

O Christ, Our True and Only Light

Lutheran Service Book 839 | study by Allen D. Lunneberg

Introduction

This hymn by Johann Heermann (1585–1647) is the Hymn of the Day for all three years for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, as well as for Proper 9 (July 3–9) of year B. It is primarily associated with the famous call of Isaiah 60 (“Arise, shine, for your light has come”) as God’s beacon of salvation for all nations, as well as with the beginnings of Jesus’ earthly ministry, His choosing of the first disciples and especially His rejection at Nazareth. The hymn is a prayer for the mission of the Church, that the light of Christ

may enlighten and shine on all who are yet enslaved by the spiritual blindness of the fallen nature.

- How is Jesus “our true and only light”? Are there other false lights?
- What is the darkness that we pray Christ will enlighten and overcome?

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Is. 60:1–3. The gracious good news of salvation is announced as light shining in darkness. The darkness of spiritual blindness and death is described in the previous chapter. Read Is. 59:9–10. The fact that thick darkness covers the earth and all people emphasizes the universal fact of the fallen nature of all people. Sin and death are our lot until we are released and freed from their slavery by the gracious action of God. His salvation is as universal as our need, in that “nations” (60:3) shall come to the light.

- Define sin according to 1 John 3:4.
- Sin is not only wrong acts but also a condition. According to Eph. 2:3 we are sinners also by our very _____.
- How is sin described in the following passages? Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:11.
- What is the light the prophet speaks about? See Luke 2:32; John 1:9.

- Who is speaking and who is being spoken about in Luke 1:78–79? See John 1:6–8.

Read John 8:12. Jesus declares Himself to be the light of the world, and that those who follow Him will live in the light.

- How do the following passages describe the follower of Christ? Matt. 5:14; Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9.

Read Eph. 5:8–14. According to this passage we not only were *in* darkness, but *were* darkness; and now we not only walk *in* light but *are* “light in the Lord.” Read John 12:35–36.

- How does darkness and light describe us as sinners and saints in our daily life?
- What is the “fruit of light” (Eph. 5:9)?
- What are “the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11) that we cannot mention without shame?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Heermann wrote this hymn in the midst of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). But Heermann seems to be looking beyond the current disruption and destruction of peaceful daily life to the realm of people’s spiritual condition. We are told that the hymn is modeled on a prayer in a booklet by Philipp Kegel (Hamburg, 1592), a prayer for those who have never yet known Christ as well as those who may be misled by false teachers. Interestingly, it is doubtful that Heermann knew that Kegel’s prayer reflected one by a Jesuit priest seeking the return of misled Protestants! Heermann’s hymn and prayer sings from the light of

the truth of pure doctrine as contained in the Lutheran Confessions.

“Mission and Witness” is a main aspect of the Church’s work, especially as it is directly related to our Lord’s “final sign” to be fulfilled before His return: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

- Everyone agrees to the necessity of reaching out with the Gospel to the unchurched, to those who have never heard. To what extent do we agree, however, to reach out to those who are being misled by false teachers?

- What are some false religions or teachings today?
- Should these false teachings be addressed by the pastor in his sermons?

Text

Stanza 1 identifies Jesus Christ as Isaiah’s “light” (Is. 60:1). This is true of Christ according to both natures. We confess Him as the divine Son of God in the words of the Nicene Creed, “Light of Light, very God of very God,” and the incarnate Son, Jesus, says of Himself, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). It is He who “enlightens,” that is, reveals the truth to His disciples. See Luke 24:45.

The second stanza’s claim that they are “lost in error’s maze” or in “Some dark delusion” certainly may come to some people as a surprise.

- What is the difference between the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers and enlightens sinners and the Son of God who opens and enlightens minds?
- Aware of his sin, how did the prophet Isaiah describe his condition at his famous confrontation with Holy God, Is. 6:5?
- How is this spiritual lostness different from that referred to in the last phrase of the last stanza of *LSB* 700, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”?

Stanza 3 is our prayer for every sinner, that they be gently called to salvation, peace and rest.

Making the Connection

This hymn should, among other things, draw together the concerns for both the truth of sound doctrine and outreach to the lost. For it is only as we believe, teach and confess the truth that we have any power for reaching the lost with the glorious Gospel of salvation. There may be other ways and other messages that “reach” or draw people, but the question is always, to what end? If the issue is looked at as merely a question of “marketing,” one will certainly want to downplay the “negative” diagnosis of our audience as those who are lost, in darkness or in error. If, however, the issue is bringing people to repentance and saving faith, we need to

In Closing

Prayer

Almighty God, in Your kindness You cause the light of the Gospel to shine among us. By the working of Your Holy Spirit, help us to share the good news of Your salvation that all who hear it may rejoice in the gift of Your unending love; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Mission Observance).

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 839.

- With what “gentle” word do 1 Peter 2:25 and Is. 53:6 refer to people who do not know Christ?
- How does Matt. 11:28 suggest we should approach and invite unbelievers to Christ?
- According to Heb. 9:9–14, what is it that gives the conscience peace and rest?

Stanza 4 speaks of the “darkened” and “cold,” the “wand’rers,” and those who “walk apart.” This seems to identify those who are led astray by false teaching or doctrine. Those who “walk apart” are distinguished from others, that is, those who “walk together,” which is the definition of the word “synod,” walking the same road (of confession). We continue to pray and work for the unity of the Church across so-called “denominational” lines to agreement in the truth.

Stanza 5 speaks of the grand goal of the unity of the “*una sancta*,” the one holy Church of every time and place, at the final marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end.

- To what extent should ecumenism, or work for outward unity, insist on doctrinal agreement?
- Read John 10:16 and 1 Cor. 1:10. To what extent is the unity of the Church a reality?

face up to the truth of the spiritual condition of all people according to our common, fallen nature, and then deliver the glorious good news of God’s gift of salvation.

- What, according to Matt. 28:19–20, are the two primary means by which we are commanded to “make disciples?”
- What do we call the orderly system or arrangement by which the Church attempts to teach “all things” as the years pass by?

Prayer

O God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy. Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 9B).