

40
Favorite
Hymns
*for the
Christian Year*

A CLOSER LOOK
AT THEIR SPIRITUAL
AND POETIC MEANING



LELAND RYKEN

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Dedicated to my friends at P&R Publishing

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Introduction

IT will doubtless surprise most readers to learn that until 1870, the customary format of a hymnal was a small (five-by-three-inch) book consisting of words only. The most accurate designation for such a book is an “anthology of devotional poems.” These anthologies were carried back and forth between home and office and school and church. *Forty Favorite Hymns for the Christian Year* seeks to revive this tradition of experiencing familiar hymns as poems.

Among several good reasons for such a revival is the fact that every hymn is a poem first, and only later becomes a hymn. As a verbal text, a hymn possesses all the qualities of a poem. Only when it is paired with music does it become a hymn. Much is gained by the singing of hymns accompanied by music, but much is also lost.

This anthology of hymnic poems aims to restore what has been lost. An immediate gain comes from reading the successive stanzas in linear fashion, with one stanza following its predecessor. Our gaze keeps moving forward instead of returning to the same starting point at the beginning of each stanza. The result is a clear sense of the sequential progression of thought and feeling, as it grows organically from beginning to end.

A second advantage of reading a hymn as a poem is that we can read slowly instead of being hurried along by the music and singing. Poetry is concentrated, and it accordingly requires

pondering and analyzing. When reading a poem, we can take as long as the text requires. Such contemplative reading allows us to pause on individual images, letting the literal picture register in our imagination and then noting the connotations and emotions that flow from each image. Figures of speech such as metaphors and similes likewise ask to have their meanings unpacked.

Much of the beauty that we experience when we sing hymns is the beauty of the music. Experiencing hymns as poems puts the focus on the verbal beauty of the words and phrases. The great hymns of Christian tradition are an untapped source of devotional poetry, just waiting to be made available for the pleasure and edification of Christians.

It is not an overstatement to claim that this anthology of hymns presented and analyzed as devotional poems will introduce readers to the hymns they never knew. Readers will realize that they have been deprived of a treasure that was never opened to them.

All the poems that were selected for this anthology share two specific traits. First, all the entries are linked, on the basis of their origin and usage, to an annual season or event such as Easter or Christmas. This means, second, that all these hymnic poems belong to a genre known as occasional poetry. An occasional poem is inspired by a specific event or occasion. This occasion leaves an imprint on the poem and often determines its content. Linking such a poem to its occasion is an indispensable part of understanding its nuances. The explications in this anthology will thus keep the occasional nature of the poems in view.

THE explications of the poems should be used as a lens through which to look closely at the accompanying texts. They are not a substitute for the poems, nor are they detachable pieces of information. They function as a travel guide at a site,

Introduction

interpreting what the travelers are looking at and bringing out features that would otherwise be missed. There is no prescribed order for reading a poem and its accompanying explication, but regardless of whether you read the poem or the explication first, the explication is designed to send you back to the text repeatedly. For example, every explication includes an account of the flow of the successive stanzas or sections of the poem under consideration and examines how different rhetorical and literary techniques are used in each one. Thus, if the explication says something about image patterns or allusions, that insight comes to fruition only if you go back to the text and see how the statement in the explication is true. This book will achieve its intended purpose only if you go back and forth between a poem and its accompanying explication.

A glossary at the back of the book gives definitions for the poetic and literary terms that will be used in the discussions of the different poems.

New Year

THE religious event of New Year that is observed by Christians and churches has nothing to do with the secular celebration of New Year, which has roots in pagan mythology. The only thing they have in common is a day on the calendar.

We need to pause in order to note some nuances in our terminology. The night of December 31 is known in some circles as Old Year's Eve and in others as New Year's Eve. The denomination in which I was raised had a full-fledged Old Year's Eve worship service and an equally complete New Year's service on the morning of January 1. In addition, some groups—especially in the African-American community—call the service that takes place on December 31 a Watch Night service.

Attaching spiritual significance to the turn of the year has been a practice of Christian church life for a very long time. Most sources trace the origin of Watch Night to a Moravian service that was held in 1733 on the estate of Nicholas von Zinzendorf in Hernut, Germany. By 1740, Charles Wesley had incorporated the practice into Methodist church life, where the services were called Covenant Renewal services.

The African-American experience of Watch Night is the most dramatic of all, because of what happened on December 31, 1862—the night before the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. Slaves met in churches to see if their freedom would

actually occur. It is no wonder that the night also became known as Freedom's Eve in the African-American community.

Services that are held on Old Year's Eve follow a range of formats. In some Protestant churches, a service is held at the usual time for evening services. In other churches, the service may begin later and go until midnight. In turn, some churches make it a priority to enter the new year while celebrating the sacrament of Communion. Many Roman Catholic churches hold a midnight mass on the night of December 31.

As the hymns and their accompanying commentary in this section will show, the spiritual themes of the turn of the year are varied. It is a time for introspection regarding one's spiritual state (for keeping watch over one's soul) as well as for meditating on the temporality of life. Renewal of one's Christian commitment is also a prominent theme, and so is the rehearsal of spiritual resources that believers claim from God as they contemplate the uncertainties and fears of the coming year.



O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Under the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their lives and cares,

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Are carried downwards by thy flood,
And lost in following years.

Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home.

WRITTEN by “the father of English hymnody,” this poem had its origin in Psalm 90. To call it a paraphrase of that psalm is misleading, however. Only half of the poem uses specific motifs from the psalm. It is more accurate to say that Psalm 90 gave Watts the idea and inspiration for his poem, along with some of its specific motifs. The bulk of the poem took shape through the ordinary process of poetic composition. The imagery, verbal beauty, and smooth flow of the lines all fell like a benediction on it while Watts was caught up in composing an English-language poem independent from Psalm 90.

The subject of the poem’s meditation is time—a fact that makes this hymn a natural selection for a New Year service or meditation. Two dimensions of time are held before us: the fleeting nature of human life on this earth and the eternal nature of God, which is presented as a defense against the impermanence of our lives in a time-bound world. The poem is evenly divided between these two themes.

The poem views time in a uniformly negative light, presenting it as a threat to people and their security. It is like a *stormy blast* from which we need protection. It is *an ever rolling stream*

that drags everyone down into oblivion. It is as fleeting and insubstantial as a *dream*. As a New Year meditation, this poem presents the temporality of human existence as something profoundly disquieting. It thus presents time as a problem that needs a solution.

That solution is a divine eternity that is exempt from the qualities attributed to time. All the stanzas that are devoted to God celebrate his transcendence over time. God is *everlasting*. He predates creation and will exist *to endless years*. He is an *eternal home*. He is a permanent presence from our past to our future.

Intertwined with this central contrast between time and eternity is a parallel contrast between people and God. The poem paints a realistic picture of human weakness. People are *busy tribes of flesh and blood* (an epithet or title that evokes negative feelings) whose *lives and cares* are a trial to them. After being *carried downwards* by the flood of time, they are *lost in following years*. They are *forgotten as a dream* that dies at daybreak, and their earthly sojourn is one in which *troubles last*. This New Year's poem faces time-bound human existence at its worst.

Yet we do not experience this as a depressing poem. Even the negative observations noted above are beautified by the poem's language and imagery, through such magical phrases as *shelter from the stormy blast* and *time, like an ever rolling stream*. But poetic beauty is only a momentary stay against the frailty of human life in a time-bound world. The reason for the buoyancy we feel from this poem is the picture of God and eternity that it offers us. As we confront time and its threatening nature, we are led to throw ourselves on God as our only security. This poem, with its images of an *eternal home* and a *sure . . . defense and help in ages past* and *hope for years to come*, is a poem of comfort.

Watts's poem brings us to the same resting place that we find at the close of an Old English poem titled *The Seafarer*:

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Let us consider where we have a home,
and then think about how we may come there;
and let us also strive to reach that place
of eternal blessedness.

His poem does not instill in us a sense of defeatism as we face the threat of time but instead a resolve to embrace an alternative. This sense of embracing a better alternative is enhanced by the fact that the poem is a prayer addressed to God.

PSALM 90 is the obvious biblical passage to read as a parallel text to this poem. Here are the verses that are most directly seen in Watts's poem:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (vv. 1-2)

For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream.
(vv. 4-5)



Standing at the Portal

Frances Ridley Havergal (1836–1879)

Standing at the portal
Of the opening year,
Words of comfort meet us,
Hushing every fear;
Spoken through the silence
By our Father's voice,
Tender, strong, and faithful,
Making us rejoice.

For the year before us,
O what rich supplies!
For the poor and needy
Living streams shall rise;
For the sad and sinful
Shall His grace abound;
For the faint and feeble
Perfect strength be found.

He will never fail us,
He will not forsake;
His eternal cov'nant
He will never break.

Standing at the Portal

Resting on His promise,
What have we to fear?
God is all-sufficient
For the coming year.

Refrain

*Onward then, and fear not,
Children of the day;
For His Word shall never,
Never pass away.*

FRANCES Havergal made a practice of writing a hymnic poem for each New Year and then sending it to friends on postcards or in letters. As a result, we can regard her as a connoisseur of New Year poetry and hymns—an author who was conversant with the range of motifs and themes that this genre offers. A fruitful approach to this specific poem is to imagine the author choosing from among available options and deciding what aspect of New Year to distill for her readers.

The poem follows a familiar paradigm in which poets begin by placing themselves in a landscape. Usually that landscape is physical, but this time it is temporal. Nonetheless, the poet uses an architectural metaphor to do what medieval traditions described as “composing the scene” by opening an imagined gate to us, in the first two lines, as a lead-in to the rest of the poem.

Before we contemplate the actual subject of the poem, therefore, we picture ourselves standing in front of a portal. A portal is not just any door; it is a large and imposing door that serves as a point of entry to a significant building. This metaphor sets an appropriate tone for the poem and the event that it marks. Entering the new year is a momentous event—one that leads to something noteworthy. The second line of the poem,

by mentioning *the opening year*, moves from this metaphoric portal—while also cleverly building on it, through its use of the adjective *opening*—to the poem’s actual subject.

We thus move into the poem itself in a spirit of discovery, as we wonder what aspect of the new year it will lead us to contemplate. The unifying thread of the poem’s theme is that we can enter the new year with confidence because of the resources that are ours in God. The poem presents an inventory of these supplies and accompanies them with assertions of the feelings that they naturally arouse in us.

The first resource that we see being provided during the new year is the words of comfort that God speaks in stanza 1. His voice speaks through an evocative *silence* and is rendered even more moving because of its attributes—it is *tender, strong, and faithful*. Two human responses to this are then described: the hushing of fears and rejoicing.

The second resource that is provided is spiritual sustenance for the needy. Stanza 2 develops a contrast between human neediness and divine provision. On one side, we have *the poor and needy, the sad and sinful, and the faint and feeble* (evocative epithets, to be sure). This sad spectacle is a foil to what God offers: *rich supplies, living streams, grace that abounds, and perfect strength*. As we look closely at the structure of this stanza, we can see that Havergal has matched each particular need to a corresponding supply that meets that need. Thus the sad and sinful receive grace, and the faint and feeble receive strength.

The concluding stanza develops the motif that God’s unfailing faithfulness is a sufficient supply for the coming year. The first four lines stress the eternal nature of God’s commitment to his own, which is implicitly set over against the mutability that we feel at the turn of the year. The second half moves from the fact of God’s faithfulness to the response of confidence that it instills in us.

The poem begins by leading us through a door, and its refrain portrays a kind of exit from the site we have imagined entering, through its command for us to step *onward*. The refrain also picks up two key ideas of the poem: freedom from fear and the never-failing divine Word. The concluding note of the poem fixes our gaze on something that will *never pass away*. Taking this as our cue, we can find many hints throughout the poem that one of Havergal's goals was to counter the feeling of vulnerability that people naturally feel at the beginning of a new year. It is even possible to see the poem as a subtle protest poem that counters a prevailing attitude.

MANY Bible passages echo in our minds as we ponder this poem. The following verses from Isaiah 41 are an obvious parallel to it (and perhaps were even a source for it):

Fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you. (v. 10)

For I, the LORD your God,
hold your right hand;
it is I who say to you, "Fear not,
I am the one who helps you." (v. 13)