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 Sheffler use the language of the Old Testament hymnal in his own hymn?

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.

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 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?

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.

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).