

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?
- How are the two related?

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?

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?

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- 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).