

Proper 23 (Series B)

“Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower” (*Lutheran Service Book* #694)

At first the language of this hymn seems to be about my fervent love of Jesus, a kind of “You Are My Sunshine” song. Instead, for the Christian who knows the words of Jesus, it turns out to be a strong reflection on the relationship between “light” and “life.” The “light of the world” is Jesus and Jesus is the one who gives me new “life.” No Jesus, no new life—just the old rebellious self. The poet, Johann Scheffler (1624-1677), at the end of the first stanza makes reference to this connection between light and life (“Thee will I love, O light divine, so long as life is mine”) and he repeats the same thought in the closing stanza.

Scheffler, an enthusiast for mystic poets like Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), sought to reach for the Infinite and a sense of oneness between Creator and creature. This hymn, not surprisingly then, reminds today’s singer of what was said in the opening to John’s gospel about Jesus, the “Word,” through whom all things were made: “In him [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

Scheffler rightly associates life with light and the “divine Light” is his central poetic image. Indeed, in stanza three Jesus is called the “Sun from heaven, whose radiance hath brought light to me.” For this I give thanks because Jesus’ lips (in the German: “golden mouth”) revealed the Father’s love; because Jesus gave up of his life for me I am “glad and free.” The poet develops the light image in various ways but since not everything comes through in translation permit some reference to his original wording. In the German of the first stanza Scheffler says he loves the “strength” (vigor, intensity) and the “powerful affect” of this light (the translator’s paraphrase says it gives me “hope” and “joy”). In the second stanza Jesus is “my life” (cf. John 1:4) and “truest friend.” Then in the second part of this stanza where Scheffler’s German text had three Biblical images for Jesus, namely, that Jesus’ “splendor” (brightness) enlightens a believer, that Jesus is the sacrificial “Lamb of God,” and that Jesus is the “bridegroom” of the church, the translator settled for a single summarizing word, “Redeemer.” In either version the language makes clear that Christian life is sourced in Jesus.

Since Christian life is enlivened by the radiance of the Light, stanza four prays for its power. Scheffler’s original German asks Jesus to “keep me” on the narrow path, from straying in the wrong direction, and from stepping in the wrong places. It also prays for Jesus’ heavenly “brightness” to enlighten my “life and soul.” Finally, in stanza five Jesus is my “Crown” and, in times of greatest need and at my death, the “Light Divine” will always be my “God.” The poetry concludes with a statement of trust.

Since the Light, Jesus, is the source of my life, everything that he does for me causes me to love, praise, and thank him. I recall Jesus’ words: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). When I sing this hymn it becomes my song of trust in Jesus, who enlightens me and gives me life.

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Thee will I love, my strength, my tower;
Thee will I love, my hope, my joy.
Thee will I love with all my power,
with ardor time shall ne'er destroy.
Thee will I love, O Light divine,
so long as life is mine.

Thee will I love, my life, my Savior,
who art my best and truest friend.
Thee will I love with praise forever,
for never shall thy kindness end.
Thee will I love with all my heart—
thou my Redeemer art!

I thank thee, Jesus, Sun from heaven,
whose radiance hath brought light to me;
I thank thee, who hast richly given
all that could make me glad and free;
I thank thee that my soul is healed
by what thy lips revealed.

O keep me watchful, then, and humble;
permit me nevermore to stray.
Uphold me when my feet would stumble,
and keep me on the narrow way.
Fill all my nature with thy light,
O Radiance strong and bright!

Thee will I love, my crown of gladness;
thee will I love, my God and Lord,
amid the darkest depths of sadness,
and not for hope of high reward,
for thine own sake, O Light divine,
so long as life is mine.



Text: Johann Scheffler, 1624-77; English translation by Catherine Winkworth.
Tune: ICH WILL DICH LIEBEN

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[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]