

LENT WITH THE WESLEYS, 2023

Hymn singing flourished in 18th-century England and then in America. Methodism continues to be marked by a lively and continuous tradition of hymns. Charles Wesley (1707-1788) wrote thousands of them; John Wesley (1703-1791) also wrote hymns, edited his brother's verses, translated German and Spanish texts, and published many hymn books. (The Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition at the Duke University Divinity School has made accessible on its website all of this material.)

John Wesley advised people to “sing lustily” but “above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing [...]. Attend strictly to the sense of what you sing.” (1761) Eventually, John published a pocket hymn book for people to carry around; this was adapted by an enterprising Methodist class leader to also include hymns by other writers than the Wesleys and was sold as *A Pocket Hymn-Book, Designed as a Constant Companion for the Pious: Collected from Various Authors*. In America, this pocket hymnal became the official hymnal of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1790. So, as you keep company with the Wesleys during Lent, may their hymns also be your constant companion.

This devotional aid can be used in several ways. There is a single morning hymn that can be read and sung each day of Lent. There are excerpts from prayers by John Wesley for each day of the week. And there is a weekly hymn to read and sing. The spirituality of the Wesleys united the mind and heart: the texts are rich in scriptural references and in theological truths, all growing from an experiential knowledge of God's grace. The hymns encourage worship and praise; they educate the laity; and they constitute a call to follow Christ, to serve, and to grow—“to go on to perfection.” The texts for hymns are in the current UMC hymnal, indicated by # , and at the site www.hymnary.org, where the opening line can be typed to locate the hymn. Music is available by searching for the hymn on YouTube. The tunes and settings for the hymns have often changed, so that you may find more than one tune for a single hymn text. You may experiment by reading silently, reading aloud, and then singing to see how your spiritual understanding is deepened. Scriptural references will permit you to use the hymns as vehicles for reflection and study. Finally, you may wish to consult Bishop Ken Carter's essay, “A Wesleyan Understanding of Grace,” available at www.ResourceUMC.org, under “Topics.” If you are interested in the history of hymns, you can visit www.umcdiscipleship.org, and search under “History of Hymns.” All scriptural references are to the KJV, the translation the Wesleys used.

DAILY MORNING HYMN: “Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies” #173 and hymnary.

--With the morning light, what does the writer call on Christ to do? What is the morning like without Christ? --Notice the movement from outside (nature) to inside (the poet's heart). What difference does the light of Christ make? – Long term, what does it mean to be filled more completely until “the perfect day?”—Now personalize the prayers or requests. What sin, grief, and unbelief spread gloom, blocking the light of Christ and your own spiritual growth?

--This poem also conveys the nature of the Christ as God incarnate through its series of images and names, linked to glory, transcendence, and light. Read and study carefully the following passages of scripture: Malachi 4:2, Hebrews 1:1-4, Luke 1:65-79, 1 Peter 1:16-19, and Proverbs 4:18. How does Wesley's evocation of such passages change your reading and singing of this hymn and your own understanding of the work of Christ on earth?

EXCERPTS FROM: FORMS OF PRAYER FOR EVERY DAY IN THE WEEK (<https://wesleyscholar.com>).

Sunday Morning: "...O let me ever esteem it my Privilege and Happiness, to have a Day set apart for the Concerns of my Soul, a Day free from Distractions, disengaged from the World, wherein I have nothing more to do but to praise and to love Thee." (p. 4)

Monday Morning: "...Blessed be thy Love for all the Temporal Benefits which Thou hast with a Liberal Hand poured out upon me, for my Health and Strength, Food and Raiment, and all other Necessities with which Thou with a Liberal Hand hast provided thy Sinful Servant." ... "Suffer me to exclude none, O Lord, from my Charity, who are the objects of thy Mercy: But let me treat all my Neighbors with that tender Love, which is due to thy Servants and to thy children." (pp. 10, 11)

Tuesday Morning: "...O Thou Saviour of all that trust in Thee, Do with me what seemeth best in thine own Eyes: Only give me the mind which was in Thee: Let me learn of Thee to be Meek and Lowly. Pour into me the whole spirit of Humility; fill, I beseech Thee, every Part of my Soul with it, and make it the constant, ruling Habit of my Mind that all my other Tempers may arise from it: That I may have no Thoughts, no Desires, no Designs, but such as are the true Fruit of a lowly Spirit." (pp. 15-16)

Wednesday Morning: "...Send thy Holy Spirit to be the Guide of all my Ways, and the Sanctifier of my Soul and Body. Save, defend, and build me up in thy Fear and Love; give unto me the Light of thy Countenance, Peace from Heaven, and the Salvation of my Soul in the Day of the Lord Jesus. ... Hear also my Prayers for all Mankind, and guide their Feet into the Way of Peace." (pp. 20, 22)

Thursday Morning: "... I believe, O sovereign Goodness, O mighty Wisdom, that thou dost sweetly order and govern all Things, even the most Minute, even the most Noxious, to thy Glory and the Good of those that love Thee: I believe, O Father of the Families of Heaven and Earth, that Thou so disposeth of all Events, as may best magnify thy Goodness to all thy Children, especially those whose Eyes are upon Thee. I most humbly beseech Thee teach me to adore all thy Ways, tho' I cannot comprehend them; Teach me to be glad Thou art King, and to give Thee Thanks for all Things that befall; seeing Thou hast chosen them for me, and hast thereby set to thy Seal that they are Good. And for that which is to come, give me thy Grace to do in all Things what pleaseth Thee; and then, with an absolute Submission to thy Wisdom, to leave the Issues of them to thy Hand." (p. 26)

Friday Morning: "... O Jesus, poor and abject, unknown and despised, have mercy upon me, and let me not be ashamed to follow Thee. O Jesus, Hated, Calumniated, and Persecuted, Have mercy upon me, and let me not be afraid to come after Thee. O Jesus, betrayed, and sold at a vile Price, have mercy upon me, and make me content to be as my Master [...]. O Jesus, Crowned with Thorns, and hailed in Derision, O Jesus, burthen'd with our Sins, and the Curses of the People, [...] O Jesus, hanging on the accursed Tree, bowing the Head, giving up the Ghost, have mercy upon me, and conform my whole Soul to thy Holy, Humble, Suffering Spirit." (pp. 31-32)

Saturday Morning: "... Thou art Praised, O Lord, by all thy Works, and magnified by every Thing which Thou hast created. The Sun rejoiceth to run his course, that he may set forth thy Praise who madest him. Nor do the Moon and Stars refrain to manifest thy Glory, even amidst the Silent Night. The Earth breathes forth each Day Perfumes, as incense to Thee her Sacred King, who has crowned her with Herbs, and Trees, and beautified her with Hills and Dales. [...] Amid this universal Jubilee of Nature, suffer not, I beseech Thee, the Sons of Men to be silent, but let the noblest Work of thy Creation pay Thee the noblest sacrifice of Praise. O pour thy grace into my Heart, that I may worthily magnify thy great and glorious Name for Thou hast made me and sent me into the World to do thy Work." (pp. 37-38)

HYMN FOR THE WEEK OF FEBRUARY 26: “O For a Heart to Praise My God” #417 and hymnary

--“O for a heart...” An expression of yearning—and the word “heart” is repeated 3 times in stanza one, and once in the next 3 stanzas, with each mention accompanied with ever more detailed descriptions of the qualities of heart – of life – desired. What are these qualities? Now read and study the following scripture passages: Ephesians 1:7, Col. 1:4, 1 Peter 1:19; Psalm 19:14, Hebrews 4:16, Matthew 19:28, 25:31. How do they enlarge and deepen the meaning of the hymn?

--“Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart...” This last stanza sets out clearly the desire to embody the nature of Christ... , echoing, but superseding Proverbs 7:2-3. Now, read and sing the hymn in the context of Phil. 2:5-11 and I John 4: 8, 16-17.

--What are the deepest yearnings of your heart? Are they centered on Christ and Christ-likeness?

HYMN FOR THE WEEK OF MARCH 5: “Jesus , my strength, my hope,/On Thee I cast my care” hymnary

--“Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (I Peter 5: 7; see also 7b-11). This hymn seems to deal with the realities of daily life in Christ and our dependance on prayer. What are your actual cares, blocking your way and how do you pray? (I Thess. 5: 17, “Pray without ceasing.”) What qualities does the hymn suggest that we need? And what is our final confidence? (Phil. 4:13)

--How do we guard against and respond to temptation and evil? (stanzas 2 and 3) Are we steady, patient, and discerning? And do we rest upon God’s word? (Psalm 119: 11, Phil 4:13)

--What do you think Charles Wesley may have been experiencing personally when he wrote these stanzas and why is it that we can ourselves transfer the realities and truths he describes to our own lives?

HYMN FOR THE WEEK OF MARCH 12: “’Tis finished! The Messiah Dies” #282, hymnary

--John 19:30. How dramatic the first two stanzas are! We are present, drawn into the scene of the crucifixion as the poet uses the present tense and as the action unfolds. Imagine that you are there, participating in the scene.

--Jesus, the Messiah. See Matthew 1:1. By referring to Jesus with this title, Wesley places the redemptive work of the Christ in the tradition of Old Testament sacrifice, the tabernacle and temple, and the “new covenant.” See Matthew 27:50-57, Hebrews 9:1-12, 28; 10:11-22, Ephesians 2: 11-17.

--In stanza 3, “’Tis finished!” is repeated twice. What is Wesley’s personal experience? Do you share it? See also John 1:34-30, regarding the meaning of the “Lamb of God” and the call to us to follow.

--Then, in the final verse, Wesley states a truth, that “all may live from sin set free.” With what is the reign of Satan equated and how does it end? Read 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, especially verses 51-58.

HYMN FOR THE WEEK OF MARCH 19: “Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise” #312, hymnary

--This hymn calls us to praise the risen, triumphant, exalted Lord, and note the immediacy of the experience: the present tense, the action, and the calls to us: Hail, See, See, Hark! How do the echoes of Psalm 24, esp. 7-10, and Revelation 22:1-5 add to the image of the exalted Christ?

--In stanza 3, the adverbs “yet” and “still” usher in a different theme. Jesus may reign from above, but has He forgotten about the world He has left behind?

--Wesley envisions a remarkable scene at the end of the hymn in which Jesus reveals himself anew to us, the church. Compare Luke 24: 33-48. Do we recognize the love and blessings of the risen Lord in our midst today? See also what Paul has to say in Col. 1: 12-20 and 28, "Christ in you, the hope of glory..."

HYMN FOR THE WEEK OF MARCH 26: "Put thou thy trust in God,/ In duty's path go on" hymnary and 4 stanzas as #129, "Give to the winds thy fears"

--This hymn was penned by Paul Gerhardt (1609-1676), a Lutheran pastor, theologian, and one of Germany's great hymn writers. John Wesley translated the text and included it, along with 4 other of his translations from German, in the hymnal he edited, *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, the first Anglican hymnal published in America (Savannah, 1737). (The two versions of the same hymn that we encounter with this example illustrate how hymns in the Wesleyan tradition often exhibit varying numbers of stanzas and tunes.) Lutheran and Moravian piety and spirituality heavily influenced both John and Charles during their early spiritual quests. In fact, the central theme of giving our fears to the winds may have struck a chord in John because, on his way over to Georgia for his troubling two years there, the ship that he and Charles were on was caught in a life-threatening storm. The German-speaking Moravian passengers maintained an exceptional calm due to their inner calm and trust, while the English speakers were struck by panic. The Wesleys never forgot the example of the Moravians.

--In fact, we can think of Mark's account of Jesus and his disciples, caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee (4:36-41): "Carest thou not that we perish?" How often do we act as though God does not care? Yet, I Peter 5:7 admonishes us otherwise: "Casting all your cares upon him; for he careth for you."

-- Psalm 37, especially verses 1-11, is a source for this hymn. Look at the advice in the psalm and see if you have put it to work in your life.

-- What is the "work" or Christian service in your own life that awaits completion in due time with God's "sovereign" providence? In retrospect, do you see "how wise, how strong" God's hand has been in the ups and downs of serving?

HYMN FOR THE WEEK OF APRIL 2: "Jesus, United by Thy Grace" #561, hymnary

--Psalm 133 begins "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren [RSV: kindred] to dwell together in unity!" What feeling does this hymn convey about the unity of the community of believers, kindred by grace, but diverse by nature? What are our responsibilities to one another as members of the body of Christ? What are we moving toward in our individual lives in Christ and in our shared life in Christ?

--"Let this mind be in you..." (Phil. 2:5); "Be all of one mind..." (I Peter 4: 8-12); "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ..." (Gal. 6:1-2). How are these passages and New Testament ideals reflected in this hymn? Give thanks for the special people who have helped share your burdens or showed you the mind of Christ along your spiritual journey.

--Study these Pauline passages about the early church: I Cor. 12:12-13, Eph. 4:1-16, Col. 3:12-17. What gifts do you bring to our particular church and its mission that God may be calling you to use?