Son of God, Eternal Savior

***Lutheran Service Book* 842** | study by Bruce E. Keseman

Introduction

During World War II, Rev. Henry Gerecke, an LCMS clergyman, served as a U.S. Army chaplain in England. At the conclusion of the war, Chaplain Gerecke was asked to provide spiritual care for his enemies, Nazi leaders who were being tried for war crimes at Nuremberg. Chaplain Gerecke knew about and sometimes witnessed the effects of the atrocities inflicted because of those Nazis. He also knew that he could decline the assignment and return to his wife whom he had not seen in two years. Still, he agreed to minister to his enemies. Some in the United States criticized him for befriending men who were responsible for such horrible torture and death.

- Why might Chaplain Gerecke have provided pastoral care — and friendship — to enemies?
- If you were Chaplain Gerecke, how would you respond to criticism from U.S. citizens?

Exploring the Scriptures

"Son of God, Eternal Savior" was written by Somerset T. C. Lowry (1855–1932). The hymn reflects John 17:1–26, a prayer Jesus prayed for us the night before He died. Read those verses now, especially noticing Christ's emphasis on unity and love.

- In verse 3, what does Jesus say is eternal life? Why is eternal life impossible apart from Jesus?
- The Father's words lead us to know and believe that Jesus came from the Father (v. 8). Jesus spoke the Father's words directly to the first disciples, but how does He get those words to you (v. 20)? How might that have affected Chaplain Gerecke's decision?
- What evidence have you seen that verse 14 is true?
- What is Christ's prayer for us (vv. 15, 17, 20–21 and 26)? What comfort does that give to you in this often-difficult world?
- What indications are there that the love of God was in Chaplain Gerecke (v. 26)? In Christians you know?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Read through *LSB* 842. Most hymnals today — *LSB* included — omit two stanzas that Lowry wrote when he penned the hymn in 1893. Read the omitted stanzas.

Bind us all as one together
In your Church's sacred fold,
Weak and healthy, poor and wealthy,
Sad and joyful, young and old.
Is there want or pain or sorrow?
Make us all the burden share.
Are there spirits crushed and broken?
Teach us, Lord, to soothe their care.

Dark the path that lies behind us,
Strewn with wrecks and stained with blood;
But before us gleams the vision
Of the coming brotherhood.
See the Christlike host advancing,
High and lowly, great and small,
Linked in bonds of common service
For the common Lord of all.

- In your opinion, do these stanzas strengthen or weaken the hymn? How do these stanzas alter the focus of the hymn? Explain.
- What good reasons might editors have for omitting these stanzas?
- When it was first published, editors called this a "Christian Brotherhood" hymn. In *LSB*, it is in the category "Society." In your opinion, how does the inclusion or exclusion of the stanzas above affect the category of the hymn?

Text

Look again at stanza 1 in *LSB*.

- List the titles given to Jesus in this stanza. What unique truth about our Lord does each title provide?
- In what ways does Christ's birth among us hallow (that is, make holy) the human race?
- Much of the hymn is about showing love, yet only one brief clause of stanza 1 alludes to anything we do for others ("Fill us with Your love and pity"). Why is the

emphasis on Christ's work essential before the hymn speaks about what we Christians do?

Read Heb. 7:23–25.

- What prevented most high priests from remaining in office? How is Jesus, our High Priest, different?
- What does verse 25 say Jesus is doing for us? Why? How is that reflected in the hymn?

Look at stanza 2 of the hymn.

- Notice that the entire hymn is a prayer. For what do we pray in this stanza?
- We often say that Christ *died* for others, but in what ways has Christ "*lived* for others" (including you)?
- What are some ways we might live for others as Christ did for us?
- Lowry writes that our money really belongs to God. We are "stewards" and keepers of a "trust." How does that shape our Christian view of giving?

Read 1 Peter 1:20–23.

- Because of Christ, what have we become (vv. 20– 21)?
- Why does Peter suggest (v. 23) that we can "love one another earnestly" (v. 22)?
- What does verse 25 say is the "imperishable seed" by which you have been born again? When did that rebirth happen?

Look at stanza 3 of the hymn.

- If we are going to live for others, what does the hymn suggest that Christ must first do for us?
- What strife, passions and discords are evident even among Christians? So why is it appropriate that we call Jesus the "King of *Love*" and "Prince of *Peace*"?

The hymn asks our Lord to "quench our fevered thirst of pleasure" (st. 3). Read John 4:1–26, where the Samaritan woman's thirst of pleasure led her to five husbands and her current live-in.

- Why do earthly pleasures fail to quench our desires?
- What does Jesus offer to the woman (and us) that provides what we really need? What hint of that offer is included in stanza 3 of the hymn?

Look at stanza 4, especially thinking about the final request of the hymn: "Here on earth Your will be done."

- How does repeating half of stanza 1 emphasize the true source of Christian sanctification? See also John 17:17–18.
- In what sense is Jesus our "Source of Life?" Of truth? Of grace? What alternate sources might we be tempted to rely on?
- What verses from John 17 especially seem to be reflected in the last half of stanza 4?
- What elements of God's will does Jesus mention in John 17?
- How is God's will done? (See the Third Petition in the Small Catechism, *LSB*, p. 324).

Making the Connection

As Jesus works among us — speaking His Word, baptizing us into His death and resurrection, serving us His forgiving body and blood — He grants us faith that trusts in Him. The result is both unity (John 17:11) and love (John 17:26).

- Why are true unity and true love impossible apart from faith in Christ?
- How might your life look different when Christ's gifts of unity and love show more clearly in you?

In Closing

When we pray for unity and love, as we do in this hymn (and Jesus does in John 17), God sometimes responds in surprising ways. When Chaplain Gerecke arrived at Nuremberg, few of the twenty-some Nazi defendants trusted Christ for their salvation. Jesus prayed "for those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20). And God's Word spoken by Chaplain Gerecke changed some of the unbelievers at Nuremburg. When Joachim von Ribbentrop, former Riech Minister of Foreign Affairs, went to the gallows, he was asked for his last words. His response: "I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul." Amazingly, that meant Chaplain Gerecke had Christian unity with his earthly enemy! Christ's love worked through Chaplain Gerecke as he lived for others.

- Sing or read aloud together, *LSB* 842.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, You desire not the death of a sinner but that all would repent and live. Hear our prayers for those outside the Church. Take away their iniquity and turn them from their false gods to You, the living and true God. Gather them into Your holy Church to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (For those outside the Church, *LSB*, 305).