

Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands

Lutheran Service Book 458 | study by Larry A. Peters

Introduction

Could it be that this hymn is more valued in theory than in usage? It was Luther's favorite of all his hymn texts, but it is not quite a favorite among Lutherans. That is too bad. We are poorer for not singing this hymn as often as we might. It was probably based on the hymn that follows it in *LSB*, "Christ Is Arisen."

Exploring the Scriptures

Two Scripture texts are pivotal to this hymn. One is Ex. 12:7–14, about the Passover lamb. Look at Exodus and compare the Passover lamb to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

- Does the blood of this lamb anticipate the blood of Christ that cleanses us from all sin?
- Luther returns to this imagery in the final stanza. How is the Lord's Supper the successor to and the fulfillment of the Passover? What does the Lord's Supper anticipate?

The other text deeply intertwined with Luther's hymn is the historic Epistle for Easter, 1 Cor. 5:6–8. This also focuses on Christ, our Passover lamb, who has removed the old leaven of sin and made us new.

- Is Christ a symbol of the Passover lamb, or is the Passover lamb a symbol of Christ?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Martin Luther (1483–1546) published this in 1524 in his Erfurt *Enchiridia*, and it has been called one of the greatest of his hymns, second only to "A Mighty Fortress." Luther referred to this hymn often, and it was also a favorite of J.S. Bach, whose first Easter cantata was based upon all seven stanzas.

The best hymns are concise statements of our faith, literally like a sung catechism. Luther had great respect for the original on which this is based, but he saw how to improve upon it by drawing more fully upon the rich and profound scriptural texts that describe Christ and His saving work.

- Without singing the stanzas, read them as a catechetical text. How does Luther describe Christ's work to save us?

- When was the last time you sang this hymn?
- Would you agree that this is a classic Easter text?
- Compare this to the hymn upon which it is loosely based. How might we call it an improvement?
- Is the number seven significant to this hymn?

- The great exchange of the old leaven of sin for the new life in Christ is a familiar theme of St. Paul. Note the contrast between enmity/malice and sincerity/truth. How is this brought about in our lives? How does repentance and forgiveness bring forth this new leaven in us?

Paul wrote to Timothy that Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:10). Though it appeared that death and hell swallowed up Christ, He swallowed these up in His mighty duel. So, Paul can ask: Death, where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory? (1 Cor. 15:54–55).

- Is death done? Has it been defeated?
- So, what has death become? Is death now something through which we pass with Christ to our own joyful resurrection to eternal life? Do we believe this?

- Did you notice how many biblical references Luther compacted into each line? See how many you can find and source in Scripture.

Text

One of the characteristics of good hymnody is that it weaves a rich fabric of texts and imagery into one concise text. Note how Luther unfolds the Easter story.

- Stanza 1 begins with Christ in death's bands. Are these the linen burial bands or the prison bands that have held us? Or both?
- "Therefore" is no small word. Because of what Christ has done, we have cause to sing. What song does faith sing?
- "Loud songs of alleluia": Why do we put away the alleluia during Lent, and what does it mean to sing it again during the Easter season?

In the second stanza, Luther focuses on sin's terrible effects. We were ruined, unable to repair sin's damage or death, imprisoned and held captive. Note the contrast between the condition of the sons of man and the Son of Man (Christ). Read Heb. 2:17.

- How desperate is mankind for redemption?
- How did Christ fulfill all righteousness as well as suffer all punishment in our place?

The third stanza sets the stage for a great battle between Christ and our enemies of sin and death. Death wore the crown of victory until Christ took it. Now death is left empty and impotent.

- Note how vividly Luther describes Christ's victory. He who once wore the pallor of death now leaves death itself pale and wounded. Do we believe this? Do we live as though death has died?

The fourth stanza mirrors the wording of "Christians, to the Paschal Victim" (*LSB* 460). When life and death did battle, life won.

- "Holy Scripture plainly saith": Is this what Scripture plainly says? Is this the core and center of our Gospel proclamation? Read Luke 24:44–48. Should it be?

Making the Connection

Sometimes we think of an empty cross as a sign of the resurrection or a crucifix as a sign of Christ's death. The truth is that both crosses point to the same truth: to Jesus Christ crucified and risen. There is no other Gospel, and there is no Gospel apart from this truth. Luther does not merely focus on the empty tomb, but upon the cosmic battle for us and our salvation that Christ fought. He was faithful unto death so that we might wear His crown of life.

Passover embodied this hope of deliverance from enemies and redemption of slaves. Easter and the Eucharist now embody this hope for us. Here we see the Paschal Lamb who was slain. Here we are covered by the blood of the

In Closing

Seven is a number that brings to mind the idea of completeness. In seven stanzas of seven lines, each with seven syllables, Luther lays before us Christ's completed work of redemption as our cause for hope, our source of joy and our witness in song. It is a magnificent text that effortlessly ties together so many things we often leave separate or disjointed. Let us keep the feast to which the Lord invites us!

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 458.

- Christ's death swallowed up death. This is the promise of Is. 25:8 fulfilled in Christ. Though our eyes do not yet see this clearly, we see it by _____. This is the tension in which we live — eyes and faith.

The fifth stanza shows how the Passover is fulfilled in Christ. See how the final stanza carries the same idea.

- How is Easter the fulfillment of Passover? How is Holy Communion our Christian Passover?
- Note how the tree of the cross and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are contrasted. As the Preface for Good Friday says, "the serpent who overcame by the tree of the garden might likewise by the tree of the cross be overcome." Is this why we have a cross/crucifix ever before us?

The sixth stanza ties the Old Testament idea of keeping the feast to our Easter festival. Christ is the Sun of Righteousness who warms our hearts and shines with the brightness of eternal day to end sin's night.

- How does the Church Year help us to keep Christ and His death and resurrection ever before us?

covenant. Here we feast upon Christ's flesh and blood. Here Christ imparts to us the fruits of His death and resurrection. We keep the faith by keeping the festival, sharing the story of our redemption, and rejoicing in what Christ has accomplished for us.

- Does this hymn now sing differently because you have mined the depths of its words and witness?
- Can you see why Luther called it his favorite hymn text? Could it become a favorite of yours?
- Does this hymn explain the character of Lutheran hymnody that puts Christ and His story front and center?

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).