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SACRED MELODIES: HYMN INSPIRED DEVOTIONS

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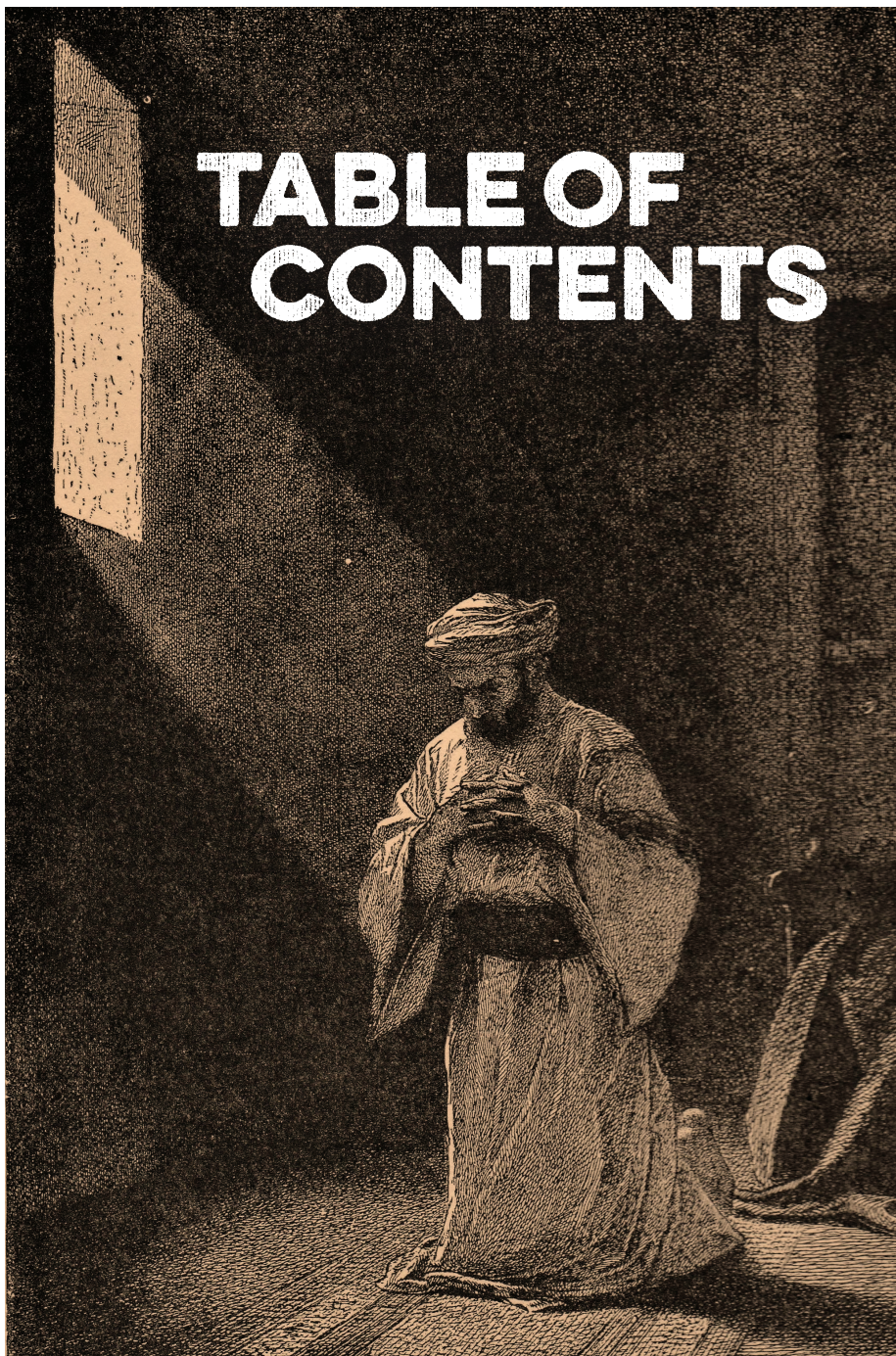
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INTRODUCTION

In our lives, things may seem very uncertain. We feel uncertain about our health, our family and friends, and what tomorrow may bring. Yet thanks be to God that His Word and His promises to you are certain and unchanging, no matter what happens to you in this life. These devotions are crafted to give you encouragement and assurance, based upon the Word of God. No matter what your circumstances may be, you are loved by Christ.

These devotions are intended to be used with the *Lutheran Service Book: Ministry Edition* and *Luther's Small Catechism*. Both resources offer additional prayers, rites for Confession and Absolution, and other gems that you are encouraged to explore.

We pray that these devotions may be a blessing for you, assuring you that your sins are forgiven and that Jesus Christ has won eternal life for you in His death and resurrection.

SILENT NIGHT

With all of the pain, hurt, anger, and grief in the world, it is hard to imagine that there can be such a thing as a “silent night.” So many of our nights are filled with anxiety, fear and loneliness. So many times Satan himself seems to steer us to find peace and happiness in all the wrong places. It may seem like a “silent night” is impossible to come by.

Yet in this hymn we sing about a silent night: a night in which God breaks into our world in the most intimate of ways; a night in which our Savior Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.

This night, Jesus, our heavenly King, is not born in a glamorous castle or a fancy hotel. He is born in a place as sorry as a prison cell or a room in a nursing home. He is born in a manger, a place fit for animals. It’s not a place we would think fitting for the Savior of the world.

In this miraculously silent night, something big happens. The silence is broken not by fear but by joy! Angels can’t help but break into the silence to sing about Jesus’ birth. And these angels appear not to the usual suspects we would think of: pastors, kings, people who are high and mighty. No, these angels appear to the blue-collar workers, simple shepherds. And these shepherds are scared out of their minds. That’s what God’s holiness does to us sinners. We know that we have broken God’s rules, and we know that we deserve nothing but death. But the angels speak words of comfort: “Fear

not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (LUKE 2:10-11).

Friend the words these angels speak are for you. Jesus comes and brings you love’s pure light. What is love’s pure light? Jesus being born for you. Jesus carrying all of the bad things you have ever thought, said or done upon Himself, and taking those to the cross. Love’s pure light is Jesus dying the death meant for you, and in His resurrection, giving you eternal life. Love’s pure light is yours, no matter who you are, where you’ve been or what you’ve done.

Be comforted that tonight, our Lord also gives you a silent night. Don’t listen to the lies of Satan who loves to torment you. Listen to Christ’s Words alone. Know that He forgives you for all the wrong you have done, no matter how bad those things may be. Know that tonight, you are not alone. Jesus is always with you, just as He has promised (MATT. 28:20).

Tonight, as our Lord bids you, rest in His Heavenly peace.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that through Your Son Jesus Christ, you have given our restless hearts peace and comfort. Be with us each night as we rest in the blessed assurance of Your eternal love for us. In Jesus’ name. Amen

AWAY IN A MANGER

In this Christmas hymn, we have the calming presence and sound of the cattle lowing as Jesus sleeps in the feeding trough (manger). We obviously have no idea what that night was exactly like when Mary and Joseph were searching for a place to stay in Bethlehem. This manger was probably in a house-barn where families and animals lived together. The animals were kept on the bigger open side with stalls and a dirt floor. The building was designed to allow humans and animals to share their warmth during the colder seasons.

Was Jesus startled and awakened by the lowing cows? After their long trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Mary gives birth to the Son of God. Jesus, the baby king will save His people, will save you from your sins. Mary and Joseph knew that the angel's proclamation was true. To them was born the Messiah, the long-awaited one whom all the prophets foretold. Joseph faithfully took Mary, pregnant despite her virginity, to be his wife. Now Christ is born. God's grace appeared and is shown in the Christ-child.

The lowing of the cattle adds a peaceful note to all of these events. The shepherds arrive to see the baby the angels told them about. Now God's peace has come to mankind. We desperately need that peace in our own lives too. Is it hard for you to sleep with all of the worries of the world circling around in your mind? Do you worry about your family, your

friends, or your future? Be assured this day that this newborn baby Jesus, this long-awaited Messiah, lived, suffered, died, and rose again from death. He protects us from Satan's tyranny against the peace of God. We know and believe that Christ is with us always, just as He has promised. Seeking Christ's peace and comfort, we ask Him to stay by our side through the night. We endure the trials of this life until the day dawns when we awake in His presence in eternity.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we worship and glorify you because you sent your Son Jesus to save us from our sins. Grant us peace, knowing and believing that we are protected from Satan and that we are your precious children, loved by You. Strengthen our faith in You each day. Remind us that Christ is with us, and will continue to care for us in this life and into eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

As you sing this hymn, you might be thinking, *What in the world is a herald?* A herald is a person who brings official news. For example, if a king wanted to issue an order that all of the towns in his kingdom needed to fly a yellow flag at sunset, he would send a herald to every town to inform them of this message. So what is this news the herald angels, messengers of our Heavenly King, bring?

The angels bring the glorious news that finally, after all of these years of the world waiting and longing for a savior, Jesus has been born! And Jesus is born *for you*. But why do we even need this heraldic message? Because all of us need a savior. All of us have fallen short of what God expects of us. We haven't loved one another as we should. We've been angry, we've hurt one another and we have made our own happiness our god. St. Paul tells us that the wages of sin is death (ROM. 6:23). But, as we sing, this is why Christ comes. He is born so that you will not die. He is born to bring light and life to your world, no matter how dark or hopeless it may seem. He is born to be the prince of peace. As the prince of peace, He wages war against Satan so that the kingdom of death will not have the last say. He is born to die your death on the cross, and He is born to give you His victory of resurrection.

In this hymn, we also sing that Jesus is the "Sun of Righteousness." He comes with healing in His wings. In our pain and loneliness, it is easy for us to lose hope. But Christ still comes. His birth marks the dawning of a new day. He comes with healing for your battered, broken soul. He breaks through your hopelessness with His marvelous light.

Dear friend, find comfort this day in the message the herald angels proclaim to you. Christ has been born for you, He has died for you, He has conquered death for you, and He has redeemed you. You are His, and He is well-pleased with you.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the hope we find in the birth of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. Grant us strength and courage each day as we take refuge in the shadow of Your wing. Continue to fix our hearts upon the mercy You have shown to us through Your Son. In Jesus' name. Amen.

OF THE FATHER'S LOVE BEGOTTEN

This beautiful, ancient hymn has a rich history. The original text was written in Latin by a man named Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, who was born in 348 A.D. For ages, Christians have sung this song in celebration to the Son of God, Jesus, who was begotten of the Father from all eternity.

What does it mean when we say that the Son is begotten of the Father? It means that the Son of God has always been the Son of the Father, and has always existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit. There was never a time when the Son didn't exist. John 1:1-3 says,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

The Word is God. By the Word, all things have been created.

In Matthew 1:20-23, we hear how an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and told him about the baby that Mary was carrying:

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and

you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

Jesus is the only Son of the Father. Jesus is the Word who was with God, and was God in the beginning, and who made all things. Jesus is the one who was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. Jesus is the Word who became flesh to be with us and to save us from our sin.

Jesus says this about Himself in Revelation 1:8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and is to come, the Almighty."

Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Jesus is saying that He is the first and the last. All things have their beginning in Him, and all things have their completion in Him. How wonderful that the God who created all things has come into human flesh to dwell among us! Jesus became human for us. Philippians 2:8-11 says this about Jesus:

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him

the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Because Jesus humbled Himself and became human, because Jesus was perfectly sinless and died for our sins, and because Jesus rose again from the dead, we have salvation in His name. Acts 2:21 says “[E]veryone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” The name of the Lord is Jesus. Our Lord is the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus Christ. He is coming again on the last day to raise us up and bring us home to live with Him evermore. We praise together: Alleluia! Amen!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You that out of Your great love, you sent Your only Son to become flesh and dwell among us to save us. Send Your Holy Spirit so that we may believe in the Gospel promises You give us, celebrate the blessings of Jesus’ incarnation, and be preserved in the one true faith as we look forward to life with You evermore. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

JOY TO THE WORLD

“Joy to the World” is a familiar hymn for Christmas Day. Christians who have been waiting for Christ’s birth during the church season of Advent sing this hymn as loudly and as joyfully as they can. The Lord has come to us, a Savior has been born, and we praise Him and thank Him.

One Sunday not too long ago I went to church in the middle of summer and the pastor’s message was about being a joyful Christian. What an unexpected joy it was to me and to others when we sang “Joy to the World” at the end of the service. It was a perfect hymn of joy to sing that morning, considering the sermon. It filled me with just as much joy to sing it in summer as when we sing it at Christmas. I had not been so joyful that morning, and was too focused on the daily worries and stresses of life.

If you consider the words of “Joy to the World,” you will understand that it is not just a hymn for one day of the year. It is for every day of the year, and especially for days when we may not be so joyful. Our lives are plagued with unexpected sorrows and troubles. The loss of a loved one, an illness, an unexpected burden, or pain and suffering that never seem to go away may make joy unimaginable. When we sing “Joy to the World” we remember that the Lord knows the trials we suffer. He loves us so much that he sent his Son to save us from our sins. This truth trumps any troubles in this life, no matter how bad they seem. They are short

trials compared to an eternal life with Christ where there will be no sorrow, pain, or misery.

“Joy to the World” is about how Christ has come into the world to redeem us and forgive us, making us sinless in his sight. The greatest joy in the world is that the Lord has given this joy to the world. These are *the wonders of His love* that we sing about in the hymn. Singing the words comforts us and helps us to refocus our thoughts to eternal realities, not just the temporal sufferings we bear each day. When we look to Christ and the cross, we Christians can live a joyful life, despite the setbacks and heartaches we endure. Even when things are falling apart in our lives, God has not forgotten us.

Whenever you fail to remember the promise and need to be pointed back to the cross and God’s gift to you, repent. Confess your sin to the Lord, know that you are forgiven, and sing praises and give thanks to the Savior who reigns over all the earth. Sing “Joy to the World,” and never forget that you are loved by God, and Christ came to save you.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, prepare our hearts by your Holy Spirit so that we always have room for your Son. Make us grateful and eager to sing praises to You for the joy You brought into the world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

WHEN I SURVEY THE WONDROUS CROSS

Isaac Watts wrote the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” more than 300 years ago and it’s amazing that we still sing it today. Watts was a very popular hymn writer. Some even refer to him as the greatest hymn writer who ever lived. Another famous hymn writer, Charles Wesley, supposedly said once that he would have given up all the hymns that he had written to have been the author of Watts’ “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” In total, Watts has been credited with writing around 750 hymns. These hymns include classics like “Joy to the World” and “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past.” Watts was not just a hymn writer, but also a pastor, educator, geographer and philosopher. He certainly was a man of many talents.

It is easy for us to get caught up in Watts’ greatness, fame and accomplishments. We tend to add up the achievements of others in our heads, and keep a running list of our own accomplishments. We like to pat ourselves on the back for the things we have done well. What we like to forget is that we are *sinful* self-achievers. That’s part of being sinful. Seeking the things of this world, like honor, recognition and wealth, makes us look good in front of others, and makes us feel better about ourselves. We want to receive praise from those around us so we can brag about our own good works. And though it may seem that there was nothing Isaac Watts couldn’t have done in his lifetime, there was one life-changing and life-saving thing that he couldn’t do. He couldn’t redeem himself.

Yes, indeed, we are mighty, sinful self-achievers. But more importantly, we are sinful self-achievers *in need of a mighty savior*. In this truth lies the greatness of Watts’ hymn. The truth is that each of us in our wretched, sinful condition can neither brag of anything we have done in this world, nor can we save ourselves from eternal punishment. Only God in His endless mercy can accomplish that for us. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” leads us to the One who saves us from our sins. Watts wrote the hymn as a communion hymn, and each stanza we sing leads us to the cross and the gift of salvation. At the Lord’s table, we are refreshed with Christ’s body and blood and assured of the forgiveness of sins. We are covered in Christ’s sinlessness. We are made right with God, not by our own merit, but by the gift of God who did not forsake us, even when we rebelled against Him. There at the altar we lay our sins—our vanity, pride, and failures—in exchange for the forgiveness of sins and promise of eternal life with Jesus. There at the altar, the Holy Spirit works on our hearts so that we don’t brag of ourselves, but Christ alone.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, guide us to the altar by your Holy Spirit. Forgive our sins through the eating and drinking of the body and blood of Your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

O PERFECT LIFE OF LOVE

People often say, “I’m carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders.” You may even say it yourself. This expression arose long ago, yet it is still a common one we use today when we feel burdened by the hardships in our lives. Maybe it’s an injury that never heals, or an illness that never gets better. Maybe it’s being separated from a loved one. Maybe it’s loneliness, anxiety or sadness that comes to us at one time or another. Feeling like *the weight of the world* is on us is unbearable when we are buried under troubles that pile up, one upon another. Suffering wears us down and makes us tired, but Scripture tells us that in this world we will suffer and have trouble. When Adam and Eve first rebelled against God, sin was brought into the world. And because of this, the world became a much different place than the one God had created. Now, the world has hard work, chaos and arguments. The harder we work to fix what is broken, the more our efforts result in failure. We just can’t get ahead. When we solve one problem, another soon arrives. Not only does it feel like the weight of the world is on our shoulders, but it sometimes feels like we are standing in quicksand at the same time. To *carry the weight of the world* and succeed sounds like an impossible task for us—because it is.

Placing hope in ourselves is a lost cause. The burden of sin is the heaviest of all that weighs us down. It sticks to us and is a disease. We cannot help

but sin. So where is our hope? Only in Christ. Jesus really did carry the weight of the world upon his shoulders when He bore our sins upon the cross. Our heavenly Father, in His love for us, sent Jesus to be our burden bearer. Jesus saved us from our sins that separated us from the Father. Jesus is the one who comes to give us new, sinless clothes in exchange for our filthy rags. Every sin that you have ever committed, and every weight that you have ever felt upon your shoulders, He takes upon Himself for you! He wore a crown—the one whose thorns bore into his head and caused him to bleed—for *you*. When others mocked him, he endured their hate-filled speech for *you*. He came down from heaven to bridge the gap between you and God for you. Not just for your neighbor, your friend and others, but for *you*, no matter what you’ve done nor where you’ve been.

Christ loves *you*. He fulfilled the Scriptures and left no work undone for *you*. He died and rose three days later, conquering death for *you* so that you will enjoy eternal life with Him, in a mansion where all the weights you carry in this world will be no more. He is the great burden bearer who truly bore the weight of the world upon himself for *you*. Jesus is our Savior who saves us from our sins, and He loves *you*.

So what is this love that Jesus has for you? Jesus shows us this in His work for you. He *is* perfect Love. He knows

your grief and suffers with you. When you fail to lean on Him and lay your burdens at the foot of the cross, go to Him in prayer and ask for His forgiveness. He will listen. He inclines His ear to you. Tell Him your troubles, because He tenderly loves you, cares for you and has prepared a place for you with Him for all eternity. He *will* listen. Trust in the one who brings peace and comfort amidst the grief, anxiety and pain in your life. He will listen because He loves you so, so much.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit to draw us closer to your Son who, in perfect love for us, suffered on the cross. When we are burdened with the weight of the world on our shoulders, guide us to the one who bore the weight of the world. Help us to place all our trust in Him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

WERE YOU THERE

“**W**ere you there?” we sing as we confess the passion of our Lord for us. The obvious answer is no. No, we weren’t there when He was crucified, when He was nailed to the tree, nor when He was laid in the tomb.

Yet there are other things that we were there for in our own lives: things that cause us to truly tremble. We were there when we failed to love others as we should. We were there when we became angry at a loved one. We were there when others sinned against us, causing us pain and misery in our own lives. Yes, these things cause us to tremble. When we look back at our lives, we ask: *Can anyone love someone as unlovable as me? Can anyone bring hope to my hopeless world? Will anyone bring light to my darkness?*

Jesus breaks into your world with a resounding, “Yes!” Jesus was there, with you, in every moment of your life. He was there for the good times and the bad, the times when you feared Him and the times you willingly walked away from Him. Jesus loves you so much that He continues to call you to Himself. In fact, He is the one who brings the least likely of people to Himself: prostitutes, corrupt politicians, thieves and murderers. And yes, He even comes to save you.

So Jesus went there, and He went there willingly. He went to the cross to die your death. He went to have His hands nailed to a tree. He went to be laid in a tomb. But thanks be to God, the story

doesn’t end there. The tombstone was rolled away, and Jesus was not there. He did not remain dead. In His death, Christ conquers death and raises you to new life in Him.

You are now here, on the other side of this glorious resurrection. No, you may not have been an eyewitness to the events of Christ’s crucifixion, death, and resurrection, but you know how the story ends. Jesus has called you by name through His Word and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus loves you and brings hope and light to your world. Jesus promises you that you are blessed because you have not seen Him, and yet you believe in Him (JOHN 20:29).

Dear friends, take comfort today as you sing this hymn. Rejoice that Christ was there instead of you. Be assured that He is the one who took the punishment of sin upon Himself so that it would not be placed on you. Jesus went there to forgive all of your sins and to give you eternal life. Instead of trembling in fear today, tremble in the joy that Christ gives you through His death and resurrection.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to die our death on the cross. Continue to comfort us with the promise of the resurrection, that we will be with You in eternal paradise. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN TODAY

Why are we so eager to sing about Jesus? What joy does He bring?

We sing because Jesus Christ is risen! That is what this hymn encourages us to do: to sing, and shout for joy that Jesus has died for our sins on the cross, and has risen from the dead to bring us life. His day of triumph is ours because He has suffered for us and gives us hope. The angels told the fearful women at the tomb to remember all that Jesus had told the disciples: that He would suffer, die and on the third day rise, for them and for all people. And now He lives forever.

So, we sing: “Jesus Christ is risen today/Our triumphant holy day/
Who did once upon the cross/Suffer to redeem our loss” (LSB 457:1). His promises hold true for us, too. Jesus saves us from our sins—from those things we have thought or done that hurt others. He redeems us—buys us back—from the punishment of death we deserve for breaking God’s Law. He brings us salvation and gives us life with Himself now, and eternal life with Him at the Resurrection. He even gives us joy when we do not *feel* joyful, but instead are lonely, sad or hurt.

He is with us in those times, too, when our hearts are heavy. He rose from the dead, just as he said he would. Now we can trust His promises to be with us, to care for us, to give us all we need “for this body and life” (Luther’s Small Catechism: The

Creed, 1st Article). He forgives our sins and will bring us to eternal life.

This is a joy beyond sorrow and sadness: that Jesus is with us throughout our earthly life, through His Word in the Bible, and His Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. He will raise us from the dead to live with Him always. He is our king, as we sing, but also our brother, in Holy Baptism. We are baptized into His death and resurrection by the glory of the Father so that we may be free from sin and walk in newness of life (ROM. 6:3). (If you are not baptized or have questions about what baptism means, please, seek out a Lutheran chaplain, pastor, or even the person who gave you this devotion to find out more about this miraculous gift to you from God.)

We are joyful in sorrow, in trials, and in sadness, because Jesus lives, and we shall live forever in Him. So, go ahead! Burst out singing! Shout *Alleluia* (meaning “Praise the Lord”)! For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins and win victory for us over sin, death and Satan himself. Continue to assure us that we will have eternal life with You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

JESUS LIVES! THE VICTORY'S WON

Christ has conquered death by His death. Christ has secured our resurrection from death by His resurrection. As Romans 8:11 says, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

Be comforted today. Death does not have the final word, Jesus does. This is Jesus’ word: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (JOHN 11:25-26).

Death does not have the final victory, Jesus does.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does this perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is

swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 COR. 15:50-58)

Now that Christ has won the victory for us, nothing, not even death, can appall us. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from God.

“Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death or life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, not anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (ROMANS 8:34-39)

Because Christ is crucified and raised for us, we no longer live as slaves to sin. We live in praise and honor to Him, looking forward to our

inheritance of the resurrection of the dead. Jesus “died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 COR. 5:15).

Whatever happens to us, whether we live or die, we are safe in Christ. Because we are safe, we have courage to live out our vocations in honor to God, whether we are a mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, worker, retired, correctional officer or inmate. “... as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”

(PHIL. 1:20-21). Our hope is sure. Our sin is paid for. Our death is temporary. The victory is won in Jesus!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, You gave Your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross for our redemption. By His glorious resurrection You delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sin may be drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever In Jesus' name. Amen.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

Imagine the trumpets, the fanfare, the excitement, the awe. This hymn invites us to picture ourselves in the crowd as we watch and witness a royal parade: the King as He approaches His throne. The melody, the beat of the music and the words come together to form this scene of a King worshiped among His people. Members of the crowd throw themselves to their knees and bow down to this divine majesty.

Together with all the saints, we worship God the Father, who is holy and rules over all things. We worship God the Son, who is holy and buys back all things from Satan. We worship God the Spirit, who is holy and keeps us in the one true faith. Christ has put everything under His feet. His throne belongs to both heaven and earth. His enemies are but a footstool (PSALM 110:1).

Do we always feel this way, though? Sometimes our lives feel like a much different song. Maybe it's a sad blues song, or a song where the notes don't even flow together. Maybe we feel we have no song to sing at all. Life doesn't always feel victorious. We may have mountains of grief and pain all around us, keeping us from joining the celebratory crowd. We may suffer from things that feel like they rule over us. We may even begin to believe that those things are in charge; that we must bend our knees under despair and defeat to the very things we despise.

It didn't look like Jesus was going to win. His death looked like the ultimate defeat. Yet when Christ was hanging on the cross, under the weight of our own sins: *that* was His coronation. The crucifixion was His crowning victory. He trampled over sin, death, and the devil, and made our enemies His footstool. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee that He has ultimate control, complete power, and the final victory.

This same victory is given to those whose lives are hidden in Christ through faith. We have the promise of a procession that is to come. No matter where we find ourselves or what circumstances surround us, we can sing along with all of the heavenly angels and the saints. Every morning we rise with a triumphal cry that victory has come and is coming. Our song starts now because we know that this is the reality of what is coming and what is promised. Holy, Holy, Holy, indeed!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Give me strength to endure the burdens of this life. Fix my eyes on the glory of Christ and the final victory that is promised to all who believe. Come quickly, Lord Jesus! In Jesus' name. Amen.

O WORD OF GOD INCARNATE

“**I**ncarnate” is a word we don’t use a lot. The word “incarnate” comes from a Latin word meaning “in the flesh.” So how in the world is the Word of God in the flesh? Thankfully St. John gives us the answer in the opening words of his Gospel. St. John, inspired by the Lord, writes, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (JOHN 1:14A). Simply put, the Word is Jesus. Jesus is the Word that becomes flesh as He is born of the Virgin Mary. And Jesus isn’t just any word. He is the living Word. The Word He gives was active throughout all of time and is active in your life today. He comes to you through the ways He has promised: through the Bible, through Baptism, and through His holy Supper.

Yet the thing about Jesus is that He’s also, as we sing, Wisdom, Truth, and Light. He is Wisdom from on high, He is wise when we are ignorant. He is Truth and breaks through the lies of Satan: lies that tell you that God doesn’t love you, you can’t be forgiven and you have no hope. Christ comes and tells you a different story, a true story. You *are* loved, you *are* forgiven and you *have* hope. Jesus became incarnate (in the flesh) so that He could bear all of your sins upon Himself, and die the death meant for you on the cross. Whenever you see a cross, whether in a chapel, on a necklace, or anywhere, know that you are loved by Christ. In Christ’s death and resurrection, you are assured that your sins are forgiven. This is where your hope rests.

Dear friend, Christ, this Word of God incarnate (in the flesh), is also your light. He illuminates the dark path that lies ahead of you. He alone is your compass and guide on the voyage of your life. No, Christ doesn’t promise that your voyage will be easy. There will be hardships along the way. Maybe you’re there now. Maybe your voyage is filled with mud and quicksand, pain and loneliness, anxiety and fear. But here’s the thing: Christ promises you that He will be with you through it all, no matter how painful your voyage may be.

We sing that we are “wandering pilgrims” on this voyage. This means that the things that are bothering you right now won’t last forever. There will be an end to the clouds and darkness that afflict your life. Christ Himself, the Word of God in the flesh, brings about the end to all of your pain and misery, even death itself. His death and resurrection assure you of this. He promises you that you will see Him face to face. The voyage will be completed. And you, a pilgrim, are a child of God.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us your incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Continue to assure us of our salvation in You. Guide us through this voyage of life. Transform us from wandering pilgrims into your beloved children, children of an eternal kingdom. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL SAVIOR

C.S. Lewis, quite possibly the greatest churchman of modern times, gave a beautiful speech that was so stunning it was later included in a book called *The Weight of Glory*. In it, he is famously quoted as saying: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

We deal with a lot of difficult things in this life. That sentence may seem like an understatement to some. There’s pain, there’s death, there’s the loss of things we held close. As sinners in a fallen world, we—along with the earth itself—are groaning for redemption. For restoration. For salvation. From our circumstances. From our bodies. From our very selves.

As much as the dark and difficult may be part of our reality, there’s also a lot of beauty. What grace! Even in our fallen world, in our sinful state, we get to be witnesses to beauty. Have you ever thought about beauty, and beholding beauty, as being a gift in itself? The rolling meadows. Flowers blooming in spring. The sunshine and its glistening beams as it rises and sets. The stars, sparkling in the heavens, beyond anyone’s reach.

What is the most beautiful thing in creation that you have ever witnessed or experienced? What did you feel when you beheld the truest beauty you have ever seen, heard or sensed?

Beauty has a way of affecting us in a very real and “felt” way. It captivates beholders and changes them forever. Even as our bodies groan and all of creation aches and waits, we already, *even now*, get to witness beauty bursting forth, like heaven coming to earth.

Beauty is meant to be beheld. It is meant to be enjoyed, sometimes to be discovered, and often to be considered. But beauty is *always* meant to point to the one who creates beauty: Jesus Christ Himself. The God who made all of the beauty in creation has recreated us through the perfect, flawless, pure Son of God. He is the gift to top all gifts. He is brighter and more beautiful than the sun itself. He is the promised “Sun of righteousness” who rose on Easter dawn with healing in His wings (MAL. 4:2).

We don’t always think of Jesus as “beautiful.” We think of Him as the Suffering Servant. We think of Him nailed to the cross. But this hymn reminds us that to think of Him is also to think of beauty. He is the most beautiful gift we have been given. He is fair and He is pure and He reflects His love upon everything, even now, when the world is still not as it should be or will be. Even when you may be sitting in pain, misery or the shadow of death, Christ is your salvation. His promise to restore all things, even your lowly body to be like His beautiful body, is as sure as the rising of the sun. Be comforted with this truth!

It is by our Savior's light that we see the beauty around us. That beauty points our gaze back to Him. His Spirit enlightens us to this very thing, and so we believe in our beautiful Savior.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, You sent Your Son, our Beautiful Savior, who is King of Creation and Lord over all, to give beauty to our darkened lives through His death and resurrection. Teach us to behold the Your beauty and the beauty of Your salvation, won for us. Thank You for this gift! In Jesus' name. Amen.

SALVATION UNTO US HAS COME

What is *salvation*? Christians are usually pretty quick to define salvation as the saving work that Jesus did for all the world in his life, death, and resurrection. He rescued us poor sinners from sin, death and the power of the devil.

This hymn reminds singers that salvation is indeed a gift from God. We sing, “Salvation unto us has come by God’s free grace and favor,” echoing the words of St. Paul in Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Later on, we sing about how our good works cannot allow us to enter heaven on our own worthiness. We sing even further on that we suffer in our sinful despair. Thanks be to God that there’s more to the story than that! God loves you so much that He sent His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to fulfill the law and win salvation for the entire world. Christ is our savior! We are not left to eternal despair and separation from our Heavenly Father. None of us is alone. In the miracle of Holy Baptism, we become members of God’s family and cling to the faith God grants us through the work of the Holy Spirit. We rejoice and sing, “Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead/Your death is now my life indeed/For you have paid my ransom.”

Our faith in Christ does not stay idle. We know that faith bears much fruit, which is helping and serving our

neighbor in need. We are reminded of this truth when we sing, “Works serve our neighbor and supply the proof that faith is living.” When you have the love of Christ, it is hard to contain it and keep it to yourself. Your heart is bursting with joy to share this news with others, and to serve others in need. It’s like when you’ve read a great book. What do you do when you’re done? You grab your buddy and say, “Hey, check this book out. It’s fantastic! You just have to read it!”

The same thing happens in our lives when, through the Holy Spirit, we receive faith in what Jesus did for us. We *want* to tell others! This same faith clings to Jesus’ cross alone. That’s where salvation is found. This hymn concludes by giving all glory to God the Father, Son, and Spirit who saved us by his grace. Singers thank God for His work in sending his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die the death meant for us. He is the Savior of the world.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of faith You give to us in Baptism. Thank you for sending Jesus Christ to be our one Redeemer, who won salvation for us all. Grant us courage to live out our faith in You and serve the neighbors You place in our lives. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

JESUS, THY BLOOD AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Trends come and go. Think about how this happens with clothing and shoes. Whether you always wore the latest “cool” piece of clothing or not really doesn’t matter in the end. God’s Word reminds us, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (MATT. 6:19, 20).

This hymn helps us understand how we are to store up treasures in heaven. Without the shedding of Christ’s blood, we poor sinners are unable to stand before the Lord on judgment day. Despite our wrongdoing and sin, Christ died for us. He shed His blood so that all of us, sinners though we are, could be made sinless in the Lord’s sight. Jesus Christ took your place on the cross! Through Christ’s earthly life, death and resurrection He paid the price for you. You now have the hope of eternal life in heaven one day. When judgment day is upon us, God won’t look at you and see all of the bad things you have done. Instead, He will see red: Christ’s blood, shed for you. This blood covers all of the things you have ever done wrong. Jesus bought us not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. When judgment day comes, God won’t be concerned about what kind of clothes you are wearing. What matters is that you are clothed in the blood of Christ, as all Christians are.

This hymn opens with the words, “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness/ My beauty are, my glorious dress.” Without being covered by Jesus, we can’t have true joy to lift up our heads in this life. The hymn ends with those who have died hearing God’s voice and rejoicing in Jesus, who clothes them in His blood and sinlessness. What comfort there is in knowing that because of Christ’s love, He willingly gave Himself up for death *for you*. Everything you have ever done against God is made right by Christ. You receive eternal life not because of anything you have done, but because of what Jesus did for you in His death and resurrection. Thanks be to God for this amazing gift!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank You for sending Jesus to take our place on the cross. Thank You for giving up your only Son to shed His blood and make us right in Your sight. Help us to answer Your call to serve others. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THE LORD'S MY SHEPHERD, I'LL NOT WANT

If we're familiar with any part of the Bible, Psalm 23 might come to mind. But have we really taken the time to reflect on the words our Lord gives us in this Psalm?

We begin by singing of a comforting setting. Green pastures, quiet waters, contentment, and safety: what else could a sheep ask for?

He restores our soul. He leads us to a better path than the broken one where He found us, lost, alone, battered and bruised, angry and defiant. He, our Good Shepherd, is the one who seeks us out and snatches us away from the claws of the ravenous wolf.

Yet darkness and the shadow of death still come. The wolf rages, furious that you have escaped his grasp. Maybe you know what that is like in your own life. Maybe you are experiencing that now. Be assured that the Good Shepherd, Christ Himself, is with you. His rod and staff comfort you and defend you against all of your enemies.

But it's not the rod itself that holds the power against the wolf. No, it is the Shepherd. And this Shepherd isn't like any other shepherd that a sheep has ever known. When the wolf comes, growling and baring his sharp teeth at you, when the wolf lunges at you with all of his might, your Good Shepherd steps in front of you. The teeth of the wolf sink into

Him instead of you. The wolf devours the Good Shepherd, licking his lips in delight, thinking that he has won the day. And as the wolf approaches you, a miracle happens. The Shepherd bursts forth from death into life. He smashes his rod against the wolf, sending the wolf fleeing to the valley. The Good Shepherd lovingly puts His staff around you, assuring you that He has been with you every step of the way, and that you are His.

The Good Shepherd prepares a feast for you, even as the defeated wolf lurks in the background. The wolf knows that the Good Shepherd will not allow His sheep to be devoured. This feast has everything a sheep could ask for: Baptism into God's holy family. The Lord's Supper, our Shepherd's true body and blood, in and with the bread and wine, given *for you*. And the feast that your Shepherd provides is not a one-time deal. It *overflows*. You are invited to this feast of the Holy Supper time and time again. Every day, you live in your baptismal identity as one rescued by the Shepherd.

Finally, you are assured that goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life. The original Hebrew word that is translated "follow," though, has much more to it than we may think. When we think of something "following" us, we may think of it lollygagging around, lazily coming along behind. But that's not

what's going on here. The Shepherd's goodness and mercy don't just follow you. They relentlessly pursue you, they won't let you out of their sight, they will run after you no matter what the cost. This is the love that the Shepherd has for you!

Be comforted, dear friends, in the truth of this hymn. You belong to the Shepherd, the wolf has been defeated, and you will live in the house of the Lord forever.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for being our loving Shepherd, always watching over us and caring for our every need of body and soul. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I AM TRUSTING THEE, LORD JESUS

What does it take for you to trust someone? Do you need to know them for a long time, making sure they follow through on their promises to you? In our relationships with one another, trust usually has to be earned. And trust can be broken. Have you found it hard to trust others in your life? Have you found it hard to trust God?

We sing in this hymn, “I Am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus.” But this is hard to do, isn’t it? When we think about all the ways people have hurt us, when we think about all of the times that it seems like our prayers have fallen on deaf ears, doesn’t it feel much safer to trust in ourselves?

Dear friends, no. We cannot trust in God on our own. We are sinners, and we rebel against Him and His will for us. Yet the beautiful thing is, even though we are unfaithful, even though we are untrustworthy, God is still faithful to us. He calls us by name and gives us His Holy Spirit through His Word. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit, working in spite of our sin-filled hearts, that we have trust in God.

It is Christ who has brought salvation to *you*. He does this for free, without you doing anything to earn it. Christ has shown you tender mercy in a merciless world. Christ cleanses you from your shame and guilt by shedding His holy and precious blood for you on the cross, making

you, a sinner, also a saint. Christ is your guide in this darkened world. He knows what’s best for you. Christ promises that He will give you your daily bread and provide you with every need for your body and soul, even if your circumstances seem hopeless.

It is Christ who holds you tenderly in His loving arms. His power will not fail, He will not let you fall, and you are His.

Dear friend, trust in these promises. Continue to trust in Him with your whole heart, a heart redeemed by the Christ’s blood, and don’t trust in your own understanding (PROV. 3:5).

Regardless of how much you have been hurt by others, be assured that Christ’s promises to you are true. Find comfort, peace, and rest in the One who was crucified for you, the One you can know with absolute confidence will be true in His Word to you.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for being the source of unending trust. Enable us by Your Holy Spirit to lean on You in every trial and tribulation that comes our way in this life, assured of the eternal life we have through Your Son Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

I AM JESUS' LITTLE LAMB

In college, I had a friend from Wisconsin whose family had a dairy farm. One time, as he was driving me to his home to experience “life on the farm,” we passed by a field with hundreds of sheep. My friend, seeing this, shook his head in disgust and remarked, “I don’t get how people tend to sheep. Sheep are so dumb.”

In this hymn, we sing that we are sheep. If we put this in the context of what my friend said, we might be offended by this. Sheep need to be guided, they needed to be cared for, and if they’re left on their own, they wander and get lost. By our sinful nature, we don’t want to be sheep, do we? We want to be something smarter and stronger. We don’t want to be dependent on others, let alone a shepherd. But out in this wicked world, we quickly realize that we can’t do it all ourselves. We’ve wandered and gotten tangled in the thorns of this life. We keep trying to find our way back, but the more we try, the more lost we become. So there we are, defiantly lost, hurt and trapped in what seems like a hopeless situation. We come to the harsh realization that we really are dumb, dependent sheep, and we need a shepherd to rescue us. Will a shepherd come?

Yes! Christ our Shepherd comes. He rescues us from our sin and takes us from the snares of Satan to His beautiful pasture. In this pasture, Christ provides for you, He feeds you and He

loves you. In this pasture, assured of the victory over death won by Christ on the cross, we don’t need to fear death ourselves. Christ promises you that you will be with Him in eternal paradise. No matter how far you have wandered, no matter how many thorns you willingly entangled yourself in, you are forgiven in Him, and the Kingdom of Heaven is yours.

Dear friend, take comfort that you are not just any sheep. You are Jesus’ little lamb. He cares for you, He loves you and He will bring you to Himself forever.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for being our loving Shepherd, wandering sheep though we are. Help us to trust in Your love and mercy, so that we find peace and joy in You alone. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

AMAZING GRACE

Grace. That's a word we hear thrown around a lot, but do we know what it really means? Grace is a gift given to us that we don't deserve. Maybe the best example of this is an inheritance. No one should expect to get an inheritance. It is undeserved. If you are included in an inheritance, it is always to be considered a gift, no matter how good you think you've been or how much you think you deserve something. In one family, several members got upset about the way the inheritance was distributed after the passing of a loved one. The pastor caring for them told them, "Even if the only item you get in an inheritance is a plastic spoon, the proper response is, 'thank you.'"

Thanks be to God that He gives you much more than a plastic spoon, money or anything else this world has to offer. When God gives you undeserved gifts, He goes all the way. He gives you gifts that really matter: forgiveness of sins, life and eternal salvation. Before God gave you His grace, you were a blind and lost wretch. Yet God loved you so much that He sent His only Son Jesus Christ to save you from your sins. You didn't do anything to earn God's favor or Christ's mercy. All of us, in fact, fought against God in our sin. But Christ came, in spite of your sin, out of His love for you, to die your death on the cross and give you grace.

This grace that Christ gives brings you through the hardships of the world. It

brings you through all of the heartaches, the pain and the sin to the safety and comfort found in Christ Himself.

Because of this undeserved gift from God, you don't need to fear anything, not even death itself. When your life on this earth comes to an end, you will be brought to eternal joy and peace in Christ. Through Holy Baptism, God makes you His own dear child. No longer are you a blind and lost wretch. You are a child of the Most High King. Jesus tells you that all that the Father has given to Him He has given to you (JOHN 16:15). You are an heir of something much greater than an earthly inheritance. You are an heir of the eternal king.

Dear friend, be assured today that our Lord gives you gifts beyond your wildest dreams. All of the things that you see around you—the money, the fashionable clothes, the fancy cars, all of it—will fade. None of these things last. Your heavenly Father gives you gifts of forgiveness and life that last into eternity! Be comforted with the love and mercy that our Lord continues to show you today, tomorrow, and into eternity. You don't need to do anything to earn it. What amazing grace, indeed!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, assure us today of the grace that You have shown to us. Focus our eyes and hearts on the cross, where Your Son has won forgiveness, life and salvation, for us without any merit or worthiness on our part. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I'M BUT A STRANGER HERE

There is something about seasons, isn't there? You may be reading this in a southern climate that doesn't change much, but if you've ever been up north, you know what I'm talking about. There is nothing like a good thunderstorm and soaking rain. The buildup of clouds on the horizon is an awesome sight. A large dump of snow blankets everything with white and is followed by calmness after the storm. The glistening of each individually created snowflake in the sunshine is a joy to behold. Dec 21st, the shortest day of the year, is my favorite, because it means warmer and sunnier days are ahead. Watching new life come from the earth and animals in spring is like that first big breath in the morning. It is so uplifting and refreshing. There is nothing like the change of seasons.

In this hymn, we sing about tempests raging. When you look at the world around you, you see God's handiwork in all of creation, even in the most desolate places. When storms come, they can cause much damage and people may even die. That kind of tempest can be extremely scary. But when it comes to tempests, think about your own life. Think about the brokenness in your own relationships with others and with God. The wintry blast can be that cold shoulder from someone we thought was on our side but has turned against us.

But have we been better ourselves, especially in the way we honor God?

Every time we do something bad or leave something undone, we rage against Him with our sin. This is exactly what Adam and Eve did. God the Father walked with them in the garden. They had the perfect relationship with Him! They were in His presence daily and had everything they would ever need. But they still rebelled. They thought they knew better.

Creation groans. Storms destroy. Death has come and continues to take lives. But like the change of seasons, this life will "soon be overpast." Just like death seemingly destroyed Jesus, His time in the grave was quickly over when He rose triumphant on Easter.

St. John calls us to keep all things in perspective (JOHN 12:25). We can certainly enjoy this life and God's creation. But if we live in a way that tries to make life perfect, pouring all of our resources into it like an idol, we ignore the harsh truth that everything in this world will pass away. Everything will be gone the collectibles, the bank account, the perfect yard and home...all of it.

What doesn't pass away? The Word of the Lord. God comforts us that His Word endures forever (IS. 40:8), so His promises to you will never fade away. In dying and rising with Christ, we have this unchanging promise of eternal life. We will be given new bodies, bodies just like that of Jesus when He rose from death. We will live in a new heaven and a new earth. We will again walk with God and we will see Him face to face.

So what do we do today? We can thank God for the life He gives us. We take refuge, no matter our circumstances, in the sure and certain hope that Christ has redeemed us. Indeed, He has redeemed all of creation, and has promised us a heavenly home with Him.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank You for each day you have given me in this life. Thank You for the blessing of living in and enjoying Your creation. Thank You for the privilege to serve You and others in many different ways. Help me not to become so attached to this life that I forget where my blessings have come from and where I am going because of Jesus. Thank You for the gift of eternal life in the place You have prepared for me to be with you into eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

