# 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.

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?

## 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).

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?

## 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).

- 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?
- 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?

## 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 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?

## 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.

### 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).