

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Lutheran Service Book 700 | Study by Jesse L. Brubaker

Introduction

Love divine, all loves excelling LSB (Lutheran Service Book) 700 Charles Wesley (1707-88), prolific hymn writer and brother of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, first published this hymn in the 1747 collection *Hymns for Those that Seek, and Those that Have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ*. The text illustrates Wesley's tendency to write hymns that are dense with biblical references; Erik Routley has called Wesley's style "biblical mosaic." Wesley frequently quotes from nonbiblical sources as well. The opening stanza is inspired by the "Song of Venus" from John Dryden's *King Arthur*, an opera of 1691 with music by Henry Purcell: *Fairest Isle, all Isles Excelling, Seat of Pleasures, and of Loves; Venus here, will choose her Dwelling, and forsake her Cyprian Groves. Here Wesley reworks Dryden's text, replacing England's "fairest isle" with the human heart, making it a dwelling place not for Cupid's erotic love but for Jesus, the divine Love.*

It is estimated that during his lifetime, Wesley penned more than 9,000 poems of a spiritual nature, 6,000 of which are hymns. Charles' brother John sometimes served as editor to his hymns. John's typical response was, "some were good, some were mediocre, and some were exceptional." John can also be credited with improving the singability of Charles' hymns.

One of the most loved Welsh tunes, HYFRYDOL was composed by Rowland Hugh Prichard (1811-1887) in 1830 when he was only nineteen. It was published with about forty of his other tunes in his children's hymnal *Cyfaill y Cantorion* (The Singers' Friend) in 1844. Hyfrydol (Welsh for "tuneful" or "pleasant") is often set to Charles Wesley's "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "Alleluia! Sing to Jesus," & "Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us" in our hymnals.

Exploring the Scriptures and the Stanzas

Stanza 1: In our Gospel reading today (John 13:31-35), Jesus gives his disciples a "new commandment." We see that commandment echoed in 1 John 4:10-12.

- All of God's commandments (in the Old and New Testaments) are given to His people as beneficial rules. What goodness or joy comes to the one who follow this commandment? What benefit does it provide for the whole world?

Stanza 2: In comparing hymn stanzas across several denominations, very minor variances did occur, mainly in single word changes especially in this stanza. Wesley's second stanza originally asked that Jesus would take away "our power of sinning," which met with theological objections early on and was changed to "the love of sinning."

- What is the theological difference or how does that small change in words speak to the truths we know from the Bible?
- Read Revelation 21:6 (from our second reading in today's bulletin) says: And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment." - how does this support your thoughts or answers to the previous question?

Stanza 3: This stanza pairs the Church's plea of "Come, Almighty to deliver" with the hope that we look forward to which is so clearly laid out in Revelation 7:9-17. Read Revelation 7:9-12 and pay close attention to verses 9 & 10.

- There is a fun connection to be made to Palm Sunday where peoples were gathered together from all nations (for the Passover) shouting "Hosanna" ("save us!"), and the proclamation of those who are saved and praising the lamb around the throne.
- How does this help you think about the joy and excitement that the people had at Jesus' triumphal entry? How does it provide light to your view of what heaven is like?

Stanza 4: Here Wesley writes a plea to God that He would continue His work of sanctification – making us holy, "pure and spotless." Continue reading Revelation 7:13-15.

- Who are those clothed in white? Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 – what does this mean for the Christian?
- Your name is written in the book of life, through the divine love of God which excels far beyond a love that the world has to give. How does it feel to know that because of God's love, you are included in that vision of the faithful standing before the throne of God?

Making the Connection and Prayer

In "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," Charles Wesley does a great job of weaving together the truths of God's promise to fully wipe our sins away, through the love and mercy he has shown. Through the salvation purchased and won for us through the sacrifice of Christ love for us as it is found throughout scripture. In the book of Revelation, "John gives a glimpse of the glory that is Christ's. How incredible to be part of that blessedness! Drawn onward and upward by the magnificence of this hope in Christ, God's people join in the heavenly chorus **even now**.

By Your grace, Lord, keep [us] among the faithful, so that [we] may forever sing Your praises in the glory of heaven. Amen." ¹

¹ The Lutheran Study Bible, Concordia Publishing House 2001, commentary on Revelation 7:9-17. *Emphasis added.*