

Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart

Lutheran Service Book 708 | study by Randy Wurschmidt

Introduction

As the young woman lies dying in her hospital bed, the pastor is urgently summoned. He brings with him his well-used *Pastoral Care Companion*; anticipating that death is imminent, he opens to the “Commendation of the Dying.” Prayers are prayed, psalms are chanted, Scriptures are read; after the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, he sings the *Nunc Dimittis*: “Lord, now You let Your servant go in peace...” Then he sings stanza 3 of this hymn: “Lord, let at last Thine angels come...” It is a beautiful and confident way for the Christian to face death, trusting in God’s promise

Exploring the Scriptures

Anyone who is paying attention knows that this life is far from perfect. There are disappointments and heartaches, illnesses and pain. “Change and decay in all around I see,” we sing in another favorite hymn of trust and hope (*LSB* 878:4). And of course, there is death.

Most people think of death as an unfortunate but normal part of life. There may be some vague thought of heaven (never hell!) for the nice people; for some, death means simply disintegration back into the earth and no more. But there is more; there is much more, for Jesus has promised to return on the Last Day and raise the dead.

It won’t be just the righteous that He raises, but all people, as we confess in the Nicene Creed: “I look for the

of the resurrection and in the hope of eternal life in heaven. This stanza is famously used as the final chorale in J.S. Bach’s *St. John Passion*, giving the Good Friday narrative an appropriate ending — not with our Lord dead on the cross, but with the open tomb and death defeated.

- Is a Christian’s death different from the death of an unbeliever? Why or why not?
- What is the benefit of the pastor being at the bedside of one who is dying?

resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come” (*LSB*, p. 191). The Athanasian Creed goes even further, stating, “And those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire” (*LSB*, p. 320), meaning that those who have rejected Jesus will experience weeping and gnashing of teeth in eternal damnation.

- Read 1 Cor. 15:12–28. When (or who) is the beginning of death and the end of death, according to verse 21? Why should this give us hope?
- Read Psalm 90. How should we consider this life in light of this psalm? Should we put our hope and trust in the things of our life now?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The text was written by Martin Schalling (1532–1608), a Lutheran pastor and theologian who was a disciple of the reformer Philipp Melancthon, author of the Augsburg Confession. Schalling lived during a time of intense religious strife, which reached even outside Germany and throughout Europe. As the Reformation moved forward, the Roman Catholics often fought back, countering with their own documents and creeds. At that time, Germany was composed of many small principalities and kingdoms. It was up to each individual ruler to decide on the religious confession of his territory, leading to many changes as rulers came and went. Unfortunately, these battles of words often spilled out into battles of swords, and many were killed in wars and power struggles during this time.

Even if we were without religious strife, death is still a universal problem in this life, and all Christians should be

able to confess the truths sung in this hymn, finding comfort in these words.

- What would be some of the challenges for a pastor in a time of ever-changing allegiances? Could you continue to confess the truth even if your job or your life depended on it?

Text

In the first stanza, we are reminded that earth’s pleasures are no match for eternal life in heaven, and that the most important thing for us is to be in the presence of God.

- Where does Jesus promise to be when we gather for the Divine Service each Sunday?

In the second stanza, we are reminded of the Creed, as you may have learned it from the Small Catechism. In the meaning of the First Article, Luther writes, “I believe that

God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them” (*LSB*, p. 322). We pray that the devil, the world and our own flesh would not betray us or lead us into temptation or doubt.

■ According to this stanza, how do we glorify God’s lavish grace? To whom is our own love directed?

Sing the third stanza now, if you have not already.

Here we have the heart and soul of this hymn. Jesus said, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world

and forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). All roads point to the end. The whole life of a Christian is one preparing for death. And in these words, we confess to what end we have held steadfast: “That these mine eyes with joy may see, / O Son of God, Thy glorious face, / My Savior and my fount of grace.”

■ Each stanza closes with the refrain, “Lord Jesus Christ...” Compare each of these and describe how, just from the last phrase, each stanza summarizes our life of faith.

Making the Connection

When the Pharisees tested Jesus, asking, “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” Jesus answered by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:36–40). This hymn sums up these commandments very well: We love God because He loved us first and gave His only begotten Son for the forgiveness of our sins; we love our neighbor because God has given us everything we need for this life and the next.

In Closing

“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” we confess in the meaning of the First Commandment (*LSB*, p. 321). As you know, this is easier said than done, because by nature we look to other gods. This is why we need to regularly hear the Word of God, why we need to regularly hear the words of absolution from our pastors, why we need to regularly receive Jesus’ body and blood: to ease our burdened consciences and to strengthen our faith in God and our fervent love for our neighbor. For God has promised salvation to you and baptized you into His life and death. He has assured you that as His sons and daughters, you will inherit eternal life with Him on account of Christ, who covers all your sins in His own righteousness. Therefore, sing

This we do when we share Jesus’ body and blood at the rail with fellow saints. We do this when we receive the forgiveness of sins promised from the cross and forgive those who trespass against us. We love our neighbors when we help them in time of need, pray for and with them, and comfort them with the beautiful hymns of our faith.

■ In times of distress, have you ever just sat down with your hymnal open and sung? Why or why not?

■ How does our own selfishness and sin keep us from facing death without fear?

this hymn with all boldness and confidence. Sing it now if you haven’t already. And sing it as you journey from this life into death and into life everlasting.

Prayer

Almighty, everlasting God, Your Son has assured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal death. Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit that our faith in Christ may increase daily and that we may hold fast to the hope that on the Last Day we shall be raised in glory to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen (Hope of eternal life in Christ, *LSB*, p. 313).