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.

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?

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).

- 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?

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.

- 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).