

SING
TO THE LORD
AN OLD
SONG
MEDITATIONS ON
CLASSIC HYMNS

RICHARD H. SCHMIDT

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PREFACE

Tears don't often come to my eyes in church, but when they do, it's usually because of a hymn—not a sermon, not a biblical or liturgical text, not the beauty of the architecture or a stained-glass window, but a song. I'd be happy with a worship service consisting almost entirely of singing. So important are hymns to me that when I sought a church as a young man, I chose the denomination that sang the hymns I liked.

Hymns are poems set to music. A good musical setting adds color to the poem, brings out nuances of meaning that might otherwise be overlooked, and helps cement the poem in the singer's memory. A compelling tune often initially attracts me to a hymn and draws the text to my attention. I have suggested a suitable tune (occasionally two tunes) for each text discussed in this book, and settings for most of the hymns I discuss in this book can be found in the appendix. Many of these tunes can be found in modern hymnals; all can be found at Hymnary.org.

In my private devotions, I often reflect on a hymn text and let it probe my mind and guide my praying. The meditations in this book are based on hymns I have come to love over the years. Because each hymn engenders a unique response, these meditations differ widely. Each begins with a few sentences on the authorship and history of the hymn. Then

comes an expository section with comments on each stanza. The exposition may discuss the hymn's biblical background, its theology, its historical context, its pertinence to modern concerns, or how it has impacted me personally. Each meditation concludes with a prayer, sometimes very brief, arising from my reflecting on the hymn. Italicized passages in quotation marks are my imaginings of words spoken by God or Christ to me—to us.

All the hymns I have chosen for these meditations are old ones. The two most recent, “Morning has broken” and “God of grace and God of glory,” were both written in the 1930s. It's not that I don't enjoy singing more recent hymns. I do. But many recent hymns are of a genre called “praise” or “renewal” music. I like singing this music. As with nineteenth-century gospel hymnody, which it resembles and which I also enjoy singing, praise music moves the heart and is easy to learn, making it useful in worship. But the texts are often repetitive and rely on stock phrases. For me, they do not hold up well when used for meditation.

Anyone with two or more hymnals at hand will quickly discover that many hymns vary from one hymnal to another. Hymnal editors often revise the text of a hymn, for a variety of reasons. Entire stanzas may be deleted and not all hymnal editors delete the same stanzas. I have researched the original text of most of the hymns discussed in this book and in a few cases have reinserted a stanza omitted in many hymnals but which I find helpful.

Editors also change the wording of sentences and phrases. Some changes are made to clarify what a text is meant to say; the meaning of words changes with time, sometimes making

the original meaning unintelligible to later generations. Editors also revise hymn texts to correct what they deem to be questionable theology.

In recent decades, editors have sought to remove the hint of sexism from hymns by eliminating or minimizing the use of masculine terms and pronouns when referring to God and to humanity. In the texts as quoted in this book, I have usually used the newer, inclusive wording and have done a bit of rewriting myself along those lines, though I have occasionally returned to the original wording when I felt a revision compromised the text's meaning.

Eliminating sexist language in hymns is a dicey undertaking. There is no way entirely to abandon the use of masculine words with reference to God without creating other problems. As for pronouns, the traditional *he* can suggest that God is male, but *she* could suggest that God is female. *It* will not do because God is personal, and *they* is out because God is one. That exhausts the available pronouns. But we need a pronoun because refusing to use one leads to awkward, clumsy prose that distracts more than it inspires or informs. Modern hymnal editors have minimized their use of pronouns when referring to God, but when they feel compelled to use one, most use *he* because it is biblical and traditional. The terms *Father* and *Lord* used with reference to God can also be painful for those whose father or authority figure was absent or abusive. But in my opinion, no suitable substitute for *Father* and *Lord* as terms for God has been found. Continuing to use these terms, but sparingly, seems to me the least unsatisfactory policy.

One reader of an early draft of this manuscript commented that this approach seemed very traditional. I'm not sure whether she meant that as a compliment or a criticism, but I wouldn't disagree. It's not that I fear new ideas. It just takes me a while to embrace them, and in my prayers, out of which these meditations arise, I am a traditionalist through and through.

Another reader commented that there's a lot about me in this book. I don't think I'm a narcissist, but since these meditations come out of my praying, they could hardly be about anyone else. At one point I tried to minimize my use of first-person singular pronouns, but that seemed artificial and contrived, so I have left most of them in. I hope readers will connect with the issues I wrestle with in my praying. As children of God seeking peace, strength, comfort, and love, we stand on common ground.

Richard H. Schmidt
Fairhope, Alabama

1

A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Suggested tune: *Ein feste Burg*

tr. Frederic Henry Hedge (1805-1890)

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;
for still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his Name, from age to age the same,
and he must win the battle.*

*And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure,
one little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth:
let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also,
the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
his kingdom is forever.*



Martin Luther, the great German theologian and leader of the Protestant Reformation, believed in hymn singing. “The devil, the originator of sorrowful anxieties and restless troubles, flees before the sound of music,” he said. Luther wrote both the words and the music for this hymn, which he based on Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”



*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;
for still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.*

Countless Christians have drawn strength from this hymn’s robust, sinewy images of divine strength. But who is this “ancient foe” who threatens us? While neither Satan nor any other cosmic foe is mentioned in Psalm 46, the psalm does refer to earthquakes, raging seas, and war. Luther personalizes these dangers in his hymn by calling them *der alt’ böse Feind*, the angry old enemy, a meaning retained in our translation.

I’m not sure about that understanding. While the devil has a prominent place in classical Christian imagery, he doesn’t appear as a cosmic figure until very late in the Bible. But if human experience on earth includes rebellious self-will, could the same be true in other dimensions of reality? The Book of Revelation (12:7) refers to war in heaven. Perhaps there really are rebellious celestial creatures vying for human

souls on earth. Maybe C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, purporting to contain the correspondence from a senior devil to his subordinate trying to win a human soul for hell, isn't entirely fictitious after all.

*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his Name, from age to age the same,
and he must win the battle.*

We don't need an "ancient foe" to seek to work us woe, for we work plenty of woe ourselves, and nothing on earth seems able to quell the power of the temptations we gladly entertain. It seems just a short time ago that my tall frame, daily exercise regimen, and youthful vigor gave me a sense of being in control of things, certainly of my own life. I also confided in my own intelligence and personality. Everything revolved around me. I'm grateful that some of my plans have come to pass, but I now realize that other people and fortuitous timing had as much to do with that as I did. Other plans went belly up, often because I made foolish mistakes. When I confided in my own strength, my striving was losing.

One of the advantages of old age is that the temptation to confide in our own strength wanes as our strength diminishes. When merely to rise from a chair requires careful unbending and steadying, the foolishness of confiding in our own strength stares us in the face.

And of course the "right man" is on our side, "the man of God's own choosing," which is to say, not the man of our own choosing. Many of us are still learning to trust Jesus Christ,