

“God Loved the World So That He Gave” (Lutheran Service Book #571)

Inestimable Grace!

God Loved the World So That He Gave is one in a long list of hymns and spiritual songs based on what is arguably the most quoted passage in Scripture, namely, John 3:16. The list includes such favorites as Fanny Crosby’s *To God Be the Glory* and *God Loved the World so Tenderly; Father, Long before Creation* (translated from Chinese by Francis P. Jones); Margaret Clarkson’s *Jesus, Life of All the World*; and, of course, John Stainer’s choral arrangement of *God So Loved the World* that is firmly established as part of the Christian Church’s Canon of Choral Classics (please pardon my egregious use of alliteration).

God Loved the World So That He Gave is a cento¹ - a poem composed, in this case, by an anonymous author or authors and compiled by editors.² The altered version found in *The Lutheran Service Book* was created under the auspices of the LC-MS Commission on Worship that added the doxological stanza, and the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship. It was translated from the German by Rev. August Crull, who attended Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and eventually became a professor of German at Concordia College in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

In spite of the editorial tinkering, the hymn is a lovely melding of text and tune that offers both adults and children a simple, yet thoughtful poetic rendering of the “Gospel in a Nutshell.” It complements the Old Testament lesson, wherein the Israelites are saved by God’s grace as they look upon the bronze snake that Moses fashioned in the wilderness and the Epistle lesson in which Paul reminds the Ephesians that it is by “grace we are saved through faith.”³

The hymn can be interpreted as an expression of the *Five Solas* of Lutheran theology: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus* and *Soli Deo Gloria*.⁴ The first stanza is a straightforward paraphrase of John 3:16 that reminds us of the grace of God who sent His only Son to redeem the world. *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide* & *Solus Christus* - *Grace alone/Faith alone/Christ alone*.

God loved the world so that He gave
His only Son the lost to save,
That all who would in Him believe
Should everlasting life receive.

The poetry is simple, direct, and paired with a beautiful tune composed by George J. Elvey,

¹ *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) and *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (1942) identify the hymn as a cento, which means “patchwork” in Latin. Centos, sometimes called collage poems, are composed of stanzas or lines from other poems, sometimes for humorous effect. A long hymn may become a cento if some of its stanzas are edited out and/or rearranged. Examples of cento hymns include: *Of the Father’s Love Begotten*; *Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*; *O Jesus, King Most Wonderful*; *Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee*; and *O Love, How Deep, How Broad, How High*.

² The hymn’s authorship, according to the most recent Lutheran hymnal companions, is unknown; however, the on-line resource, *Hymnary.org*, lists Johann Olearius as the author. This site also contains a list of hymns by Olearius that have been translated from German into English, however in that list - taken from John Julian’s, *Dictionary of Hymnology* of 1907 - no mention of *God Loved the World So That He Gave* (Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt) is found. Until well documented evidence is discovered, the hymn’s authorship will remain a mystery. The *Hymnary.org* web address for the *God Loved the World So That He Gave* is: http://www.hymnary.org/text/god_loved_the_world_so_that_he_gave. Another interesting side note is that August Crull, translator of *God Loved the World So that He Gave*, also translated a number of Johann Olearius’ hymns such as *Come, Thou Precious Ransom*, *Come and O How Great Is Thy Compassion*.

³ “...as Moses lifted up the snake...so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” John 3:14 & “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

⁴ *Sola Scriptura* - Scripture alone, *Sola Fide* - Faith alone, *Sola Gratia* - Grace alone, *Solus Christus* - Christ alone and *Soli Deo Gloria* - Glory to God alone. *Solus Christus* and *Soli Deo Gloria* are 20th century additions to the Reformation era’s theological tenets of, *Sola Gratia*, *Fide* and *Scriptura*.

whose stirring music is found in hymns such as *Crown Him with Many Crowns* and *Come, Ye Thankful People Come*.⁵ In contrast to the aforementioned hymns, Elvey's tune to *God Loved the World...* presents us with a tranquil melody set in triple meter that gently invites us to contemplate the theology of salvation by grace through faith in Christ that the first stanza so clearly articulates.

The second stanza speaks of Christ's incarnation, suffering, and atoning death on the cross. Christ is the "ground" and "cornerstone" of faith and all who trust in "Him alone" can rest secure on that firm foundation. *Sola Fide & Solus Christus - Faith alone/Christ alone.*

Christ Jesus is the ground of faith,
Who was made flesh and suffered death;
All then who trust in Him alone
Are built on this chief cornerstone.

Stanza three can be viewed as a poetic reading of God's last will and testament. It opens with a reminder that the "wages of sin is death" while simultaneously declaring that God's Son is close to us with His "saving grace." In our baptism, and through the Word, God's Spirit brings us to faith; we are God's children and have His promise that we will receive the heavenly inheritance He has prepared for us. God's last will and testament was written in Christ's precious blood in order that we might be heirs of life eternal. *Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia & Solus Christus - Scripture alone/Grace alone/Christ alone.*

God would not have the sinner die;
His Son with saving grace is nigh;
His Spirit in the Word declares
How we in Christ are heaven's heirs.

The fourth stanza begins with an absolution; we can "be of good cheer" because we are justified and forgiven by Jesus. God's "own Son" proclaims that we are now right with Him and, in Baptismal grace, are granted the "highest good" of everlasting life. *Sola Gratia - Grace alone.*

Be of good cheer, for God's own Son
Forgives all sins which you have done;
And justified by Jesus' blood,
Your Baptism grants the highest good.

The penultimate stanza reiterates the third stanza's declaration that "God would not have the sinner die" and the fourth stanza's encouragement to "be of good cheer!" In the midst of sickness or impending death, the "troubled heart" can find solace, peace, and joy in this truth: Christ Jesus will save all those whose faith is grounded in Him. *Solus Christus & Sola Fide - Christ alone/Faith alone.*

If you are sick, if death is near,
This truth your troubled heart can cheer:
Christ Jesus saves your soul from death;
That is the firmest ground of faith.

The hymn concludes with a doxology punctuated by two exclamation marks. What response can we give to John 3:16 other than to stand in honor of the Trinity and exclaim our praise to God for the grace that He has lavished on us! *Soli Deo Gloria! - Glory to God alone!*

⁵ Sir George Job Elvey, (1816-1893) was an accomplished organist and composer of church music. He was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1871. The following hymns with tunes by Elvey are found in the *Lutheran Service Book*: LSB 394 - *Songs of Thankfulness and Praise* - Tune: St. George's, Windsor; LSB 525 - *Crown Him with Many Crowns* - Tune: Diademata; LSB 563 - *Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness* - Tune: St. Crispin; LSB 570 - *Just as I Am* (setting by Elvey); LSB 571 - *God Loved the World So That He Gave* - Tune: St. Crispin; LSB 829 - *Christ the Eternal Lord* - Tune: Diademata; LSB 892 - *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come* - Tune: George's, Windsor.

Glory to God the Father, Son,
And Holy Spirit, Three in One!
To Thee, O blessed Trinity,
Be praise now and eternally!

May you continue to be blessed by God's inestimable grace as you sing and pray *God Loved the World So That He Gave* in worship services, at home, or in your personal devotional time during this Lenten season.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Prayer:

The following poetic prayer may be spoken, or sung to Evley's tune, St. Crispin, or to another Long Meter (LM) tune. A list of LM tunes can be found on page 1007 of the *Lutheran Service Book*.

O Father, Who Created All

O Father, who created all,
Upon our knees we humbly fall
Seeking forgiveness for misdeeds;
In prayer lifting all our needs.

O Jesus, Savior who once bled
And died at Calv'ry in our stead,
Hear us and help us Lord, we pray,
To place our faith in you each day.

O Holy Spirit, by whose pow'r
Our faith is strengthened ev'ry hour,
Help us to live and run our race
E'er mindful of baptismal grace.

O God, our Father, God the Son,
And Holy Spirit, Three-in-One,
Bless us and keep us in Your grace
Till we, in heav'n, know Your embrace.

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This prayer/hymn may be duplicated for local use in your congregation or school.

Long Meter (LM): 88 88

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This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.

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God Loved the World So That He Gave

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His only Son the lost to save,
That all who would in Him believe
Should everlasting life receive.

Christ Jesus is the ground of faith,
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All then who trust in Him alone
Are built on this chief cornerstone.

God would not have the sinner die;
His Son with saving grace is nigh;
His Spirit in the Word declares
How we in Christ are heaven's heirs.

Be of good cheer, for God's own Son
Forgives all sins which you have done;
And justified by Jesus' blood,
Your Baptism grants the highest good.

If you are sick, if death is near,
This truth your troubled heart can cheer:
Christ Jesus saves your soul from death;
That is the firmest ground of faith.

Glory to God the Father, Son,
And Holy Spirit, Three in One!
To Thee, O blessed Trinity,
Be praise now and eternally!

Text: *Heiliges Lippen- und Herten-Opffer*, Stettin, c. 1778; tr. August Crull, 1845-1923, alt.
Tune: George J. Elvey, 1816-93
Text and music: Public domain

Tune: ST. CRISPIN[†]
Long Meter: 88 88
John 3:16; Titus 3:4-7; Timothy 1:9; Matthew 9:2

[†] According to the 8th century legend, St. Crispin and his brother, St. Crispinian, were beheaded during the Diocletian persecution c. 286. The brothers, it is said, were from a noble Roman family and fled to Gaul to avoid persecution because of their faith. They were missionaries by day and, in the tradition of St. Paul, supported themselves by making shoes and other leather goods by night. In England, St. Crispin's day (October 25) is associated with the Battle of Agincourt (1415) and King Henry's famous St. Crispin's Day's speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V* (Act IV, scene 3). St. Crispin and his brother are the patron saints of shoemakers, tanners and leather workers. Elvey's tune was originally written in 1862 to accompany *Just as I Am, without One Plea* and honors the martyrdom of Crispin. See: *The Catholic Encyclopedia* and *The Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Resources for further study used in the preparation of this devotion:

Polack, W.G. (1942) *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
Precht, Fred L. (1992) *Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2nd edition - 2001). Macmillan: New York/London.
Vol. 8, pgs. 172-173.
Stulken, Marilyn Kay. (1981) *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
Westermeyer, Paul. (2010) *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis.