and praise God. Read Ps. 98:1–2.

- What is the reason in this psalm for praising God?
- How is this similar or related to our hymn?

Stanza 1 concludes that Christ “as a victim won the day.” This little phrase brings us right into the heart of redemption and atonement. It is Christ’s cross that is our victory and salvation, and yet the cross is apparent weakness and suffering and defeat.

- Which enemies of ours did Christ defeat on the cross?
- How did His dying “as a victim” defeat them?

While the hymn is appointed for Good Friday and Holy Week and focuses on the crucifixion, it encompasses the whole scope of Christ’s redemptive work.

- According to stanza 2, what else did Christ do to redeem us?

Making the Connection

This hymn presents to us Christ’s suffering and cross as a victory and a triumph. Scripture also reminds us that we are baptized into Christ. Our lives are connected to His. The fact that Christ’s suffering is a victory over sin and death allows us to see our own suffering in faith. Christ suffers with us and weeps with us and, since we are connected to Him, leads us through our suffering to eternity and life.

- How does this hymn help us to see our suffering as part of our Christian life?

This hymn also gives a glimpse of Christ’s “passive obedience.” He obeyed and fulfilled the Law though He had no need to do so, since He is the Giver of the Law.

In Closing

The cross of Jesus is a triumphant sign, though it is a disgraceful one to the world. A dying man’s blood, suffering and death seem like foolishness or worse to those without faith. To us it is glorious, a sign of conquest, a noble and beautiful tree. The more we consider the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the more we keep in mind His great love for us in giving Himself into death, the more the Spirit will lead us to sing of the glorious battle and to tell how Christ, the world’s redeemer, won the day.

- Read Gal. 4:4–5. How does this passage help us understand Christ’s life of obedience?
- For whose sake was He being obedient?

Stanza 4 draws a comparison between the tree of life in the Garden of Eden and the cross.

- Read Rev. 22:2. How is this tree of life similar to the cross? See Is. 53:5.
- Read Gen. 3:22. There God mentions that eating of the tree of life brings eternal life. How do we “eat” the cross, our tree of life, for eternal life?

- For whose sake did Christ obey the Law?
- Who gets the “credit” for His obedience?

Stanza 3 emphasizes the willingness of Christ to die on the cross for our sakes and for our forgiveness.

- What does such willingness indicate about Christ’s attitude toward us?

Such an attitude calls forth from us just the type of praise and singing this hymn invites us to offer to God.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 454.

Prayer

Almighty God, graciously behold this Your family for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed and delivered into the hands of sinful men to suffer death upon the cross; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Good Friday).

The Royal Banners Forward Go

Lutheran Service Book 455 | study by Paul Gregory Alms

Introduction

Every king, president or ruler has symbols of power that surround him. A king has a scepter and a crown. A president has the presidential seal and Air Force One. Ancient generals often had banners that were lifted up before their armies to march before them. Such things are used to proclaim that the ruler or king is powerful and important.

Jesus Christ's "banner" is His cross. It is the sign and the place of His great victory. For many centuries, churches have lifted up crucifixes and crosses in worship as reminders of Christ's power and might. But this banner of Christ is

a strange one. For on that wood He suffered, bled and died. His grisly death does not seem like a victory but an awful tragedy. But in such things as suffering, blood and death is the triumph of our Savior. With such things He wins the battle for us.

- How is the cross a sign of victory?
- Where and how does your church use crosses, crucifixes or banners with the cross? What messages do they (and how your church uses them) convey?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings for Holy Cross Day form an excellent scriptural basis for this hymn. Numbers 21:4–9 tells the story of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness to save the people of Israel from God's wrath.

- What do the people say to Moses in verse 7, and how is this similar to the way we approach God in the Divine Service?
- What does God tell Moses to "lift up" for the people? What does God "lift up" for us today? Where do we see and receive this?

In the Epistle Reading, Paul says many regard the cross as folly and weakness (1 Cor. 1:18–25).

- Do people today still have this attitude? What about Jesus on the cross appears foolish?
- Paul writes that in truth the word of the cross is the power and wisdom of God. How is the proclamation of Christ's death powerful?

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

- How does the crucifixion and death of Jesus draw us to Him?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Venantius Honorius Fortunatus (c. 530–609) is the author of this hymn. He wrote many hymns, most of which were written for use in the church year. One volume of verse was entitled *Hymns for All the Festivals of the Church Year*, but it, like almost all of his work, has been lost. This hymn is among the few that have survived.

This was written as a procession hymn for a specific occasion. A supposed relic of the cross of Jesus was being brought into the monastery where Fortunatus lived. This piece of wood was highly regarded and greeted with pomp and ceremony at the church where it would be displayed. Fortunatus wrote this hymn to be sung as the relic was first brought into the sanctuary. Of course we reject the value of relics or the idea that they are genuine. The hymn itself does not mention relics but rather praises the atoning work Christ did on the cross for us.

- What is the difference between worshiping relics and using crosses, crucifixes, banners and art in our churches?
- If we are looking for tangible signs of Christ's love for us, where should we look? Has God given such signs?

Text

The first stanza of this hymn includes a challenging theological statement. Fortunatus points to the mystery that the one who made our flesh (the Son of God) now pays the ransom of sin in that very flesh He has made. God has taken on this flesh in order to free that flesh (us!) from our own sin.

- Consider how this stanza emphasizes God working all things in our salvation: creation, incarnation and atonement.

Read John 19:34.

- What does this Scripture tell us flowed from Jesus' side?
- The hymn calls the "torrent rushing from His side" (st. 2) a "precious flood" that washes us. How are we washed in the cross of Jesus?
- How do Baptism and the Lord's Supper connect to this image of blood and water flowing from the crucifixion of Christ?

Making the Connection

This hymn text pushes us boldly to meditate on the cross of Christ, on His suffering and death. But it does that with us in the picture. Read the text hymn slowly and consider how each part of the picture of Christ's redemptive suffering includes us and our sin and the salvation Christ brings.

- How can you find yourself and Christ's work for you in these individual words:
 - ransom (st. 1)
 - price (st. 4)
 - restore (st. 6)
 - flood (st. 2)
 - shame (st. 5)

In Closing

Christ is our King and Lord. But unlike other earthly rulers, the banners and symbols of His power are upside down. His banner is His holy cross, where He conquered in the fight against our sin not with worldly displays of power but by suffering and dying. The true cross is shown forth in our midst by preaching, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. There Christ has promised to give the victory over sin that His cross has won.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 455.

Stanza 3 says that Jesus reigns "in triumph from the tree."

- Why is Christ's place of death considered the place where He rules and triumphs?
- How does Gal. 3:13 fit in here?

The hymn speaks of the cross as a "tree of beauty" (st. 5) that bore holy limbs. Further in that same stanza, the hymn proclaims that the shame once associated with the tree is now gone.

- What shame might be attached to a tree in the biblical narrative? See Gen. 3:1-7.

We often encounter difficulties, burdens and afflictions. How can this hymn's proclamation that Christ reigns and triumphs, especially on the cross in His agony, be a comfort to us?

- Are there words or images in this hymn that speak the comfort of the crucified Christ to you?

Prayer

Merciful God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, was lifted high upon the cross that He might bear the sins of the world and draw all people to Himself. Grant that we who glory in His death for our redemption may faithfully heed His call to bear the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Holy Cross Day).

Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us

Lutheran Service Book 851 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Lutherans are understandably nervous about how we speak of our response to the Gospel. Not wanting to confuse what justifies us before God through Jesus Christ and our response of faith (and good works), we sometimes appear to downplay the importance of good works. In Eph. 2:8–9, St. Paul clearly states that we are saved by grace through faith — without adding anything to Christ’s saving work on our behalf. Yet in the very next verse, he gives this blunt reminder: “For we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Today’s hymn, “Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us,” captures well this connection between the Lord who bought

us with His lifeblood as the price and hearts moved by the Holy Spirit to give to others as Christ has given to us.

- How important is it that we shine with Christ’s light so that others may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16)?
- Does this life of giving and good works flow automatically from faith, or do we need to be encouraged in this direction?
- How does the world tend to characterize Christians — loving or judgmental? Is this a true or false characterization?

Exploring the Scriptures

In the Readings for today, we see various aspects of this call to good works. By connecting the Readings together, we set the right context for the faithful and fruitful response of good works in the life of a Christian.

By the Introit Psalm (37), we are reminded that our delight is in the Lord (faith), and this is the starting point for good works (v. 4). If we commit our way to Him, He works in us and through us (v. 5) and brings forth our righteousness as the light (v. 6).

- In what way does this first speak of Jesus Christ?
- We receive Christ’s righteousness by Baptism and wear it by faith. Is this righteousness also light?

Psalm 54 speaks of the Lord as our “helper” (v. 4), as well as the free and sacrificial response born of our thanksgiving for His saving help (v. 6).

- Our offerings are to be freely given of a thankful heart moved by Christ’s own example. Can you recall a time when the motive for giving made all the difference before the Lord? Hint: Gen. 4:3–7 and Heb. 11:4.
- How is the offering of things related to the offering of our very selves (Rom. 12:1)? Which is first?

James enlarges this whole discussion. Read James 3:13–4:10. He tells us that this is not a simple matter of remembering to do good works. It is about the attitude of the heart. As long as our hearts are full of “me,” there is no acceptable offering possible.

- Good works are the fruit of what kind of heart (3:17 and 4:6)?

- Notice the flow. Peace from God leads to peace with others, a peaceful heart within us, and a “harvest of righteousness.” Can anything we do please God as long as selfishness and jealousy occupy our hearts?
- Is it possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason?

In Mark 9:30–37, Jesus is teaching His disciples what He must do to win salvation. Here the Gospel is succinct and concrete. “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise” (v. 31).

- Why did the disciples fail to understand Jesus?
- Was it a failure of understanding His words or hearing His words because something else was on their minds? What did they understand (v. 34)?
- Why were they reluctant to admit to Jesus what they had been discussing among themselves?
- Greatness born of selfless service — who is Jesus referring to in verse 35? What do we need from God before we can hear and understand this truth?
- Why did Jesus use the example of a child (vv. 36–37)? What can a child return to you for the kindness you show him?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Eliza S. Alderson (1818–89) wrote this hymn, requesting that her brother write the tune. He ended up adding the final stanza as well. Alderson reported that the practice of tithing (returning 10 percent of your income back to the Lord) was her inspiration, but nothing in the hymn explicitly mentions this. In fact, the hymn spends more time dealing with the motivation for giving than what we give. The hymn begins and ends by firmly anchoring our response solidly in God's work alone; there is no confusion of Law and Gospel here.

Text

In the first stanza, the author has set the stage for all that is to come in this hymn. What glory of the Lord is referred to here?

- Did Jesus withhold anything in His sacrificial offering on our behalf?
- Why did the Lord give Himself up so freely and willingly? Read Heb. 12:2.
- Jesus did not offer Himself because anyone deserved His sacrificial gift. He died for the unworthy and undeserving. What does this say about the way we return to Him or give to the poor and needy?

The second stanza takes the form of a prayer. We ask God to give us a heart like Jesus' own heart that we might give as freely as He has given to us.

- How does the hymn describe the condition of our hearts apart from Christ?
- Before we are "warmed" up to give to others, we must first be "warmed" up by the Spirit to believe. Only Jesus

Making the Connection

Giving is not a one-way street. Jesus invites us to be lights shining with His bright light, showing forth the Gospel and displaying God's glory to the world around us. This is not a simple matter of picking up a few extra canned goods at the market. It begins with the transformation of our hearts. Our Lord enables our response by giving us the Spirit so that we might see, understand, believe and reflect His love. Notice

In Closing

In the Our Father, we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," thereby connecting Jesus' forgiveness with the way we forgive others in His name. Here we connect the way we have received His giving love to the way we love one another and do the good works He has equipped us to do. Is it possible to acknowledge what Jesus has done for us and remain blind to the needs of those around us?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 851.

can teach us the truth of how much more blessed it is "to give than to receive." The world teaches us that happiness comes from _____, while Jesus shows us it comes from _____.

Stanza 3 frames our stewardship as an honor and a privilege that God makes possible. The least little act of Christian kindness and the smallest good works do not pass before the Lord unnoticed — even though the world may never acknowledge them.

- How does this encourage us to good works? See Heb. 13:16.
- Whose face are we meant to see in the faces of the poor and needy? Read Matt. 25:31–46.
- What are alms? In what season of the Church Year are we particularly encouraged to alms-giving?

The final stanza brings back the first two lines of stanza 1. This resets the context for our faithful response and is a prayer for faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13).

- Why does giving require a bold trust?
- What is it within us that resists this call to robust stewardship of all of Christ's gifts and resources?
- Think of Christ's conversation with His disciples in the Gospel lesson. Why is it so easy to be distracted from His call to serve as He has served us?
- How often does our love need renewing? Where does this renewal take place?

how the hymn writer has maintained this context throughout the hymn while calling us to act boldly.

- What are the good works that give glory to God?
- Are these good works accessible to every Christian or the domain of but a few?
- What does it mean when Jesus tells us to give as He has given to us?

Prayer

Father, grant that we may, with thankful hearts, receive Your mercies and express our gratitude not only with our lips, but in our lives. Help us to give ourselves to Your service on behalf of the poor and needy, and therefore walk in the way that You have made known to us. Grant us faith that works in love, hope that does not disappoint, and kindness that never fails; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

What Is the World to Me

Lutheran Service Book 730 | study by J. H. Sorenson

Introduction

A very wealthy man thought he had made a shrewd arrangement to “take it with him” by making a huge contribution to “the Building Fund.” He arrived at heaven’s gate lugging a large trunk. The gatekeeper said, “Sorry, you can’t take that in here,” but the man insisted he had permission. The gatekeeper said, “We’ll see. Show me what’s in the trunk.” He opened the trunk, and it was full of gold bars, a huge fortune. The gate-keeper said, “You brought paving?”

This modern parable illustrates something about the values of heaven and those of earth.

- What do you think is the main point of the story?
- Is anything like that story remotely possible?

This hymn emphasizes and underlines a teaching that few people ever really learn.

- What evidence is there that St. Matthew learned it (Matt. 9:9–13)?
- How did following Jesus change him?

Exploring the Scriptures

In Luke 16:1–13, Jesus told the parable of the dishonest manager to teach the importance of eternal values. In discussing the matter, He told His disciples and us, “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (v. 13).

- What does the word “money” include?
- What are some of the “masters” we are susceptible to?

In 1 John 2:15–17, the apostle urges us not to love the world or the things of the world that appeal to our senses. In Phil. 3:7–9, Paul strongly and passionately says that he counts everything as rubbish compared to knowing Jesus Christ by faith.

- Do these two passages give a different message?
- Why is loving the “things of this world” not compatible with loving eternal things?
- What is the “tipping point” between love for God and love of money?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The origin of this fine eighteenth-century hymn is a little bit cloudy. Most students of the matter agree that the author was Georg Michael Pfefferkorn (1645–1732), a teacher and pastor in Germany. However, the hymn first appeared anonymously and lately it has been attributed to Balthasar Kindermann (d. 1706). It was translated into English by August Crull, who was born in Germany in 1845. He emigrated to the United States at an early age, and graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1862. He served as pastor and teacher in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and died in 1923.

Text

Pastor Crull used his gift as a poet in translating the key phrase of the hymn as “What is the world to me!” Its literal meaning in German is “What do I ask of the world?”

- Does the translation change the meaning of the phrase?
- What is the answer to the question, either way?

Stanza 1 of the hymn makes a bold statement of the changed value system of the Christian life, contrasting the world and its “vaunted pleasure” against the peace and rest of having Jesus as treasure and soul’s delight.

- What are some of the “vaunted pleasures” of this world?

Stanza 2 considers the praise and honor of the “mighty” of this world, but finds them “frail and flighty” compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.

- How are the “mighty” of this world “frail and flighty?”

In Stanza 3 the wealth of this world in money is contrasted to the wealth of knowing Jesus.

- How much money is enough?

The fourth stanza brings the main message of the hymn together in a striking way with a list of important things that Jesus means to the believer — wealth, treasure, life, health, friendship, love, pleasure, joy and eternal bliss.

- Can you think of a few more things to add to the list?

Making the Connection

Hard times often make people reevaluate their list of what is important in life.

- Have you had that kind of experience lately? Or ever?

Jesus said, “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25).

- Is it easier for a poor person to believe?
- How poor do you have to be?

“What Is the World to Me” is a hymn not only for the eighteenth century, but for the twenty-first century as well. It seems designed to make us think about what is important eternally and who we have in first place in our lives.

In Closing

Another parable that teaches a point similar to the story about the rich man who thought he had a way to “take it with him” is Jesus’ parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21). A man is so wealthy he has no place to store all his goods. He decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, thinking that then he will be at ease. “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20–21).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 730.

In the lifetimes of most of us, we have seen unprecedented prosperity. Our nation as a whole is part of the wealthiest people the world has ever seen. Yet we have recently been hearing of the overwhelming greed of some of our fellow citizens — not only greed for money and possessions, but for power, for pleasure and whatever else the world may give.

- What are some of the signs of this trend?

Christians are not immune to these social trends, but by our Savior’s grace we are called to ask the question, “What is the world to me?”

- How does this trend toward the values of this world show itself in the church?
- What can Christians do to work against this trend?

Prayer

Almighty God, heavenly Father, You have called us to be Your children and heirs of Your gracious promises in Christ Jesus. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may forsake all covetous desires and the inordinate love of riches. Deliver us from the pursuit of passing things that we may seek the kingdom of Your Son and trust in His righteousness and so find blessedness and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Against the love of money, *LSB*, p. 311).

Triune God, Be Thou Our Stay

Lutheran Service Book 505 | study by William M. Cwirla

Introduction

Dorothy Sayers once summarized the doctrine of the Trinity this way: “The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the whole thing incomprehensible” (*Creeds or Chaos* [Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1999], 33). Indeed, the mystery of God’s “tri-unity,” three distinct persons in one divine being, is far above and beyond our experience. It stretches our vocabulary to invent new words like “triune.” While God’s “tri-unity” — His

“three-in-one-ness” — cannot be comprehended or explained, it can be confessed and worshiped and adored.

This hymn addresses God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — in a threefold prayer for faith and protection as we run the race of faith set before us.

- How would you describe God’s tri-unity to someone who had never heard of it before?
- What puzzles you most about God being three persons in one being?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read the creation account in Gen. 1:1–2:4.

- In 1:1–3, how is each person of the Trinity described?
- In 1:27–28, how is the divine Trinity of persons expressed?
- The Latin church father Augustine said that the “external works of God are indivisible.” That being the case, what role does each person of the Trinity play in the work of creation?
- See John 1:1–3. What role did the Son (Word) play in the work of creation?

Read Matt. 28:16–20.

- In Jesus’ baptismal mandate to His disciples, how many persons are named? How many “names” are there? What does this say about the relationship of persons within the Godhead?

Read John 10:30.

- The word for “one” in the Greek of this passage is neuter, that is, “one thing.” What does this tell you about the unity of the Father and the Son?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn of Martin Luther (1483–1546) is based on a popular processional hymn that predates the Reformation. The traditional first stanza was addressed to St. Peter or to Holy Mary. Other saints were added as needed for length. In fact, the stanza specifically addressed to Mary appears to have been the model for Luther’s version, so that what was attributed to Mary is now attributed to the Triune God:

Holy Mary, stay with us
And do not let us perish.
Free us from all sins
And if we should die,
Defend us from the Devil;
Help us, chaste Virgin Mary,
To join the lovely Angel Host
So we will sing Alleluia,
Alleluia we shall sing
In praise of the Almighty God.
Grant to us, Lord, as our reward
The heavenly crown.

Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy!
All praise to you, Mary.

- What does Luther’s use of this old and popular hymn tell you about the nature of the Lutheran Reformation?
- Do you think it is possible to rescue old hymns and tunes that contain errors and put them to use in teaching proper doctrine?
- What does the original stanza tell you about medieval piety concerning Mary? To whom should this prayer properly be prayed?

Text

This hymn may be sung either as a single stanza to the Triune God in the unity of His divine essence or in three repeated stanzas, each addressing one of the Trinity of persons.

- Which way of singing this hymn do you think would be preferable, and why?

- How does the threefold repetition of the same stanza to each person of the Trinity illustrate Augustine’s maxim that the external works of God are indivisible?

The hymn calls God our “stay.” This is not our usual usage of that word. Read Ps. 31:1–3.

- What other words might you use in place of “stay”?
- The first sentence of the hymn asks God for seven specific things. What are they?

The second sentence of the hymn draws on Eph. 6:10–17 and the “whole armor of God.”

- List the various components of the whole armor of God.
- Would you say that the “war” believers are called to wage is offensive or defensive? Explain.

Making the Connection

The Small Catechism teaches that we are to make the sign of the holy cross and say, “In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit” every day — in the morning when we arise and in the evening before we go to sleep (*LSB*, p. 327).

In Closing

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). This hymn reminds us of all the eternal blessings and benefits we receive as we live in the triune name of God as His baptized children.

While we certainly cannot fully understand or comprehend the mystery of God’s tri-unity, we can certainly enjoy His blessings of creation, redemption and sanctification that are ours thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus and our Baptism into God’s creative and redemptive work. This is a good hymn not only for one or two Sundays in the Church Year, but also for daily use as we run the race of baptized believers.

The hymn speaks of the Christian life as running a race (Heb. 12:1–2).

- In what ways do the Father, Son and Holy Spirit enable us to run the race of faith?
- What role do the saints play in our heavenly race (v. 1)?
- Ultimately, how are we to shun “the devil’s wiles and cunning”?

The Small Catechism says “Amen, amen means ‘yes, yes, it shall be so’” (*LSB*, p. 325).

- What is our ground of confidence that God will hear our prayer in this hymn and grant what we ask?

- How would remembering your Baptism in this way draw on the gifts prayed for in this hymn?
- How does regular participation in the Lord’s Supper bring to you the gifts for which this hymn prays?
- What examples do you have in your life of the Triune God being your stay?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 505.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Holy Trinity).

Lord God, to Thee We Give All Praise

Lutheran Service Book 522 | study by Thomas E. Lock

Introduction

For this feast of the church year Martin Luther preached:

Now, you have often heard that the devil is around people everywhere, in palaces, in houses, in the field, on the streets, in the water, in the forest, in fire; devils are everywhere. All they ever do is seek man's destruction. ... Against such a malicious, spiteful, cunning enemy, who is continually hounding us, God has appointed the beloved angels, to keep watch so that where the devil suddenly comes and strikes with pestilence, with fire, with hail, and the like, an angel is there to counter it.

(Eugene F. A. Klug, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996], 7:375–6)

- The devil and his demons are angels who sinned against God (2 Peter 2:4). With what power or might can people defend themselves against the evil spirits? What hope is there for Christians?
- Are there events that have happened which reveal the destructive power of the devil and his crew? How have angels guarded people from such evil?

Exploring the Scriptures

Who, or what, are angels? It is a common fallacy that angels are Christians who have died and been taken to heaven. As we will see, they are spirit beings who are in heaven alongside God and His saints.

- Read Matt. 18:10, a portion of the Holy Gospel for this day. Who protects Christians? Where are they? Whose face do they see?
- Read the Epistle for this day, Rev. 12:7–12. What took place? Who was the leader of the angels? In Job 1:6–12 we see that Satan had access to heaven even after his fall

into sin. But at Christ's death and resurrection, what took place according to Rev. 12:9? Where do Satan and his demons now reside? Why should heaven rejoice and earth fear at his descent?

- Read Rev. 7:9–14. Besides the angels, who are present around the heavenly throne?
- Who will judge the angels? The answer is given in 1 Cor. 6:2–3. How then is it possible for saints to become angels? Doesn't the fallacy of saints becoming angels actually diminish the standing of saints?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560) was Luther's right-hand man during the Reformation. Born as Philipp Schwartzerd in 1497, he was given the name Melancthon (which is Greek for "black earth," the meaning of *Schwartzerd* in German) by one of his teachers, Johannes Reuchlin.

Melancthon was highly intellectual, even in his youth, having earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1511 and his Master of Arts degree in 1514. In 1518 he accepted a call to teach Greek and literature at Wittenberg University, Wittenberg, Germany. At Wittenberg he trained generations of men how to be theologians through his compilation of texts under subject headings known as *Loci communes theologici*. Melancthon also gave the church three of the Lutheran Confessions, later contained in the Book of Concord, namely, the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537).

Melancthon published this hymn in Latin in 1543. Since it was in Latin, the hymn was to be used at the university and by the educated. In 1554 Melancthon's friend and colleague, Paul Eber, made a German translation so that it could be sung by the uneducated as well. Finally, this hymn came to us in an English translation by Lutheran pastor Emanuel Cronewett.

- Why was it important for the Latin version to be translated into German and English?

Text

Stanza 1 of our hymn for today is a general thanksgiving to God for the angels, based on Ps.103:20–22 and Matt. 18:10. The remainder of the hymn explores why Christians thank God for these angels.

Stanzas 2 and 3 speak of the nature of these angels of God.

- When Jesus spoke of the angels in Matthew 18, He was speaking from His own knowledge as God, and as He revealed in Ps.34:7. Read Ps.34:7. How is that verse like the lines in stanza 3, “Their whole delight is but to be / With Thee, Lord Jesus, and to keep / Thy little flock, Thy lambs and sheep”?

Stanzas 4–6 sing of the one against whom the angels need to defend the saints.

- Read Eph. 6:10–12. How are the evil angels portrayed in verse 12?

Making the Connection

Luther included morning and evening prayers in his Small Catechism. Both of these prayers include the sentence, “Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me” (*LSB*, p. 327).

- Whom does God appoint to guard you from dangers of body and soul? Have you ever had a time when you might have been injured or even died, but you escaped all harm? Explain what happened.

Luther preached:

“[God] does at times permit us to experience such things[evil and harmful attacks], that we might learn,

In Closing

Why do Christians celebrate the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels? Luther summed it up nicely in one of his sermons on this day:

“This feast commemorating the angels has been placed in the church’s calendar for the sake of our young people, or more correctly, for the sake of all Christians, so that they might train themselves to think about the beloved angels and thank God for appointing these mighty lords to be his servants for us” (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7:374–5).

Thanks be to God for appointing these ministering spirits (Ps. 104:4 and Heb. 1:7).

- Read 1 Peter 5:8–9. How is the devil described? What does he seek?
- Read stanza 5 of our hymn. Against whom is the deceiver of old fighting?
- Read Rev. 20:1–2. Who is the dragon being bound? Who does the binding?

Stanzas 7 and 8 conclude Melancthon’s hymn.

- Read the final two stanzas of the hymn. Who defeats our foe? What are Christians to do in return for this blessing?

if God were not there [with His angels] all the time preventing their occurrence, they would happen continuously; and for this reason we ought to pray all the more diligently and thank God for such protection” (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7:376).

- Have there been occurrences in your life in which one can see God’s withholding of the protection by the angels? Why would such a loving God allow terrorist attacks to occur in the United States and other countries?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 522.

Prayer

Everlasting God, You have ordained and constituted the service of angels and men in a wonderful order. Mercifully grant that, as Your holy angels always serve and worship You in heaven, so by Your appointment they may also help and defend us here on earth; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Michael and All Angels).

Our Father, by Whose Name

Lutheran Service Book 863 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

“It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us fathers and sons.” So wrote the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

It goes without saying that fatherhood has fallen on hard times. Oh, it’s never been easy for men to be fathers. Going all the way back to Adam and Cain and Abel and the descendants who follow shows us just that (see Genesis 4).

Exploring the Scriptures

LSB 863 serves as the Hymn of the Day for two days in the Church Year. Read Mark 10:2–16, the Gospel appointed for Proper 22B, which falls on a Sunday in early October.

- What indication from the text tells you this was a tough topic in Jesus’ day?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Francis Bland Tucker (1895–1984) grew up knowing something about family and church families. He was the youngest of 13 children. His own father and two brothers served as bishops in the Episcopal Church; several nephews served as clergymen. Tucker also was a collateral descendent (a relative descended from a brother or sister of an ancestor and, therefore, a niece or nephew) of George Washington. His mother was one of the last children to be born at Mount Vernon. Tucker’s family was illustrious in both church and state lineage.

Known for his skills as a poet and hymn writer, Tucker served on the committees that produced the 1940 and 1982 hymnals of the Episcopal Church. In preparing the topical index for the 1940 hymnal, Tucker noted there were no hymns for the “Home and Family” section — and so he wrote one.

- Why do you think there were no hymns in 1939 concerning home and family for Tucker’s consideration? (*The Lutheran Hymnal* [1941] did have a section on “The Christian Home” with four hymns in “The Family” section.)
- If you have a copy of *Lutheran Service Book*, turn to Page 995 and find the “Home and Education, Christian” category.

Tucker wrote that he started with Eph. 3:14–15 as the basis for his hymn. He also noted that the Trinity — Father, Son

and Holy Spirit — paralleled the family — parents, children and the spirit of the family.

- What things have led to the demise of fatherhood?
- Consider Schiller’s quote above. How is this true or not true for earthly fathers? How is this true or not true when we consider our heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus?

- The Pharisees started with the topic of divorce. Where does Jesus instead lead them in their testing of Him?
- What indication in the text tells you the parents knew they needed Jesus in their children’s lives?

and Holy Spirit — paralleled the family — parents, children and the spirit of the family.

- Let’s expand Tucker’s reading of Ephesians. Read Eph. 3:14–19. What does St. Paul have to teach us about each person of the Holy Trinity?

Text

In stanza 1, the words “Our Father” immediately make all kinds of liturgical and worship connections for us.

- In what ways does stanza 1 reflect the following Scripture passages: Is. 63:16; Is. 64:8; Rom. 8:15; 1 John 3:1?
- In what ways does Tucker take the Invocation, the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, and the Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer and bring them together in stanza 1 (see *LSB*, pp. 322–3)?

Stanza 2 moves us to the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Mary.

- What comfort is yours that Jesus left His heavenly home in order to grow up “within an earthly home”?
- What are the benefits of having the Lord Jesus in *your* home? Consider the lives of these biblical people: Mark 10:14–16; Luke 19:5–9; Acts 16:25–34.

Stanza 3 has us sing of the Christian home as a place where unity, love and peace are to be found.

- What have been some of the best times in your Christian home life?

Original sin, the sin we have inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve, and actual sin, the sins we commit against one another, break the unity, love and peace of Christian home life.

- What is the one thing necessary to restore unity, love and peace?
- Consider the following Scripture passages in light of the homes of Christians, forgiveness and the restoration of peace: Psalm 133 and Eph. 4:1–6.
- In what ways do Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution and Holy Communion reestablish and strengthen Christ’s peace in your home?

Making the Connection

In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther has this to say about the Fourth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother”:

Honor requires not only that parents be addressed kindly and with reverence, but also that, both in the heart and with the body, we demonstrate that we value them very highly, and that, next to God, we regard them as the very highest. For someone we honor from the heart we must also truly regard as high and great.

We must, therefore, impress this truth upon the young [Deuteronomy 6:7] that they should think of their parents as standing in God’s place. They should remember that however lowly, poor, frail, and strange their parents may be, nevertheless, they are the father and the mother given to them by God... . Therefore, we are not to

consider who they are or how they may be, but the will of God, who has created and ordained parenthood. (LC I 107–108)

When the Church remembers St. Joseph, guardian of Jesus, on March 19, the day really becomes the Church’s “Father’s Day.” Once Joseph’s shock and disbelief are answered by God’s Word proclaimed by the angel, we see in Joseph true love, faith, diligence and quick action. He carries out his vocation as provider, protector and teacher of Jesus.

- What do the words and actions of Joseph have to say to today’s “blended” families, that is, stepfamilies, adoptive families and foster families? See Matt. 1:18–25; Matt. 2:13–23; and Luke 2:41–52 if your memory needs refreshing.

In Closing

Jesus shows us the Father’s heart and His great love for all of humanity through His sacrificial love upon the cross. The true family of God is baptized into the Body of Christ and is fed with His body and blood. It is the heart of the Father and the flesh and blood of the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit that make us God’s family.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 863, and then read Psalm 128.

Prayer

Almighty God, from the house of Your servant David You raised up Joseph to be the guardian of Your incarnate Son and the husband of His mother, Mary. Grant us grace to follow the example of this faithful workman in heeding Your counsel and obeying Your commands; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Joseph, Guardian of Jesus).

Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower

Lutheran Service Book 694 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

Whimsical scenarios are daily staged at one of the world's most photographed towers as tourists with extended arms pretend to hold up the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Had it remained upright, the tower would have been at best a minor Italian tourist stop. But because this tower in Pisa leans, well, now it's famous.

Sections of once-towering metal recently rested in a government laboratory as scientists and engineers studied

the beams for strength and weakness. The question: What would it have taken for the twin towers of the World Trade Center to withstand the violence done to them?

- What is the tallest structure you have visited? Did being there make you feel safe? If not, what about the structure frightened you?

Exploring the Scriptures

Foundational to understanding stanzas 1, 2 and 5 of "Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower" is John 14:23, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

- What words does the hymn writer give you to sing as an appropriate response to Jesus' statement?

Read Mark 10:46–52.

- Which phrases in stanzas 3 and 4 reflect the sight-restoring miracle in Bartimaeus' life?
- How do we know that Jesus also healed Bartimaeus' spiritual blindness? Which words in stanza 4 reflect such healing?
- Imagine for a moment what it must have been like for Bartimaeus to see Jesus for the first time. In what ways had Jesus become Bartimaeus' "strength" and "tower?"

Read Matt. 22:34–46. Here we run into the Pharisees, men who see and yet do not see. In verse 36 the Pharisees show their hand right away. They were (in)famous for wanting to keep the Law.

- Does Jesus give them a Law answer or a Gospel answer?
- What question should the Pharisees be asking Jesus?

When the Pharisees do not ask Jesus who will save them from the requirements of the Law since they can't save themselves, Jesus asks His own questions in verses 41–45.

- About whom have the Pharisees forgotten?
- With which words does Jesus teach the Pharisees about the two natures of *the* Son of David, His humanity and His divinity?
- What theological conclusion can be drawn, then, if the Christ, the Son of David, is also "Lord?" What help and hope is there for you in keeping the Law?

Sadly, the Pharisees tightly squeeze shut their spiritual eyes and refuse to see the answer-to-the-Law incarnate, the very tower of salvation before them.

- We all have a "little Pharisee" inside of us. What does it take to break down that "little Pharisee" and see the Christ, the Son of David, the Lord who spoke to David's Lord as Savior?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The biography of this hymn's writer is bittersweet to orthodox Lutherans. Johann Scheffler (1624–77) was born to Lutheran parents in Breslau, Silesia, or what is today Wroclaw, Poland, located in the central part of Europe. Through his studies at various universities Scheffler prepared himself for a career in medicine, and became a private physician to Emperor Ferdinand III. It was during this time that the House of Hapsburg exerted considerable force through the Counter-Reformation for people to return to

Roman Catholicism. Scheffler fell under the influence of the Counter-Reformation, joining the Roman Catholic Church in 1653. He ultimately gave up his vocation of physician and joined a monastery in Breslau. At this time he became known by his pseudonym Angelus Silesius, which means "messenger of Silesia."

A man with a gift for words and writing, most of the over two hundred hymns penned by Scheffler were written before his conversion. This hymn is one to which Lutherans can sing their "amen."

- What are some of the qualifying traits a hymn needs to have before a Lutheran can say, “Yes, this is true; yes, this is what I believe”?
- Where in the present-day world is undue influence by the government exerted on faithful Christians?

Text

The German text for the first line of this hymn translates, “I will love Thee, my Strength.” The word “tower” is not explicitly mentioned. So where does the “tower” come in? Behind the German word for “strength” is the meaning of power, fortitude, yes, even towering height. Hence, in the poetic choices of Catherine Winkworth’s English, the phrase becomes, “Thee will I love, my strength, my tower.”

- Compare stanza 1 with the following psalm verses: Ps. 18:1; Ps. 59:16–17; and Ps. 61:3. In what ways does Scheffler use the language of the Old Testament hymnal in his own hymn?

Making the Connection

The blindness of both Bartimaeus and the Pharisees was curable, but not by their own doing. The Explanation to the Small Catechism reads, “Why do you need the Holy Spirit to begin and sustain this faith in you?” The answer? “By nature I am spiritually blind, dead, and an enemy of God, as the Scriptures teach; therefore I cannot by my own reason

In Closing

The God who spoke light into darkness is the same God who speaks faith into sin-darkened hearts. The towering strength of God’s love in Christ Jesus shines brightly in His Word and into your life. His love does not lean, His love does not fall. His love stands firm and stands strong for you.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 694.

Through faith and with great boldness and confidence Scheffler appropriates to himself the promises of Jesus.

- Which titles of Jesus in stanza 2 does the author claim with the use of the word “my”? How are these titles of Jesus pure Gospel and a comfort to you?
- In stanza 3, for what benefits of the Word of God does Scheffler give thanks?
- In what ways does the spoken word of absolution bring healing to the soul?

In stanza 3 the lips of the Lord revealed His healing word. In stanza 4, the effect of this healing word is stated.

- How are Ps. 141:3 and Micah 6:8 reflected in stanza 4?

The theme of light that was sung of in stanzas 1, 3 and 4 is summarized in stanza 5.

- Consider how stanza 5 reflects and summarizes the comfort you have in Is. 9:2 and 51:11.

or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him” (*Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, p. 147).

- What words would you use to describe how the Holy Spirit has cured your spiritual blindness so that you can see *your* strength, *your* tower, *your* Jesus?

Prayer

O God, the helper of all who call on You, have mercy on us and give us eyes of faith to see Your Son that we may follow Him on the way that leads to eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 25B).

Hope of the World

Lutheran Service Book 690 | study by Gifford A. Grobien

Introduction

It is so easy to get caught up in the daily routines and stresses of our lives. It's not that we try to forget about God, but in our busyness and weakness, our trust is interrupted and disrupted.

We know that Christ offers us the certainty of eternal life, and that nothing can come between Him and us. This is typically the focus of the preaching we hear, and for good reason. The promise of forgiveness and eternal life is given and strengthened by this preaching. But sometimes we do not so clearly connect the promise of eternal life with our everyday routine.

Exploring the Scriptures

“Hope of the World” is grounded in Psalm 146.

- The psalm considers people or things in whom we might put our trust. Who or what are the options mentioned? In whom does the psalmist declare we should put our trust?
- Can you find the phrase in the psalm used as the basis for the title of the hymn? Hint: See verses 5–6.

We have general expectations about what a prince — or a president, legislator or judge — should do. We expect them to govern in a certain way and to pay attention to certain things.

- Share these expectations with one another.
- What expectations does the psalmist have for princes? Do these expectations match our own expectations for government? In what ways?
- What task for the prince is suggested by the psalmist that seems unreasonable (v. 3)? Why do you think the psalmist says this?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

“Hope of the World” was submitted to the Hymn Society of America in response to its search for new ecumenical hymns. “Ecumenical” means having to do with unity among church bodies, and it often refers to structural unity or joint participation in services or other activities. This hymn was chosen first out of over 500 submissions and sung at the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954. In penning this text for Christian unity, author Georgia Harkness (1891–1974) emphasized the place of Christ. The

- Briefly discuss what impact the assurance of eternal life has in your daily life, and the impact you think it should be having.

Christ's grace gives us peace that passes understanding, joy and contentment that gives perspective to our day-to-day struggles. Each of us has ups and downs. Sometimes, our difficulties can become severe, such as losing employment, a very hurtful relationship or extreme loneliness.

- What does God do in these situations? Does He actively work to improve our temporal situation? How?

We don't expect our salvation to come from our president or other governing authorities. Yet, we don't always *behave* as if we realize this!

- What kinds of events in your daily life make you anxious or worried?
- How is this kind of anxiety a way of trusting in princes — or money, or approval from others, or something other than the LORD? Reflect on the First Commandment and its explanation in answering this question.

Among other things, the psalm depicts the LORD as one who executes justice, one who feeds the hungry and releases prisoners, one who heals and cares for those who are without other help (the sojourners, widows and orphans — v. 9).

- What is your reaction to this depiction of God? Do you expect these things from Him, or do you think that He only bothers with eternal concerns?

theme of the 1954 assembly was “Christ, the Hope of the World,” and Harkness places Christ's action at the forefront in each stanza.

- How is an ecumenical attitude a good thing? How can it be detrimental?
- Contrast an ecumenical movement that is focused on external, structural unity or improved human relationships with one that is centered on Christ. How does an emphasis on Christ and His work prioritize ecumenical endeavors?

Text

In the hymn, Harkness skillfully presents the troubles of the human condition to suggest that outward unity is not the Church's only problem.

- What are the troubles and sins that plague people, according to stanza 1?
- What is the remedy for these, according to stanza 2? Where and how do we receive the bread of life and the Spirit of Christ?

Christ comes to us in Word and Sacrament. His Spirit is ours through the Means of Grace: preaching, Baptism and eating the “bread of life” (st. 2) of Holy Communion. This message of Christ coming to our world to accomplish salvation for us and to be with us in our troubles becomes stronger with each stanza.

Stanza 3 includes the imagery of walking and traveling — of pilgrimage. Read these passages: Prov. 4:27; Is. 30:21; John 14:1–6; and Mark 8:34.

- What do these passages say about walking and the way in which we walk? What does it mean to walk straight and not veer to the left or right?

Making the Connection

The texts we have looked at show a rich, multifaceted understanding of Christ's ministry. He works forgiveness and eternal life, to be sure, yet also is concerned for our bodily and temporal needs.

- According to stanzas 4 and 5, what characterizes the life of one who has received mercy from Christ?

In Closing

God does not relieve our worldly troubles in a mystical, “magical” way. Not everyone's financial difficulty, familial conflict or loneliness will be addressed or healed in the same way. But God gives us brothers and sisters in Christ to stand with us and to help us overcome worldly struggles. Through others, God fulfills His promises in Psalm 146 and Luke 4!

Most comforting of all, the promise of eternal life and peace grants us peace even in the midst of this world's troubles. Christ Himself lives with us and stays with us on our journey that leads to eternal life.

- Can we find the way on our own? How do we come to know the right way to walk?

Jesus is the way, not in that we merely follow Him, but in that He is the one we cling to. He walks “beside us” (st. 3) by making Himself present in Word and Sacrament. When we hold to these, no matter what paths we stumble upon in life, we have His salvation.

- How does the hymn express our salvation through Christ in stanzas 4 and 5? What phrases and images are used?

The message of salvation is forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Christ's death and resurrection. Yet, we suggested earlier that Psalm 146 includes other aspects of God's work when it refers to God feeding the hungry, healing the sick, caring for the lonely and freeing prisoners. Read Luke 4:16–21.

- How does Jesus describe His own ministry in verse 18? How does this compare with Psalm 146?
- How does Harkness intertwine the themes of salvation and care for bodily needs, especially in stanzas 4 and 5?

Because we have received mercy from Christ through forgiveness, we show mercy to others in temporal ways.

- What are some ways that you regularly show mercy to others in your family? At work? At church? In the community?
- Recalling that the Church is the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:5), how do our works of mercy serve to carry out the works of the LORD from Psalm 146?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 690.

Prayer

Almighty God, send Your Holy Spirit into our hearts that He may rule and direct us according to Your will, comfort us in all our temptations and afflictions, defend us from all error, and lead us into all truth that we, being steadfast in faith, may increase in all good works and in the end obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For the Holy Spirit, *LSB*, p. 310).

O God of God, O Light of Light

Lutheran Service Book 810 | study by David R. Schmitt

Introduction

An artist once made a pair of banners that hung from the ceiling to the floor, framing a stone altar in the front of a church.

If you look at the banners from the back of the church, they look like two plain panels of red. As you move into the church, however, the vision changes. When you are about halfway down the aisle you notice that the banners aren't plain at all but have words on them. Because the letters are the same color as the panels, at first you did not see them. About halfway down the aisle, however, you read the word "Alleluia." An altar framed with alleluias.

When you reach the front of the church you see that the banners are not plain panels of cloth at all; they are a weaving together of various fabrics all the same color. Bits of felt are woven with burlap, satin with velvet, to make two large panels bearing the word "Alleluia." Finally, when you kneel at the Communion rail, you see a ribbon running through the banner, beginning at the top, moving to the bottom and returning to the top once again. A ribbon of praise.

Exploring the Scriptures

In Revelation, the apostle John records a vision of heaven, where angels join their voices in song before the throne of God. Read Rev. 5:11–12.

- Why do the angels call Jesus the Lamb? Compare John 1:29 and Exodus 12.
- Why is this Lamb's death of such great value to the angels? See Luke 15:1–7.

Moving outward from this angelic song, we notice that it is part of a much larger event of singing, as one song leads into another and that song leads into yet another song. Read Rev. 5:6–10, 13–14.

- Before the angels sing, the elders greet the presence of the risen Christ by remembering what He has done. What has Jesus done that the elders celebrate in song?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

John Julian (1839–1913), an Anglican priest, is best known not for his hymn writing but for his writing on hymns. During his lifetime, he published an extensive *Dictionary of Hymnology* that is still in use today. How fitting then that the one hymn by Julian in *LSB* is a hymn about singing.

With these banners, an artist created a vision of the Church. From the world, the Church can often look like an ordinary gathering of people, a plain piece of fabric. But when you enter into the congregation and participate in worship, you begin to see what God has done. God has gathered people from all parts of the world and woven them together in His Son, Jesus Christ. These people hear a song of praise that begins in heaven, comes to earth, where they join their voices and then returns to heaven once again.

What this artist did with fabric, this hymn does with words and music. It brings to our lips a song of heaven and teaches us to join the angels in praise.

- When artists paint visions of heaven, they usually picture angels singing. Why?
- When you think about the content of our singing in worship, could the angels join us in song? Why or why not?

- After the angels sing, all of creation joins the song of praise. Who does John tell us is singing and how does that help us understand the extent of Jesus' rule?
- How does this give deeper meaning to those times in worship when we sing "This Is the Feast"?

In John's vision, all creation joins in one eternal song, praising God for His saving work in Jesus, the one whose death and resurrection save us from our sin. Until the return of Christ, however, this contagious song is not being fully sung on earth. Read Rom. 8:18–25 to see how the apostle Paul describes creation's current song.

- What is the sound one hears from creation?
- Why is creation groaning rather than singing?

Julian wrote this hymn for the Sheffield Church Choirs Union Festival on April 16, 1883.

- What are some reasons churches have choir festivals?
- What are some reasons people go to these festivals?

- What reasons does Julian’s hymn offer for holding and participating in a choir festival?

The choir festival for which Julian wrote this hymn was held on the Monday following the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

- How does Julian’s hymn relate to the Church’s celebration of Easter?
- How does Julian’s hymn look forward to the Church’s upcoming celebration of the Ascension?

Text

Like the artist’s banner, Julian’s hymn begins with a song of praise sung eternally (“forever rings”) in heaven (st. 1). As you read the first stanza, notice how the words shift from describing something that happens in heaven (“The song of praise forever rings”) to inviting something to happen on earth (“To Him ... Be all the glory ... All thanks and praise”).

- What is the primary reason the angels give such praise to Jesus (cf. line 6 of vs. 1)?
- How do we join them in giving glory, thanks and praise to Jesus Christ in worship? In the world?

In the second stanza, this angelic song enters into the fallen world. The hymn contrasts the long period of prophetic

Making the Connection

This hymn is appointed for the Church’s celebration of St. Luke, the Evangelist. Luke records many of the songs of praise that people sang when God worked salvation in Jesus Christ in their midst. Those songs of praise are now included in our services of worship (the Magnificat, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis)

In Closing

While your congregation may not have the banner described in the opening of this study, you do have the work of faithful artists who have listened to the songs of angels and put the story of our world’s salvation in Jesus Christ into words for you to sing on earth. As the angels taught the shepherds to join in heaven’s praise (Luke 2:13–14 and 20), so too our hymns now teach us to join the angels as we raise our voices and sing back to heaven what has first been given to us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 810.

waiting with the sudden appearance of the angels teaching the shepherds to sing at the birth of Christ.

- How did Gen. 3:15 begin a long period of waiting for our “coming Lord”?
- The angels are messengers of God, bringing the good news of salvation to the shepherds. How did hearing that message make the shepherds messengers as well (cf. Luke 2:8–20)?

In the third stanza, the hymn teaches us to be messengers of the Good News as we sing of salvation in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

- Compare the first four lines of this stanza with the earliest Christian preaching of the Good News in Acts 2:22–24 and 32–33. How is preaching part of the Church’s song of praise?
- The stanza closes with a moment of anxious anticipation (“Lift up your heads”) sung by angels and humans. What do we await (cf. Rev. 21:1–8)?

In the fourth stanza, this heavenly song now rises from earth and returns to heaven, so that human voices join angelic choirs in a song of praise that never ends.

- How have you participated in that song this past week? Today?

and become our song as we praise God for what He is doing in Christ among us today.

- Read the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29–32) and share with one another a phrase from Simeon’s song that expresses your praise to God for what He has done for you and for others in the Lord’s Supper.

Prayer

God of majesty, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven, be with Your servants who make art and music for Your people that with joy we on earth may glimpse Your beauty. Bring us to the fulfillment of that hope of perfection that will be ours as we stand before Your unveiled glory; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (For church musicians and artists, *LSB*, p. 307).

From God Can Nothing Move Me

Lutheran Service Book 713 | study by John G. Fleischmann

Introduction

Worries. Cares. Fears. Life is full of them! Sometimes they distract us. Sometimes they may even paralyze us. Ever since sin came into the world they have been a part of every human life.

Our Lord Jesus made it very clear that we should not worry about anything (Matt. 6:31–34).

In this wonderful hymn from the pen of Ludwig Helmbold (1532–98), a lecturer at the University of Erfurt, in Erfurt, Germany, we are shown what it means to trust

the Lord and His promises especially when our worries and uncertain future take our eyes off the cross.

- Name some of your fears. What keeps you awake at night?
- How do these things distract you from trusting God's promises in Christ Jesus?
- Have the things about which you worry ever come to pass?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Psalm 73 the basis for this hymn.

- In this psalm, what does the Lord tell us will happen to all evil?
- What promise of hope is given?

This hymn is also based on the well-known and often-cited passage from Rom. 8:38–39. Read this section of Scripture.

- What are the things Paul mentions that cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?
- Are any of your worries left off of this list?

God's chosen, Israel, often wandered from the Lord. Because they did not obey God, God dealt severely with them. Yet, even in their exile, God gave them tremendous

hope. Read the Old Testament lesson for Proper 25B, Jer. 31:7–9.

- What restoration does God promise?
- How have you wandered and disobeyed God?
- How has the Lord restored you?
- How do we walk in His ways?

Read the Gospel for Proper 25B, Mark 10:46–52. The account speaks of Bartimaeus, a "blind beggar."

- What may have been some of Bartimaeus' worries?
- Who made his worries vanish?
- Martin Luther once said, "We are all beggars. We are saved by one who became a beggar." Who is it that makes our worries vanish? How?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written during the plague that struck Erfurt in 1563. Ludwig Helmbold wrote this hymn for the rector of the university and his wife, Pancratius and Regina Helbich. They fled the city to escape the deadly spreading disease. It was intended by Helmbold to give them strength on their journey.

- Name times when your future was uncertain.
- Have you ever had to leave your friends and start a new life elsewhere?
- How did God's Word help you at those times?

Text

The stanzas of this hymn unfold the wonderful assurance of God's abiding presence in our lives at all times. Stanza 1 begins with the surety that God will never leave us. It then speaks of what God does in our lives.

- What does it mean that He "gently will reprove me"?

See Heb. 12:6, 10.

- "He stretches out His hand" is a powerful biblical image. What are some biblical examples of this? What does God do each time this happens?

Stanza 2 speaks about losing those in life who were regarded as “trustworthy and sure.” This can mean those whom we love that are left behind when life takes a different course. It can also refer to those who betray us.

- In either case, what is true about God?
- What are the “chains that bind me”?
- How does one receive “peace ... within”?

Stanza 3 speaks of the providence of God. We don’t plan our lives — He does.

- Why is understanding this truth so important?
- How does God change “All sorrow into joy”?
- How does God’s love “still” us?

Stanza 4 assures us that God’s will is done each day in our lives.

- Read the Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer and its meaning in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 324). What is God’s will?

- What is the most important gift the Father gives us according to stanza 4?
- What is meant by “The bread of earth and heaven”?

Stanza 5 speaks about our worship of God — our response to His grace, love and mercy.

- What is meant by the word “vocation”?
- How is our worship eternal?

Stanza 6 speaks of suffering and assures us that our deliverance is in Jesus.

- What is meant by “That day of bliss divine”?
- How do we look forward to that day?

Stanza 7 is a doxological stanza, that is, it gives glory to the Holy Trinity. It also sums up the hymn.

- What did the Father will?
- How did His Son fulfill this will?
- What does the Spirit give?
- What is our hope?

Making the Connection

We don’t know what happened to Dr. Helbich and his wife after they fled Erfurt. Their departure was a painful experience for them and those whom they left behind.

Likewise, we don’t know what life has in store for us this side of heaven. Without Christ the journey of life is dangerous and uncertain.

But we have been baptized into Christ! God’s promises stand. Nothing can separate us from His love.

As the biblical truths captured in this hymn brought the rector and his wife hope and encouragement, they speak the same to us.

- “The Lord my life arranges; / Who can His work destroy?” (st. 3). How, with the power of the Holy Spirit, can we reframe our thinking so that we understand this truth, causing worry to cease?
- “The bread of earth and heaven / Are by His kindness given” (st. 4). Why is the Eucharist so vitally important in our lives?
- “Praise God with acclamation / And in His gifts rejoice” (st. 5). What are the gifts of God that cause you to rejoice?

In Closing

So, what about those worries you shared at the beginning of this study? What assurance has God given you in the words of this hymn?

Worry and fear are sins. Jesus slew them on the cross. As we sing this hymn laden with the declarations of God’s grace and presence, we are moved to trust Him above all things, even our worries and fears.

It is through this life of uncertainty that “He leads us home to heaven. / O praise the Three in One” (st. 7).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 713. Let the words speak to you.

Prayer

O God, the helper of all who call on You, have mercy on us and give us eyes of faith to see Your Son that we may follow Him on the way that leads to eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 25B).

O Christ, Who Called the Twelve

Lutheran Service Book 856 | study by Paul F. Becker

Introduction

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 375–444) said this about the twelve apostles:

“These holy men became the pillar and mainstay of the truth, and Jesus said that he was sending them just as the Father had sent him. ... [I]n affirming that they are sent by him just as he was sent by the Father, Christ sums up in a few words the approach they themselves should take to their ministry. From what he said they would gather that it was their vocation to call sinners to repentance, to heal those who were sick whether in body or spirit, to seek in all their dealings never to do their own will but the will of him who sent them, and as far as possible to save the world by their teaching. Surely it is in all these

respects that we find his holy disciples striving to excel. To ascertain this is no great labor, a single reading of the Acts of the Apostles or of St. Paul’s writings is enough,” (crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/mission-of-the-12-apostles-st-cyril-of-alexandria).

Our hymn rehearses for us why Christ selected these twelve men to be His apostles, while challenging us to realize that a similar call has come to every believer.

- Discuss the various vocations of the Twelve before their call. Was there anything in their life before Christ that prepared or qualified them for their new work?
- If we also are being sent into the world as the Father sent Jesus, what sort of activities would characterize the life of the Church?

Exploring the Scriptures

At different times, the Lord Jesus sent His disciples out two by two: the twelve apostles (Matt. 10:1–15; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–6) and the seventy-two (Luke 10:1–12). His instructions fall into three broad categories: proclamation and signs of the kingdom, being prepared for persecutions and the exclusivity of answering Christ’s call.

Read Matt. 10:5–15.

- How did the apostles mirror Jesus’ compassion for the multitudes who “were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36)?
- How were the apostles’ needs provided for and what were they to expect in return for their ministry?
- What indicates the necessity for a radical dependence on the person and power of Jesus?

Read Matt. 10:16–31.

- Why does persecution come to Jesus’ disciples and what promises does He give to those who suffer for His name?
- What opportunities for the Gospel arise from times of persecution?

Read Matt. 10:32–42.

- What must Christians be willing to lose? What will they gain in return?
- Discuss how believers might either confess or deny their relationship with Christ in their daily vocation.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Herman G. Stuempfle (1923–2007) grew up in a Lutheran parsonage and served as a parish pastor, author, seminary president and teacher of preaching. But his lifelong love of hymns blossomed creatively only in his later years. He thought of writing hymn texts as another way to proclaim the Good News and said that his texts were “triggered by such-and-such a passage of Scripture.”

- After a lifetime of parish ministry, teaching and administration, becoming one of the great hymn writers of his time must have come as a bit of a surprise. How has God filled the later years of someone you know with unexpected blessings?

Stuempfle is among the most honored and respected hymn writers of the twentieth century. His collections are entitled *The Word Goes Forth: Hymns, Songs, and Carols* (1993),

Redeeming the Time: A Cycle of Song for the Christian Year (1997), *Awake Our Hearts to Praise: Hymns, Songs, and Carols* (2000) and *Wondrous Love Has Called Us* (2006). He has written an estimated 550 texts, more than half of them already published, including 15 in *LSB*.

- As you ponder the titles of his hymn collections, what theological themes can you deduce were of significance to Stuempfle?

Text

Stanzas 1–4 divide equally into a reminder of how Christ worked with His Twelve, and a request that He would work in much the same way with us:

1. Christ, who *called* — grant us to *hear*
2. Christ, who *taught* — *instruct* us now
3. Christ, who *led* — *lead* us along the ways
4. Christ, who *sent* — *send* us

For the Twelve, following Christ brings “ventures bold and new” (st. 1) in which they see “The ways of God revealed” (st. 2); ways that include miraculous feeding of multitudes but also proclaim God’s reign as they serve, suffer and teach “On roads they’d never trod” (st. 4).

Read Acts 5:17–20; 12:1–11.

Making the Connection

The hymn makes a strong connection in the final stanza between the Twelve and the saints and martyrs of every generation who share “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6).

In Closing

“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news, who publish peace and bring good news of salvation” (Gradual for St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles). By God’s grace, we also confess the faith of the Twelve: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen” (*LSB*, p. 323).

- Read aloud or sing together *LSB* 856.

- Imprisoned by both religious and secular rulers, the apostles experienced supernatural protection. How did this strategy of the evil one “backfire”?

Modern-day believers soon discover they are not exempt from the call “To risk security” (st. 1). The tragic wounds of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “Lead us along the ways / Where hope has nearly died.” These wounds can only be healed by going to the cross on that lonely hill “Where love is crucified” (st. 3). And yet, as another apostle wrote, “now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). These three have power to transcend timidity and sustain “Both life and ministry” (st. 4).

Read Rev. 7:13–17.

- The apostles speak of times of trials, testing by fire and great tribulation as something all believers share. Describe the promise that sustains us through these difficulties.

Read Eph. 2:19–22; Rev. 21:14.

- How does the apostolic foundation help explain the mystery not only of the Church’s survival despite persecution, but her spread to all tribes and nations, peoples and tongues?

- Name two or three things you share in common with saints of every generation that remind you that you belong to the crucified and risen King.

- Even though it is traditionally held that only one of the Twelve, St. John, died of natural causes in old age, what unique difference in their lives and their deaths continues to inspire us today?

Prayer

Almighty God, You chose Your servants Simon and Jude to be numbered among the glorious company of the apostles. As they were faithful and zealous in their mission, so may we with ardent devotion make known the love and mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for St. Simon and St. Jude, Apostles).

O God of Mercy, God of Might

Lutheran Service Book 852 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

“Deeds, not creeds!” Such has been the rallying cry for many Christians. A vibrant and full-bodied life of faith is the hope of such a cry. And, surely, the Christian life is one that is full of “deeds” that reflect a vital faith in the God of creation, redemption and sanctification, the blessed Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But an interest in “deeds,” the works of a faithful Christian, does not require driving a wedge between what is believed and how that belief is practiced. To the contrary,

living out the Christian faith receives its motivation and direction from the content of that faith — the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the promise of blessing from God now and into eternity.

That is the very hope expressed in this hymn, “O God of Mercy, God of Might.”

- Read James 1:22. How does James connect the content of faith with faithful actions? What “spin” does Paul put on the same truth in Rom. 2:13?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Old Testament Reading for this day is part of Moses’ instruction to Israel as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land. Read Deut. 6:1–9.

- Why had Israel been kept from entering the Promised Land for 40 years? Read Deut. 5:32–33, the words that just precede the Old Testament Reading. What command and promise were given by Moses? How does Moses then express both the content and the practice of Israel’s faith in 6:1–9?

Read the Epistle lesson for the day, Heb. 9:11–14.

- In verse 11, what are the “good things” that have come through Christ? What was it that brought these “good things”? What comfort comes from having a purified conscience (v. 14)? What do you think are the “dead

works” the writer speaks of in verse 14? What flows out of a pure conscience?

Read today’s Gospel from Mark 12:28–37. The connection to the Old Testament Reading is clear. Jesus is showing its fulfillment in Him and the New Testament.

- What might have been the motivation for the question asked in verse 28? Given the response of the scribe in verses 32–33, what do you think Jesus meant by His statement in verse 34?
- Jesus indicates to His audience that all of this needs to be taken to another level of understanding. What is Jesus telling them in verses 35–37 that they must come to see? What had often been Israel’s problem in the Old Testament, a problem also common in Jesus’ day? Read Acts 7:51 and 2 Cor. 3:12–18.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

English clergyman Godfrey Thring (1823–1903) was the author of this hymn. The text was first included in the *Church of England Hymnbook* of 1880. It was located in the Offertory section, and Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan, was cited as the basis for the hymn.

Besides being a clergyman, Thring was also a wealthy landholder who throughout his life gave generously from his own considerable means to support churches and schools. This hymn was a reflection of his devotion to living out his Christian faith by doing good with the blessings the Lord had given him.

- Read James 2:17. What do good works reveal? Ideally, what should our actions reveal about us? Apply Jesus’ words in Matt. 6:19–20 to this principle.

Text

Throughout this hymn, the author examines the relationship between justification and sanctification. His concern for good works is not found in an inadequate view of righteousness but in a clear understanding and confession of a Christ-centered, Word-bound faith.

Carefully read stanzas 1 and 2 of the hymn.

- In stanza 1, where is the strength gotten to live for God? Read 1 Cor. 6:20. What was the price that was paid

for you (1 Peter 1:18–19)? How do you understand the meaning of glorifying God “in your body”?

- In stanza 2, how will this world be able to truly live? Read 2 Cor. 5:14–15. Through faith in Christ, for whom do we now live? In light of this, thinking back to today’s Gospel, what is the relationship between the first and second great (important) commandments (Mark 12:29–31)?

Now read stanzas 3 and 4 of the hymn.

- What did Jesus “feel” for those purchased by His blood (Luke 23:34)? How are we to feel toward those same blood-bought souls, and how will that be revealed in us? The Parable of the Good Samaritan was the inspiration for this hymn. Revisit that parable in Luke 10:25–37. How does the Samaritan reflect the saving love of Christ? What is the lesson for you (v. 37)?

Making the Connection

Certainly, it goes without saying that having faith in Christ impacts the way we live. Being loved by God and saved by Him through faith in Jesus Christ is what constrains us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

- The *Book of Concord*, our Lutheran Confessions, serves us by teaching and confessing both the content of our faith and its proper application. Consider and discuss, as a group, the following quotation, attributed to Luther: “Faith and good works well agree and fit together; but

In Closing

“Deeds, not creeds!” That byword has a certain ring to it, to be sure. But when graded against Holy Scripture and the Church’s long and faithful confession of biblical truth, it doesn’t pass the test! Deeds — good works — flow from faith in Jesus Christ and the love for God and neighbor to which that faith gives and sustains life. “Creeds lead to deeds,” or, perhaps better put, faith in Christ leads to works faithful to God’s Word and to the good of our neighbor.

- Describe the powerful mission emphasis in stanza 4 of the hymn. Why is mission work a great good work? What is always the only motivation for seeking the lost?

Conclude your study of the hymn now by reading stanzas 5 and 6.

- Read Gal. 6:2, along with stanza 5 of the hymn. What burdens are you called on to bear? Christian vocation also comes into the picture here. How do Paul’s words in Galatians and stanza 5 of the hymn relate to our God-given roles as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, etc.? The context is somewhat different, but how does Col. 3:23 help us understand stanza 5?
- How does stanza 6 of the hymn describe the work of the Holy Spirit? Recall Luther’s explanation in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, p. 323). Of first importance, the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Christ through the Gospel. But what else does He do to enable us, as stanza 6 says, to “live in love”?

it is faith alone, without works, that lays hold of the blessing.’ [see LW 22:166] Yet it [faith] is never, ever, alone” (FC SD III 41).

- Our hymn is appointed for a Sunday very near the end of the Church Year. Describe why this hymn fits well at this point in the Church Year. Read Micah 6:8 and Matt. 25:40. Why are these texts appropriate summaries of the entire hymn, “O God of Mercy, God of Might”?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 852.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, cleanse us by the power of Your redeeming blood that in purity and peace we may worship and adore Your holy name; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 26B).

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Lutheran Service Book 656/657 | study by Marion Lars Hendrickson

Introduction

Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote a poem to serve as the preface to Joseph Klug’s *Geistliche Lieder*, revised and published in Wittenberg in 1543. In his poem, Luther wrote, in part, “Of all the joys that are on earth / Is none more dear nor higher worth, / Than what in my sweet songs is found / And instruments of various sound. / Where friends and comrades sing in tune, / All evil passions vanish soon... . The heart grows still when I am heard, / And opens to God’s Truth and Word.”

Luther’s own hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” has captured these very sentiments over the five centuries since he wrote the text and composed the tune.

- What are some of the feelings you have when you sing this hymn? How do the text and music together contribute to these feelings?
- Describe the image that comes to mind when you think of the word “fortress” in this hymn.

Exploring the Scriptures

Luther’s famous hymn is inspired by the words of Psalm 46 and the comfort Luther himself found in this psalm. Read Ps. 46:1–3.

- In the opening verse, the writer states his confidence. What do you think is the basis for his confidence? If your answer is “experience,” what sorts of experiences might they have been? If your answer is “faith,” what is the source of such faith?
- Verses 2–3 use parallel thoughts to emphasize a major point. If the writer has events in Israel’s history in mind, what might some of them be? Although written long before the New Testament era, what are some events in the Gospels or in Acts in which these words of Psalm 46 could come to mind?

Read Ps. 46:4–7.

- Jerusalem, Israel’s capital and the site of the temple, had springs of water supplying the city but no river flowing through it. What could the writer have in mind with verse 4? The prophets wrote of such a stream in Jerusalem. Read Joel 3:18 and Zech. 14:8. What do the prophets have

in mind? See also Rev. 22:1–8. In what ways are these images of the Holy Spirit? What does God’s Spirit have to do with the confidence within this psalm? Based on Ps. 46:4–7, what sort of fortress is God?

Read Ps. 46:8–11.

- In the third part of the psalm, the writer invites the reader to meditate, “Come, behold the works of the LORD.” In this psalm, the writer points to the end of war and conflict as an act of God. What are some other possible “acts of God” on which a person could meditate beneficially?
- Verse 10 suggests the outcome of such meditation. Do you agree? Are the words of verse 10 words of fear or of praise? Or both? Why? To whom is God saying, “Be still” — the noisy world or the person of faith in the noisy world? Why? Read Mark 4:35–41. Notice any similarities?
- The final verse repeats the theme. After all has been said, what sort of fortress is God?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

While Luther’s hymn has been employed in triumphal ways — the Swedish Lutheran king Gustavus Adolphus made his army sing this hymn before the Battle of Leipzig in 1631; the 19th-century German literary figure Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) called it the Marseillaise of the Reformation — Luther himself called it a hymn of comfort. In the period 1527–31, when the hymn began to appear in a number of hymnals, Luther was surrounded by troubles. In 1527, 10 years had passed since Luther posted his 95 Theses in

Wittenberg. During this time and after, he was buffeted by theological and political storms. His own life was in danger from the empire, from Rome and from outbreaks of the plague. The darkness of depression often closed in on him.

- What are some major cataclysms of the present day that could send a person to seek the comfort expressed in Luther’s hymn?
- What sort of personal troubles — physical, emotional, spiritual — could also find comfort in this hymn?

Whenever Luther's world would "roar and foam" like the waters in Ps. 46:3, he would invite his friends to join him in singing this hymn. In 1530 at Coburg, while awaiting the outcome of the Diet of Augsburg, Luther sang his hymn often, perhaps daily.

- What is the comfort in the phrase "He's by our side" (*LSB* 656:4)?
- Luther mentions "weapons of the Spirit" (*LSB* 657:4). What might these be?
- What phrases in the hymn are helpful when a person's troubles are of long duration or an end to them is not in sight?
- What difference does it make, do you think, singing the hymn rather than simply reading the text?

Text

While Luther found inspiration for his hymn in the words of Psalm 46, he did not confine himself to that text alone. Read Rev. 19:11–16, where St. John sees a vision of a conquering rider on a white horse, who "in righteousness ... judges and makes war" (v. 11).

- According to stanza 2 of the hymn, who is this rider?
- What other clues to the rider's identity do you find in Rev. 19:11–16?
- Although the imagery of warfare is violent in this text, how does the rider's identity interpret that violence? Hint: Think about the crucifixion of Jesus.

Making the Connection

In the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his writings, Luther wrote, "I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. ... This is the way taught by holy King David ... in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio* [prayer], *Meditatio* [meditation], *Tentatio* [affliction, trial]" (AE 34:285).

- In what ways is Luther's hymn a prayer? What is it asking? What hope does it express?

In Closing

As Luther said in his hymnal preface for Klug's *Geistliche Lieder*, where people of faith sing hymns, there is joy, "all evil passions vanish soon" and hearts are stilled and open to God's Word.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 656 or 657.

Read Eph. 6:10–17. In this epistle, St. Paul uses the imagery of a Roman soldier.

- How is such imagery helpful and comforting?
- How can military imagery be misused within the Church?

For Martin Luther, the devil was no fictitious figure, but very real and troublesome. Read stanza 3 of the hymn.

- How is the devil portrayed?
- Luther writes in *LSB* 656:3, "This world's prince may still / Scowl fierce as he will." What do you think Luther means by "still"? Jesus' crucifixion is judgment upon Satan. What does this mean for us who live in the world?

Read Rom. 8:31–39. St. Paul's answer to his list of questions is verse 37: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

- As the Small Catechism asks, what does this mean?
- Is this an answer based upon experience or on faith?
- Must a Christian have experiences similar to those listed by the apostle in this passage to express the same confidence? Why? Why not?
- If "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39) does not eliminate all of our troubles, what does it do? What sort of fortress does this make of God?

- Luther sang this hymn often. What is gained by the repetition? Does singing the text make a difference for meditation?
- Do you think Martin Luther would have expressed the confidence of the Gospel as boldly and forcefully as he did if he had not endured the troubles he faced? How have your own troubles thrown you back onto the promises of God in Christ?

Prayer

Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Reformation Day).

Salvation unto Us Has Come

Lutheran Service Book 555 | study by Christopher I. Thoma

Introduction

If you take a test and fail it because you didn't study, do you deserve an A? If you studied all week and memorized all of the necessary information and answered all of the questions correctly on the test, do you deserve an A? These are not difficult questions to answer because it is natural for man to play by the rule which says quite simply, "You get what you deserve."

Today's hymn, like the Gospel theme it supports, gets this rule a little mixed up. In fact, it turns it around completely.

- What do you believe to be the focus of the hymn?
- In your opinion, what is a "good work"? Read Article IV of the Augsburg Confession:

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Matt. 20:1–16. In this Gospel Reading, Jesus makes it clear that God's fairness is different from the fairness of man. He tells us that the reward of heaven is not based on what we do; rather, God gives to us something other than what we deserve.

- After working all day, how would it make you feel if you received the same amount of pay as someone who worked for only an hour?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Paul Speratus (1484–1551), a colleague of Luther and a significant contributor to the efforts of the Reformation, fashioned this hymn from the gut-wrenching threads of experience. Speratus was an ordained preacher who was expelled from several cities for his evangelical preaching. He was excommunicated for preaching salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and was eventually arrested, imprisoned and condemned to death. He did manage to escape his captors, and in this freedom was used by the Lord to great ends.

- During Speratus' time, what were the widely held views regarding good works? What role did monasticism play in this?
- How might the title of this hymn reflect the situation of the Reformation and the feelings of those hearing the pure Gospel through men like Luther and Paul Speratus?

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5]). (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. [CPH, 2006], 33).

- What light does this quotation shed on your understanding of good works in the Christian life?
- Remember that Jesus tells us that this parable represents the kingdom of heaven. With this in mind, what do we learn about the generosity of God?
- Read Is. 64:6. If we were to demand from God what we deserve because of our acts, what would we receive?
- Read Eph. 2:8–9. Salvation is referred to as what in this text?

Text

The language and tune of this hymn are borne along with what is seemingly a sigh of blissful relief. There is so much joy, it appears that Speratus cannot stop writing stanzas, and so we are given a hymn with ten stanzas of great substance. Let's consider a few of these stanzas.

Stanza 1 does a wonderful job of telling the reader the purpose of the joyful hymn to follow. Stanzas 2–4 drop us into the dirty reality of the Law's requirement, our sinful condition, and our helpless standing against it.

- According to stanza 1, for whom did Christ die?
- Who else might have been considered as an advocate and/or redeemer (which is contrary to the Christian faith) by the people and Church of Speratus' time? Which statements in stanza 1 make Christ's role in the Church abundantly clear?
- What is the stance of stanza 2 toward those who would seek to purify themselves by monastic living? Describe in your own words the burden of the Law to sinners

(particularly those who believe they must do good works to get to heaven). Is there certainty of salvation in this?

- Read Rom. 3:10–20. How does this text shed light on stanzas 2–4?

Stanza 5 is a significant turning point in the text of the hymn, setting the stage for the Christian to sing the remaining stanzas with confidence and certainty.

- Who is the focus of stanzas 2–4? Who is absent in stanzas 2–4 and introduced as the focal point in stanza 5?
- With this introduction, how is the direction of the hymn changed? The spirit of its tune? Christian certainty?

The remaining stanzas (6–10) reintroduce the Church to familiar terms.

- Read again the text of Eph. 2:8–10. What ancient and yet radically new theology is presented here?

Making the Connection

Reflect on the parable in Matt. 20:1–16. Perhaps we often grumble to the Lord as the workers grumbled to the landowner.

In Closing

“Salvation unto Us Has Come” seeks to reveal a right understanding of God’s Law, and it refreshes and strengthens the sin- and guilt-wearied heart with the Gospel. Ultimately, it reveals that this Gospel message truly is “foolishness” and a “stumbling block” as it flies in the face of the human understanding that “you get what you deserve.”

By Christ’s life, death and resurrection we are spared from what we deserve. In fact, the Innocent pays for the guilty, and the guilty are declared free. By the power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, faith and the merits of Christ’s innocence are given to us. What a joyful declaration

- Consider the following terms in the remaining stanzas: Atonement, baptized, ransom, the cross, trust, peace, justify. How does “saved by grace through faith in Christ” theology change their substance? (For example, Baptism as taught in the Roman Catholic Church removes only original sin. Actual sin remains.)

- Look for and discuss other words.

The hymn ends with a Trinitarian conclusion.

- Consider the First through Third Articles of the Apostles’ Creed and their meanings in the Small Catechism (*LSB*, 322–23). In his explanations, how does Luther make clear God’s redemptive plan in Christ?

- Read John 14:8–11, 23–28, and 15:26. How do these texts reflect upon not only stanza 10 but the entire hymn?

- Why is it this way for us?

- Read Luke 15:3–7. What do these words reveal to us about others? About ourselves?

of justification for the believing heart, a heart now strengthened to cling to the Lord and not to self.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 555.

Prayer

Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 20A).

For All the Saints

Lutheran Service Book 677 | study by Shawn L. Kumm

Introduction

“Saints alive!” someone exclaimed in surprise. Yes, indeed, saints alive. Saints alive here on earth; saints alive also in heaven. Certainly the people of God believe that saints are alive!

All Saints’ Day, which falls on the first day of November, stirs up all kinds of thoughts, memories and ideas about saints.

- What are some common thoughts people have when they hear the word “saint?”

Exploring the Scriptures

Hebrews 12:1–3 is the chief Scripture upon which this hymn is based, but before you read these verses, scan the New Testament list of saints in Hebrews 11.

- Which words are repeated throughout this chapter?

As is true of the people in the lists above, these saints also lived in a tension. That tension is described by the Latin phrase *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously justified (saint) and sinner.

Exploring the Hymn

Background

William Walsham How (1823–97) was born into a solicitor’s family and grew up in the historic market town of Shrewsbury, England. He spent his years of ministry in rural areas and the impoverished East End of London. In such challenging places How became known as the “children’s bishop.” This title of endearment reflected his great love and attention shown to an often-overlooked group of God’s kingdom. His published works include sermons, poetic verse and a still used volume on Holy Communion. How’s most well-known work, is the hymn “For All the Saints.”

- If you were to write a hymn about saints, what important points would you need to include? Which particular Bible passage would you want to use as the hymn’s foundation?

Originally this hymn was eleven stanzas long, but the three stanzas which reflected the ancient *Te Deum* are traditionally omitted. The remaining eight stanzas of “For All the Saints” give to the worshiper a well-developed theology of both the Church Triumphant, which is comprised of the

Turn to page xi in the front of *Lutheran Service Book*. Here is a list of the saints associated with the life of Christ and the time of the apostles.

- What do we learn about the lives of these saints from the letters “R” and “W” beside their names?

Now turn to pages xii–xiii. Here is a list of saints who span the beginning of time up to recent history.

- Scan through the lists on these two pages. Which names surprise you? Which names are unfamiliar?

- Choose two names from Hebrews 11 and discuss how each person was at the same time a sinner and a child of God.

Now read Heb. 12:1–3. The author of Hebrews sees us continuing in the same list of chapter 11.

- Who and what is the focus of faith?
- How is it the writer of Hebrews speaks as if your name is included in this list of believers?

saints now gathered into heaven, and the Church Militant, the saints still fighting here on earth.

Text

Though at first glance this hymn seems to begin with the saints of God, careful observation shows the hymn writer rightly begins by addressing the first two stanzas to the Lord Jesus.

- What comfort do you look forward to in enjoying rest from your labors? See Rev. 21:1–4 for a fuller description of rest.
- In stanza 2 Jesus is called “captain.” Read 1 Tim. 6:12. What is the battle about? See Eph. 2:1–3 for a description of the enemy. Why is it necessary to have Jesus as your captain?

Stanzas 3 and 4 turn our focus from the saints who have gone before us to the saints here on earth and it is among the earthly saints that we are included.

- What caution do we need to keep when considering “the victor’s crown of gold”? Consider what Paul writes in 2 Tim. 2:1–5.
- Why do we “feebly struggle”? In what ways do you need help? Turn to Is. 35:3–4 and rejoice in God’s promises to you.

Stanza 5 speaks of the earthly fight of faith as “fierce” and “the warfare” as “long.”

- What makes you weary as you follow your captain, Jesus?

- What are the things of God that embolden and strengthen the saints here on earth? On what basis can St. Paul say what he does in 2 Tim. 4:7?

Stanzas 6–8 draw our eyes to the same rest that began the hymn. The setting of the sun on the lives of those who have died in Jesus is contrasted with the rising of the dead, the resurrection to come, all following the “King of Glory.” Finally, in stanza 8, the “countless host” of heaven are seen gathered around the Triune God.

- What is it about “the calm of paradise” (st. 6) that appeals to you most?

Making the Connection

Read the appointed Gospel for this day, Matt. 5:1–12. Here Jesus describes your baptismal life centered in His suffering, His death, His resurrection and His ascension.

- At which points does this hymn connect with the Beatitudes? In what ways do these both sing and speak of the same realities?

- The important distinction is made that we do not pray *to* the saints nor do we pray *for* the saints, but we do *sing* with the saints and our prayers are joined with theirs. Especially on All Saints’ Day do we also *give thanks for* the saints. For examples see *LSB*, pages 250–251.

In Closing

“Our churches teach that the history of saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling. ... [T]he Scriptures do not teach that we are to call on the saints or to ask the saints for help. Scripture sets before us the one Christ as the Mediator, Atoning Sacrifice, High Priest, and Intercessor [1 Timothy 2:5–6]” (AC XXI 1–2, p. 44).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 677.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for All Saints’ Day).

Lord of All Hopefulness

Lutheran Service Book 738 | study by Paul Robert Sauer

Introduction

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535–475 B.C.) famously remarked, “You can’t step into the same river twice.” Or to put it in other terms, “Change seems to be the only thing that doesn’t change.”

Today’s hymn addresses the changes that occur for the believer throughout the believer’s day but also throughout life. And yet amidst the changes, one who is changeless in His love walks with the believer throughout the diversity of each day and, indeed, all of life’s stages.

Exploring the Scriptures

The Psalms, like much of our modern hymnody, often speak to both the physical and spiritual needs of the believer.

Read Ps. 55:16–17.

- In verse 17, at what times of the day does the psalmist call on God? Is there ever a time when it is not appropriate to call on God?
- The author of Psalm 55 utters “complaint and moan.” Is it appropriate to complain to God?

Honest need and honest frustration about life are common expressions of the psalmists. Read Ps. 55:22–23.

- Who sustains the righteous in times of trouble?
- In a world that often seems unfair, where does true righteousness and justice come from?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Jan Struther (1901–53) rose to prominence as a secular poet and the author of the novel *Mrs. Miniver*. In 1925, she was asked by an Anglican priest who lived next door to her and who knew of her fame as a budding young poet to compose hymn texts for a hymnal that would become *Songs of Praise* (1931). Despite being herself an agnostic, much of her fame today derives from her contribution to that hymn collection, of which “Lord of All Hopefulness” is the best-known hymn.

- Does knowing that Struther was an agnostic change your view of this hymn? Can God speak through non-believers? See Num. 23:5–12.

- How has your relationship with God changed throughout your life? Are there high points or low points? What, if anything, has stayed constant?
- Often our needs in life change as we pass through life’s stages: childhood, adulthood, our last years. Does the way that God speaks to His people change to meet our changing needs? Does the content of God’s message change?

In the Epistle for today, Heb. 9:24–28, Jesus is described as a high priest who appears “in the presence of God on our behalf,” to put away the sins of the people.

- How does verse 28 describe the Second Coming of Jesus? What does it mean to be “saved”?

In the Gospel for today, Mark 12:38–44, Jesus warns against those who devour widows’ houses, and He describes a pious widow who gives all that she has in offering to God.

- What does it mean to bring an offering to God? Does offering to God only happen at church?
- Is offering merely the money we bring? In what ways can we “devour ourselves” (i.e., offer to God our whole selves)?

Text

This hymn uses the form of traditional Christian collect prayers to present four stanzas, each of which is a prayer for a period of the day — morning, noon, evening and end of day. While the words speak about an actual day, the imagery also speaks to the believer’s journey through life — as a child, a young adult, an adult and at life’s end — and the presence of God throughout those different periods.

- What kind of forms can prayer take? Does prayer have to be spoken or can it be sung?
- Do you pray using different forms? Do you have a favorite form for praying? What about it do you like?

Stanza 2 describes God as being “skilled at the plane and the lathe,” a reference to Jesus being the adopted son of the carpenter Joseph. Read 2 Thess. 3:6–13.

- What does St. Paul say about work and idleness? Is busyness the same as work?
- What is your greatest temptation to idleness? Who, according to the closing petition of stanza 2, provides strength in our hearts for the day’s work?

Stanza 3 speaks of a welcome home after the day’s work. Read Luke 10:8–9.

- Is the hospitality that Christians extend to one another simply about being “nice”?

Making the Connection

This hymn prays for the gifts that God provides to His people throughout life’s stages. Luther describes it this way in his explanation to the First Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism: “He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life” (*LSB*, p. 322).

In Closing

The Small Catechism provides both a prayer to begin the morning and a prayer to close the day. Time itself is consecrated to the God who watches over us and is present with us each moment of each day of our whole life. The Morning Prayer concludes with the direction: “Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn, like that of the Ten Commandments, or whatever your devotion may suggest.” The Evening Prayer concludes: “Then go to sleep at once

- Is it always possible to love unconditionally? What obstacles get in the way of our love? Where does stanza 3 say that our love for neighbor comes from?

The hymn concludes with an emphasis on “gentleness,” “calm,” “contentment,” “balm” and a prayer for peace at the day’s end and life’s end as an antidote to the maladies of life’s end. Even with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, Christians oftentimes still struggle with death — the fear of the unknown, the fear of frailty and loneliness.

- Where do you go to hear the “voice” of God that provides contentment? Where do you go to experience the real “presence” of God that provides balm?
- What is real peace? Can peace be found even in the midst of trials of body, mind and spirit?

- How does this hymn’s description of God help to provide meaning to the ordinary tasks and moments of our everyday life?
- Does your heart always need the same thing, or are there times when it is in need of extra “bliss” or “strength” or “love” or “peace”?

and in good cheer” (*LSB*, p. 327). Go in the joyful and cheerful knowledge that God Himself goes with us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 738.

Prayer

Pray together either the Morning Prayer or the Evening Prayer (*LSB*, p. 327).

The Day Is Surely Drawing Near

Lutheran Service Book 508 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

Whereas the Last Sunday of the Church Year will proclaim and celebrate the promised victory of eternal life for all who by faith confessed Jesus as their Savior, this next-to-last Sunday sounds a solemn warning to all who have not yet come to that faith and confession. Our hymn of the day describes the Last Day both as something to be feared for those who have neglected or rejected God's invitation of grace, and as a treasured promise and goal for those who

wait and pray in confident faith. In a day when so many are ignorant of or even reject God's plan revealed in His Word, the Bible, we point to Jesus who spoke plainly regarding His return, the Day of Judgment, and the deliverance available to all by faith in Him.

- How do you imagine most people think about the end of the world or the end of their lives? Or do they think about it at all? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Matt. 25:31–46.

Angels show up at every major step forward in God's plan of salvation. Here they will accompany the return of Jesus on the Last Day as the last major step in God's plan. "All the nations" will be gathered, that is, everyone who ever lived will be raised with their bodies. Then "he will separate people one from another ... the sheep from the goats" (v. 32).

- When does "the judgment" actually happen? See 2 Cor. 6:2.

The proceedings begin with the sheep, the righteous. A summary of their good works is listed.

- How is this not to be interpreted as salvation by works? Why are the works mentioned? Hint, see James 2:18, 22, 26.
- What detail here shows that the good works of a Christian's active faith are almost automatic and certainly not kept record of by the Christian?

To the "goats" (unbelievers) on His left the King says, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). Sin results in separation. Unrepented sin results in eternal separation. What makes the judgment of hell most agonizing and fearful is that "the eternal fire" was not prepared for people to be there in the first place; a detail that supports the universal

claim of John 3:16, that God so loved the whole world, not just part of it.

Next, read 1 Thess. 4:13–18.

The question was, "When the Lord returns, when will the dead be raised, and will we who are still alive have to die first in order to be raised?" St. Paul uses the word "sleep" to describe the death of a Christian. His goal is "that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (v. 13). "Encourage one another with these words" (v. 18).

If you have a King James Bible (KJV), you need to know that the word "prevent" in v. 15 is a literal translation of the Latin *praevenio*. Whereas today the word prevent means to stop something, this word originally meant to precede, or go before. This is how modern translations have it. The point is that we who are alive when the Lord returns will not precede, or go before, those who have fallen asleep. It all happens at once, in the "twinkling of an eye." The dead are raised first, then we who are alive will be changed (1 Cor. 15:52).

- Describe what it means to grieve the death of a loved one but not "as others do who have no hope."
- Do you think the warning of hell and eternal punishment for unbelievers is necessary?
- Do you think the return of Christ is coming soon? See Rev. 22:7, 12, 20.
- What is the difference between the day of the death of a Christian and the Last Day?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn appeared first as an anonymous text in 1565. In 1586, however, a Lutheran pastor, Bartholomäus Ringwaldt (1532–99), revised it, calling it "a hymn about Judgment Day." It quickly became increasingly popular and sung

frequently, especially as the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) caused many to think that the Last Day was presently at hand.

- Is church attendance larger during wartime or peacetime? Why?

- What causes people these days to think that the world is coming to an end?

Text

The original seven stanzas have been restored to *LSB*. Only four of the seven stanzas, however, appeared in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and in *Lutheran Worship* (1982), namely, stanzas 1, 2, 6 and 7.

- What do the formerly missing stanzas (3–5) have in common?
- Why do you think these stanzas were removed in the 1978 and 1982 hymnals?

In stanza 1, that “fright shall banish idle mirth” almost goes without saying as the very “powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:26). No one will be ignorant of what is happening when the Lord returns (1 Thess. 4:13–18; Mark 14:62; Matt. 16:27; Rev. 1:7).

Stanza 2 begins with the sounding of “the final trumpet,” the sound that accompanies the Lord’s return (Zech. 9:14; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). The resurrection of those who have died and the instant change of those who are still alive is described.

“The books” of stanza 3 refer to the record of human activity. See Matt. 25:31–46; Rev. 20:12–15; Dan. 7:9–10; Matt. 16:27; and Rev. 22:12.

- Will a person have to “wait and see” what the verdict will be? Why or why not?

Making the Connection

With its sobering imagery and words of warning for all who would ignore, neglect or reject God and His gracious plan of salvation, this hymn helps us sing with calm confidence in God’s promise of salvation by simple faith in Christ and reliance on His Word and grace. In this faith we remain vigilant and ready for our Lord’s return and the culmination of our deliverance from sin, the devil and death.

In Closing

With thanksgiving and faith in the whole story of God’s grace in Christ, which we have reviewed in the past liturgical year, we sing with confidence and joy of our final deliverance and hope of eternal life.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 508.

- What is the purpose of “the books”?

Stanza 4 is devastating Law describing the biblical truth for those who “scorned” the Lord and “despised His precious Word,” preferring “carnal pleasures” and “earthly treasures.” The “delivery” to Satan is described in Matt. 25:41 and Rev. 20:15.

- What “tool” or procedure does the Church have to call a Christian back from falling away and despising God’s Word? See Matt.18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–5; 2 Cor. 2:6–11.

Stanzas 5–7 spring from the Gospel. Stanza 5 describes the confidence of faith in the gift of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. For the Christian there is no more condemnation possible (Rom. 8:1–2) because of Jesus’ salvation (Heb. 2:14–15; Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 1:18–19; 2:24). Since Baptism, our names have been recorded in the Lamb’s “Book of Life” (Rev. 3:5; 20:12; Dan. 12:1).

The confidence of faith begins to turn to prayer in stanza 6, relying on Jesus’ promise to intercede for us before the Father’s throne (Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1; Is. 53:12; Luke 23:34; Heb. 9:24). We are saved by the “blood and merit” of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19) and numbered with “all His saints in that blest place” (Rev. 7:9–17) where “we shall see Him face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Finally, stanza 7 is a prayer for Jesus’ return and our endurance.

- Do you think the return of Christ and our final endurance should occupy our attention and our prayers more than it does?
- Our receiving the Lord’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar is a proclamation of His death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26). How does it also speak of His resurrection, ascension and coming again?

Prayer

O Lord, so rule and govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of the end of all things and the day of Your just judgment, we may be stirred up to holiness of living here and dwell with You forever hereafter; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Trinity).

Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending

Lutheran Service Book 336 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

Every now and then we hear of someone who claims to know when our Lord Jesus Christ is going to return. Though Jesus Himself says that the day and hour of His return is known only to the Father (Matt. 24:36), still there are those who, from time to time, insist that they know the unknowable. Of course, they are inevitably proven wrong. An interest on the part of the Christian in the return of Christ is, however, a healthy thing. Jesus encourages us to

give attention to the “signs of the times,” that is, to pay heed to the things going on around us in our world, for they are indicators and reminders that He will return “to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed).

- Would you like to know the precise day and hour of Jesus’ return? Why, or why not? Would knowing that day and time be beneficial for your faith, or might it actually be harmful?

Exploring the Scriptures

The Readings for Advent 2 are all focused, more or less, on the return of Christ at the end of the age, and help us better appreciate the text of our hymn. Read Mal. 4:1–6.

- How does the prophet describe the judgment that will come?
- What hope, however, does he hold out, in verse 2, for those who fear the Lord?

In the Epistle Reading, St. Paul speaks of a particular use of Holy Scripture, which, at that point in time, would have been the Old Testament. Read Rom. 15:4–7.

- According to the apostle, how are we now to use the Holy Scriptures? What is the nature of this encouragement, especially as we await the return of Christ?

- Note Paul’s emphasis on the harmony that is God’s gift to His waiting people. How does the remainder of the Epistle Reading, Rom. 15:8–13, illustrate that harmony? What role is played by the creeds of the Church in building and illustrating that harmony, and why is that important as we await the Lord’s return?

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus clearly describes the days that precede His return. Read Luke 21:25–36.

- There is both warning and promise in this reading from Luke. Describe each. Where do you see examples, especially of the warnings and dangers, in our world today?
- What is the clear hope given to Christians in these words?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The text of this hymn, as it finally reaches us in *LSB*, has a somewhat complex history. The author, Charles Wesley (1707–1788), began with a hymn text by John Cennick (1718–1755), but then all but rewrote Cennick’s hymn. After Wesley’s publication of his text in 1758, Martin Madan (1726–1790), a London hospital founder and chaplain, further edited Wesley’s text, restoring some of Cennick’s original work. However, the text, as we have it in *LSB*, is largely that of Wesley, with a few important alterations.

Wesley was a prolific author of hymn texts, producing over 6,000 of them. The majority of those texts are no longer heard, but some have become among the most popular hymn texts ever written, being used in hymnals of many Christian traditions. Wesley’s best hymns are rich in theology and warm in evangelical character.

- *LSB* contains several Wesley texts. Take a quick look at a few of them: 338, 380, 457 and 469. Ask the following questions about each: (1) How is the Gospel explicitly portrayed? and (2) How is Christian hope illustrated?

Text

In keeping with the theme of Advent 2 in the One-Year Lectionary, the entire focus of the hymn is on the return of Christ at the end of the age.

- While the Advent season, as well as the close of the Church Year, is the time when the return of Christ is in focus, why is this theme important to us each day of our lives?
- In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” In the Large Catechism, Luther says about the Second Petition, “From this you see that we do not pray here for a crust of

bread or a temporal, perishable good. Instead, we pray for an eternal inestimable treasure and everything that God Himself possesses” (LC III 55). What do you think God has in store for us on that day when Jesus returns?

Stanzas 1 and 2 draw on references, fittingly, from the Book of Revelation. Read Rev. 1:7 and 11:15.

- Is Christ’s return going to be isolated to a particular place or group of people? How is the answer to this question a confirmation of what the hymn states in stanza 2? While this fact may fill the heart of the unbeliever with terror, what do these words say to you as a Christian, especially in light of Rev. 11:15?
- Read 1 Peter 3:18. What comfort does this verse give you? What is your hope when Christ when returns?

Stanza 3 describes what our Savior endured that we might be His redeemed, beloved children, who look forward, with great anticipation, to His return.

- What are the “tokens of His passion?” The disciple Thomas often gets a “bad rap” for wanting to see and

touch the Savior’s holy wounds. But what will we see upon our Savior’s return? What is the significance of the fact that, even in eternity, Jesus will still bear “those glorious scars”?

Stanza 4 tells us that, when Jesus returns, we will worship like we have never worshiped before! Again, allusions to Revelation are prominent in the hymn text. Read Rev. 5:6–14 and 7:9–12.

- Describe the worship of heaven that is revealed to St. John. Do you notice any elements of the church’s liturgy with which you are familiar? Note the prominence of “Amen.” Recall Luther’s explanation of the “Amen” in the Small Catechism. Why is “Amen” so fitting in describing the worship that will take place on the day of our Savior’s glorious return?
- Read St. Paul’s perspective on that great day in Phil. 2:9–11. As we prepare for Jesus’ return in glory, what do the apostle’s words in verses 9 and 10 teach us about what the Church’s worship on earth now is to be like?

Making the Connection

With all the trouble our world faces at present, this hymn speaks of that day when all trouble will cease, and the glorious, eternal reign of Christ will begin. And so, the message of this hymn really transcends its use in the season of Advent.

- How might this hymn serve, especially, the mission effort of the Church, its reach into the world of unbelief? What

other times during the Church Year, or events in the Christian life, would this hymn well serve?

- In a world that offers little real peace, how does this hymn help give us the peaceful confidence that the Collect for Peace in the Office of Vespers (*LSB*, 233) describes?

In Closing

Contrary to those who wish to look into the mind of the Lord and find the day and hour of Christ’s return, Christians have no such need. We have the sure and certain promise of God that, when the appointed day and hour arrives, our Lord Jesus Christ will return. He will return visibly, and He will return to redeem His faithful children, once and for all, from this world of sin and sorrow. This great hymn of the Church, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” helps us both to confess and to be ready for that day!

- Sing or read together *LSB* 336, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending.”

Prayer

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Advent 2).