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Special Section
The Devotional Life: Enjoying God's Presence
A Song In The Morning

Do you ever grow bored with your daily devotions? Your hymnal contains a wealth of material that can lead you into worship.

By Peggy J. Haslar

"But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love" (Ps. 59:16). "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mt. 26:30).

Hymns have always been important in Christian worship. Paul and Silas sang hymns when they were in jail (Acts 16:25). Revelation tells us that the Song of Moses (Dt. 32) will be sung with a new song (Rev. 15:3–4) at the end of time. We are exhorted throughout the Psalms to sing. "Sing joyfully to the Lord you righteous;" David writes, "it is fitting for the upright to praise Him" (Ps. 33:1).

Hymns have the power to lift our minds and spirits toward God when we gather to worship Him. But the hymnal can also be an important tool for *private* worship. Paul tells believers to "sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:19–20). Using a hymnal in private devotions can help us apply this verse and enrich our times with God.

ADJUSTING YOUR FOCUS

Ralph P. Martin describes the role of hymns in worship:

The hymns play an impressive role as an aid to worship by putting us in the right frame of mind and heart. To approach the divine mystery of God in a true worshipful spirit requires suitable preparation and adjustment, lest what we attempt is undertaken in a routine or formal way that lacks proper motivation and authentic intent. . . . Our singing can lift our spirits to new heights of contemplation and expectancy that makes genuine worship possible.

These words can apply to private devotions as well as public worship.

It is often difficult to focus on worship as we spend time alone with God. Images of personal involvements fill our minds and quench the Spirit's voice. Praying through a hymn can help us center our thoughts. We may entreat with George Croly:

Spirit of God, descend upon
my heart,
Wean it from earth, through
all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness mighty
as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I
ought to love.

The hymn can become a touchstone for meditation and worship, preparing heart and mind for study and prayer. Through the hymn writer's words, we invite the Lord to be with us, to speak to us. We ready ourselves to commune with Him.

WORDS OF PRAISE

When entering a time of prayer, the hymnal provides words for praise and adoration of our God. Scripture tells us to "serve the Lord with gladness, come before him with joyful songs" (Ps. 100:2). The hymnal contains many "joyful songs."

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King

The triumphs of His grace.

Charles Wesley

and
 All hail the power of Jesus' name,
 Let angels prostrate fall.
 Bring forth the royal diadem
 And crown Him Lord of all.

Edward Perronet

Though God is of course pleased with our spontaneous prayers, hymns provide images for praise that might not otherwise come to mind. When praising naturally is difficult, the hymn writer's words can become our own, transforming negative emotions and freeing us to praise Him in spirit.

The words of hymns can also carry us beyond our times of devotion and help us practice the admonition, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will! for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16–18). Because songs are easily memorized, they stay with us and can continue to remind us of the truths we encountered during our private devotions.

As our study of Scripture leads us through the spectrum of Christian teaching, we can again turn to the hymnal to reinforce these truths. The hymnal's topical index reflects the great themes of faith: grace, adoration, discipleship, peace, salvation, perseverance, resurrection, eternal life.

Many hymns paraphrase or simply put to music the words of Scripture ("Thy Word Have I Hid in My Heart," "I Know Whom I Have Believed"). Others begin with a scriptural theme and enlarge upon it in poetic form. (The statements made in hymns in this category should always be checked with and subjugated to Scripture, though the context may allow some poetic license.)

COMMUNING WITH THE SAINTS

Finally, the hymnal can provide great comfort, reminding us that "we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1). Saints of many eras have left a record of their experience of God in the hymns they wrote. Their words encourage us as we wrestle with the opposing forces of our time.

Thomas Howard describes an experience of finding such comfort:

I can remember once coming upon the hymn, "Art thou weary, art thou languid," in an old hymnbook. It was at my mother's bidding; she told me that her mother had loved it and that I might find it helpful. After speaking for six exquisite verses about the difficulties of following Jesus, the hymn concludes, "Finding, following, keeping, struggling / Is he sure to bless / Angels, martyrs, prophets, virgins / Answer, Yes." I was overwhelmed by this picture. What solace! What encouragement! I was in an ancient lineage, and all of these forerunners knew everything I had experienced, and all of them would testify, "Keep going! It is worth it! Praise God!"

Many give up on private devotions when they become bogged down in monotony. Walter Trobisch states, "What makes our devotional life so unattractive and boring is that each day, every one of us has just about the same kind of general, vague pious thoughts. . . . Our thoughts remain distant and abstract and do not come to grips with our concrete daily life."

The hymnal can quickly lead us out of this kind of monotony. Hymns can help us articulate our deepest feelings and enlarge our vision. We discover words that correspond to our entire range of thought and emotion, from contrition to praise and adoration, words of conviction, courage, and comfort. Hymns can complement our study of Scripture and help us move from the abstract to the concrete. They sharpen our focus on Christ and encourage us to move forward.

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On Your Own Hymns For Private Worship

You may want to start with some of the following hymns as you begin to use the hymnal in your devotions. Don't skip the ones you don't know; just reading and praying through the words can be a source of great blessing. Explore your hymnal. Sometimes the most meaningful hymns are those you "discover" on your own.

Praise and Worship

"When Morning Gilds the Skies"
"Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise"
"O Worship the King"
"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"
"Hallelujah, What a Savior"
"My Jesus, I Love Thee"
"Jesus, I Am! Resting, Resting"

Preparation for Worship

"Come, Thou Almighty King"
"Open My Eyes, That I May See"
"I Need Thee Every Hour"
"Have Thine Own Way, Lord"
"I Am Thine, O Lord"
"Jesus, Lover of My Soul"

Comfort and Encouragement

"How Firm a Foundation"
"My Shepherd Will Supply My Need"
"Be Still My Soul"
"Day by Day (and with Each Passing Moment)"
"He Giveth More Grace"
"O Let Your Soul Now Be Filled with Gladness"
"It Is Well with My Soul"
"All the Way My Savior Leads Me"

Dedication

"Beneath the Cross of Jesus"
"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"
"O Jesus, I Have Promised"
"I Surrender All"
"Be Thou My Vision"
"I'd Rather Have Jesus"

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