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Introduction

EVERY hymn begins its life as a poem. It becomes a hymn only when it is matched to music. For centuries, the physical format of hymnbooks reinforced the poetic nature of hymns. Until the 1870s, hymnbooks were words-only anthologies of hymn texts. More accurately, these books were anthologies of devotional poems. *Forty Favorite Hymns of the Christian Faith* belongs to this tradition.

This anthology is designed to supplement the singing of the favorite hymns that have been selected. It seeks to compensate for what is lost when we only *sing* the hymns. This is not intended to deny that something is also lost when we do not also sing our favorite hymns. The purpose of this introduction is to alert you to what it adds to your understanding and enjoyment of your favorite hymns when you experience them as devotional poems in addition to singing them.

The most apparent advantage of reading and analyzing a hymn as a poem is that we can read and analyze it at our own pace. By contrast, when we sing a hymn, we are hurried along and are unable to pause to absorb the details of the words and the overall organization of the poem. Poetry is intended to have its images and phrases unpacked, but this is impossible when the flow of music keeps moving us along.

To this we can add the revolution that is effected when we see a hymn printed on the page as a poem. The line is the

recurrent unit in poetry. Poets consciously compose line by line, and this will be apparent in the anthology that follows. Unlike with prose, with poetry the lines do not run all the way to the right margin of the page. It is somewhat shocking to realize that many hymnbooks print the hymns as prose, thereby violating the poetic principle of construction by lines.

In addition to building their poems on the principle of line-by-line progression, poets mold their content into stanzas. To grasp how stanzaic construction controls what happens in a hymnic text, we need to see the successive stanzas printed above and below each other. The printing of hymns in hymnbooks obscures this.

When hymnic poems are printed in a vertical arrangement from start to finish, several things become available to us. First, writers of hymnic poems usually build individual stanzas around a controlling topic or motif. When we see each stanza visually as a single entity, it is usually easy to see what unifies it.

After we have accurately labeled the topics of the individual stanzas in a hymn, we can also see how the stanzas fit into the poet's overall organization. This is known as whole-part relationship, and it enables us to grasp the unity of a hymnic poem. In a well-crafted hymn, the individual stanzas each contribute their part to the superstructure, resulting in a coherent composition.

There is one more thing that emerges when we see the stanzas of a hymnic poem printed above and below each other. Poets not only consciously build their composition around stanzas that fit coherently into a unified design, but they also pay attention to the progressive flow from one stanza to another. Once we are attuned to this, we can often see how the conclusion of one stanza leads logically to the beginning of the next one. This is lost to us with a conventional hymnbook because our eye does not see the last line of a stanza directly above the first line of the next one.

Thus far we have considered the unity and structure of a hymnic poem. But there is a whole further poetic realm that becomes available when we assimilate a hymn as a poem. In addition to the structure of a poem—the big, paraphrasable organization—there is what literary critics call the “poetic texture.” To speak of structure and texture like this is to use an architectural metaphor. The structure of a poem is like the wooden beams that hold up a wall; the texture is like wallpaper that covers the surface of the wall.

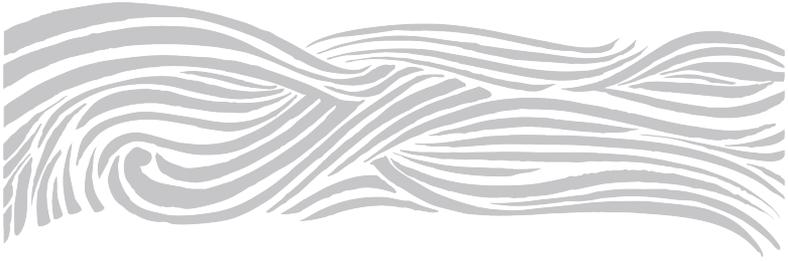
The poetic texture is the words, images, and figures of speech that embody the actual content of a poem. Poetry is a very concentrated form of discourse, and its details need to be pondered and their multiple meanings unpacked. This requires a slow pace, in contrast to the hurried pace of singing. It is a rare image and figure of speech that has only one meaning, and it takes time to discover the multiple meanings.

The foregoing anatomy of what constitutes a poem is a road map to the ingredients that make up the explications that accompany each selection in this anthology. In general, an explication will delineate the unifying theme and organization of the poem, the contribution of individual stanzas to the overall design, and the meanings embodied in the poetic texture. In regard to the latter, the explications provide prompts for undertaking a more thorough exploration on your own.

THERE is no prescribed way to integrate hymnic poems and their accompanying explications, other than to recognize that the explications are not a substitute for the poems. Instead they are a road map to your exploration of the hymns. A plausible order is to begin with your own reading and preliminary analysis of the text, then read the explication as casting a retrospective look at what you have experienced up to that point, and then return to the text with the explication serving as a lens

through which to look more closely at the hymnic poem. For the text-plus-explication format to work as intended, you need to operate on the premise of a two-way street with back-and-forth movement between text and explication.

A final word needs to be said about selections in this anthology that are unfamiliar to you. Lack of familiarity is a distinct disadvantage when we sing a hymn; in fact, initially we flounder. But not knowing a hymn is in no way a disadvantage when reading and analyzing a poem in this anthology. It may even be an advantage, prompting us to pay closer attention. Additionally, the presentation and analysis of familiar hymns as devotional poems provide a new experience of the hymns for everyone who reads this anthology. At this level, every entry in this anthology is new and unfamiliar.



What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Joseph Scriven (1819–1886)

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
In his arms he'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.

THIS poem of simple faith in Jesus is only a little less iconic than “Amazing Grace.” It is known around the world in many languages, and the number of popular singers who have recorded it is amazing. Several things save this poem from being as simplistic as it may initially seem, and one of these is the crucible of suffering out of which it arose.

Joseph Scriven lived his early life in the north of Ireland. At age twenty-four, on the night before he was scheduled to be married, his fiancée was thrown from her horse into a river, where she drowned as Scriven looked on helplessly. To distance himself from his grief, Scriven moved to Canada, where he devoted himself at the cost of personal poverty to ministry and service to the disadvantaged. When he again fell in love, his second fiancée died of pneumonia shortly before the wedding. When Scriven heard of his mother’s serious illness back in Ireland, he wrote a poem of comfort for her that he titled “Pray without Ceasing.” It was later set to music and became the hymn we know as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

When we turn to the poem itself, we again find that it is not as simple as it appears to be. We can see this first in the multiplicity of genres that converge. It is a poem of assurance and also a poem of comfort. But then there is a countermovement, as we become aware of a strong element of exhortation and even rebuke for our lack of faith in the sufficiency of Jesus and even more for our lack of fervor in prayer. This poem also fits the genre of a meditative poem in which the poet thinks through the ramifications of the subject that has been introduced. And

because this poem uses the plural form of reference, Scriven's personal reflections become transmuted into the communal meditation of all believers.

The topics covered as the poem unfolds show a similar complexity. There is a sense in which the first two lines introduce the idea that controls the rest of the poem, inasmuch as the meditation does highlight the friendship of Jesus and his sufficiency for us in the griefs that define our lives. But in a surprise move, the poem quickly comes to focus on prayer as the main subject. More specifically, the subject of the poem is the comfort that is available to us in adversity through prayer.

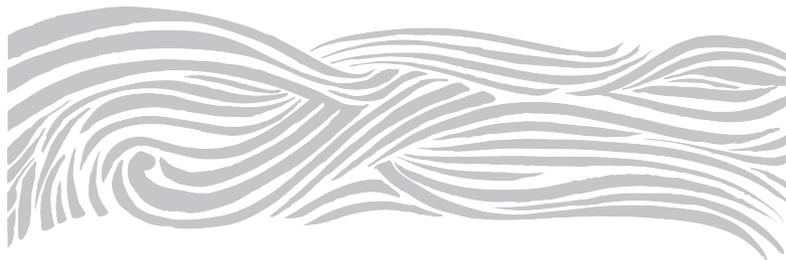
The foregoing is only the beginning of the complexity that is present in this seemingly simple poem. Two time-honored rhetorical devices organize the poem. One is the catalog or inventory, as the poet lists the griefs of life that are our lot in a fallen world and an accompanying inventory of the provisions that Jesus gives us. Second, there are five rhetorical questions in the poem—questions that are not asked to obtain information, since their answer is self-evident, but that instead awaken our agreement with what the poet is saying. For example, we all know that there are trials and temptations in life; the poet asks his question as a way of getting us to acknowledge that we are aware of this.

While the abundance that has been noted thus far is indeed impressive, there can be little doubt that this poem became an iconic hymn because it taps into powerful archetypes of human experience. Examples in this poem are peace, pain, all-inclusive “trouble,” betrayal by friends, human weakness, a “load” of care that we bear, refuge, and encircling arms of protection. Everyone resonates with these archetypes.

THIS poem took its origin from a specific passage of the New Testament. That passage is 1 Thessalonians 5:17–18:

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.



Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Thomas Chisholm (1866–1960)

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
As thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Refrain

Great is thy faithfulness!

Great is thy faithfulness!

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

*Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

THE great success of this poem, with its extravagant claims about God's faithfulness, was unlikely by human standards. The poem was one of twelve hundred written by someone who was born in a log cabin in Kentucky and who lived his life under the shadow of ill health and meager financial resources. The biblical source of the poem, the Old Testament book of Lamentations, matches these melancholy facts. Moreover, the poem first became a famous hymn during the Great Depression.

Opening lines count for a lot in poetry, and this poem runs true to form. The opening line here sets up the entire remainder of the poem. It announces that the unifying theme will be a specific attribute of God. Because the speaker addresses his assertion directly to God, we also know that the genre of the poem is a prayer. Further, because the entire poem is structured as a rehearsal or inventory of ways in which God has been faithful, we understand that the poem is a statement of praise and thanksgiving directed to God, who does not need to be informed of what he has done.

After the opening line has introduced the theme, the rest of the poem consists of variations on that theme. There are three variations, and together they present evidence that God is faithful. The remainder of the first stanza focuses on God's character, with emphasis on the attribute of immutability or unchangeableness. The remaining two stanzas shift from God's character to his works. Stanza 2 presents nature or creation as the arena of God's physical blessings, and the third stanza balances that with God's faithfulness in the human and spiritual realms. The refrain summarizes the central theme of the poem, but it also adds something new when it states that God has provided all

that we have needed. The poem is as much about God's providence as about his faithfulness, since it is in God's acts of provision that we see his faithfulness.

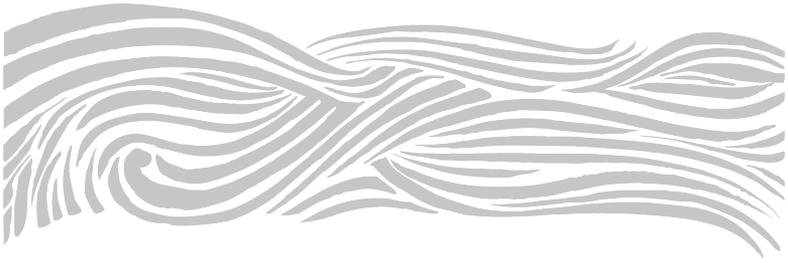
All that has been said reveals that this three-stanza poem is not, as we might think at first glance, a simple poem lacking breadth. One more proof of this remains to be noted: the mention of *today* and *tomorrow* in the next to last line of the third stanza alerts us that the poem covers a time span of past, present, and future.

The poem is a mosaic of Bible references. A conservative count is a dozen, while a broader criterion yields over fifty. An example that might prime the pump is in the second line of stanza 1, where the formulation "no shadow of turning with thee" is rooted in James 1:17, which speaks of "the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (KJV).

THE opening line of the poem, as well as a line of the refrain, comes from the King James Version of Lamentations 3:22–23:

It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because
his compassions fail not.

They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.



We Praise Thee, O God (Revive Us Again)

William Paton Mackay (1839–1885)

We praise thee, O God,
For the Son of thy love,
For Jesus who died,
And is now gone above.

We praise thee, O God,
For thy Spirit of light,
Who hath shown us our Savior,
And scattered our night.

All glory and praise
To the Lamb that was slain,
Who hath borne all our sins,
And hath cleansed every stain.

All glory and praise
To the God of all grace,
Who hast bought us, and sought us,
And guided our ways.

Revive us again;
Fill each heart with thy love;

We Praise Thee, O God

May each soul be rekindled
With fire from above.

Refrain

Hallelujah! Thine the glory.

Hallelujah! Amen.

Hallelujah! Thine the glory.

Revive us again.

THIS hymnic poem stands as proof that the simple can be a form of beauty. Accordingly, we should begin by relishing the simplicity of the design. The first four stanzas are unified by their ascribing of praise to God, as signaled in the opening line of each stanza. Each stanza then presents a variation on this theme, beginning when the second line names a specific member of the Trinity to whom the praise is directed. Each address, moreover, is expressed with an exalted epithet or title (e.g., “the Son of thy love”). The second half of each stanza enacts the actual praise by naming the mighty works that have been accomplished by the divine person named in the preceding line. The simplicity of these things, reinforced by the shortness of line length, represents a pleasing artistry.

But the simple design is not the whole story. The fifth stanza moves from declaration of praise to supplication for revival. This catches us off guard and prompts us to ponder by what logic a prayer for revival fits into what started out as a praise song. Lest we are tempted to pass off the final stanza as an afterthought to the main business of the poem, we need to know that this hymnic poem is with equal frequency known by two alternate titles in familiar hymnbooks: “We Praise Thee, O God” and “Revive Us Again.” We should also observe that the refrain merges the praise and supplication that have been noted.

Another avenue toward seeing complexity of technique under the simple surface is the poem's meter. When we read or sing a hymn text, we usually pay no attention to meter and rhyme, but the author most certainly did pay attention to them. No hymnic poem can exist without rhythm and rhyme, and these do not create themselves but are the product of the poet's creativity. We are well aware that part of what we like about "We Praise Thee, O God" is its energetic, foot-tapping tune, but that peppy tune requires the right kind of meter. Most English poems and hymns are written in iambic meter, consisting of recurring feet comprised of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. This meter keeps the words flowing smoothly and leisurely. "We Praise Thee, O God" is composed in anapestic meter, consisting of two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one. Whereas iambic meter saunters at a leisurely pace, anapestic meter gallops: "we PRAISE thee, O [unaccented] GOD, / for the SON of thy LOVE." Once we are alerted to this, it becomes part of our silent reading as well as oral reading.

This poem attains additional nuance through the real-life story out of which it arose. As a young man in Scotland, the author pawned the Bible that his pious mother had given him when he was seventeen. He went on to become a doctor. One day, a dying patient insisted that a book be retrieved for him in his final hours. After the patient died, Mackay ferreted out the book that had been so important to him. It was a Bible, but not just any Bible: it was inscribed with Mackay's name in his mother's handwriting. This providential event led to his conversion as well as his leaving his career as a doctor to become a Presbyterian minister. Perhaps this life-changing revival of commitment to a dormant childhood faith lies behind the hymn's linking of praise to God for his work of salvation with a prayer for revival.