

Praise the Almighty! (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #877)

Johann Sebastian Bach often revised many of his earlier pieces attempting to make them better. He wanted to give God his best and sometimes that meant he needed to improve upon what he had previously written. Through the years, hymn writers, poets and musicians have done the same thing with hymns. A good example of this is the hymn *Praise the Almighty!* (ELW # 877). This hymn has been altered and updated many times since its creation and it is a good illustration of how hymn texts are living things, subject to change, revision, and yes, at times even improvement.

Praise the Almighty! is a wonderful paraphrase of Psalm 146. Johann D. Herrnschmidt, (1675-1723) wrote *Praise the Almighty!* in Halle, probably between 1698 and 1702. Originally Herrnschmidt's German hymn had eight stanzas. Early in the 20th century, six stanzas of the hymn were translated into English by Alfred Ernest Richard Brauer, an Australian pastor. Brauer's translated version appeared in the *Australian Lutheran Hymn Book* in 1925, and then was revised for *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) and the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978). Most recently the hymn was further altered and a new third stanza, based on one of Herrnschmidt's original stanzas, was added by Pastor Martin Seltz. ¹

What has been created through the years from Herrnschmidt's original hymn is a brilliant metrical paraphrase of Psalm 146. Psalm 146 not only speaks of praising God for as long as we have breath, but also puts an emphasis on what God does for the lowly. It contrasts the people who trust in God, the creator of the universe, with rulers who trust only in themselves and whose ways lead to ruin.

The psalm speaks of a God who gives justice to the oppressed, food to the hungry, freedom to the captive, sight to the blind, strength to those who are beat down and love to those who are righteous. Psalm 146 says the Lord cares for the stranger and supports the widow and the orphan. The psalm encourages our praise because of what God has already done and continues to do.

Praise to the Almighty! is also a good example of a magnificent marriage of text and tune. The tune is dance-like in character and heartily persuades us to praise the Lord, even "all the day long." The tune climaxes at just the right time, breaking out of its octave range at the most important word for praise, "Hallelujah."

In singing *Praise the Almighty!* we are praising our God who does so many wondrous things. We are placing our trust not in mortal rulers, but in Jesus Christ, our Lord, our only help and comfort. We are affirming with the whole creation and all the children of God, including the saints at rest, that whatever comes to us in life, be it cancer or calamity, trials or tragedy, or finally even death itself, we triumph still through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is a message worth singing about.

Todd Carrico
Glen Ellyn, IL



¹ *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Paul Westermeyer, Augsburg Fortress, copyright @2010

- 1 Praise the Almighty! Lord, I adore you!
Yes, I will laud you until death;
with songs and anthems I come before you
as long as you allow me breath.
From you my life and all things came;
all the day long I bless your name.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

- 2 Trust not in rulers; they are but mortal;
earthborn they are and soon decay.
Vain are their counsels at life's last portal,
when the cold grave engulfs its prey.
Since mortals can no help afford,
place all your trust in Christ, our Lord.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

- 3 Lord, you give justice in all oppression,
maintain the right, set pris'ners free.
You feed the hungry in your compassion;
healing and life flow from your tree.
Happy are all who hope in God,
whose grace is rich and deep and broad!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

- 4 Praise, all you people, the name so holy,
the Lord who does such wondrous things!
All that has being, to praise God solely,
with happy heart its amen sings!
Children of God, with saints at rest,
praise Father, Son, and Spirit blest!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Text: Johann D. Herrnschmidt, 1675-1723; English translation hymnal version
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Tune: LOBE DEN HERREN, O MEINE SEELE

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