

## Oh, That I Had a Thousand Voices

People have always been very interested in knowing what God is like. Some of the world's most gifted people have speculated on that topic. In fact, most of us could probably find a friend or a coworker who would love to chat about it. It's an interesting question, an important question.

Yet, God—the only one who could give us the truth—does not seem to be very interested in giving us a detailed description of his nature in the Bible. Almost always when the Bible tells us something about God's nature, it's to help us understand who he is and will be in his actions toward us.

The way that the Bible talks about the Trinity is no exception. There is no passage in the Bible that specifically outlines the fact that there is only one God who exists in three united yet distinct Persons. We come to that conclusion by wrestling with the different statements that the Bible makes about God. Rather than giving detail about the characteristics of the Triune God, the Bible focuses on how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are at work in the world or in our lives.

Recognizing that the Scripture does this is a key idea in how our church talks about God and the Trinity. One of the most brilliant things that Martin Luther did in his Small Catechism was to explain the Trinity in terms of the gifts that we receive from God in his three Persons. He wanted people to see the Trinity in terms of grace, of comfort, and of blessings.

This hymn is very much written in that spirit, focusing on the gifts received from the Triune God. While this is a hymn about the Trinity, it is also a song of praise and gratefulness for the “great things God has done for me.” The inner three stanzas talk about the blessings that we receive from the Triune God. The outer stanzas set a beautiful tone of praise. The hymn is trying to guide us to understand the Trinity in terms of everything that God does for us and to praise him for those blessings.

The first stanza is an expression of overflowing joy: if only I had “a thousand voices... a thousand tongues” to speak about God's goodness. These words acknowledge that this hymn itself, and everything that it's going to say about God's goodness, is only the tiniest fraction of everything that we could say about what God has done for us.

The second stanza looks at the work of the Father in our lives—making us, guarding us, giving us good things. The “soul and body nobly joined” proclaims how God has given me life—both the physical matter that makes up my body and the soul that lives on after I die. God is our “guardian”—he is the one who protects us from evil things and makes sure that we have what we need. And it's true that

those “daily joys” are “so richly spread on ev’ry side.” Even in times of hardship, God’s blessings to each of us are more than we can count.

The third stanza praises God the Son—Jesus. Jesus’ main work for us is as our Savior. He rescued us from sin and restored our broken relationship with God. The hymn focuses most of all on the love that motivated Jesus to come and save us. He came with “compassion.” His “pitying heart sought my salvation.” It was Jesus’ concern and care for us that made him lower himself from heaven and carry the cross for us. And when he died for us, he bought us from captivity to sin and made us his own. He won us for God.

The fourth stanza praises the Holy Spirit. In just a few words, it touches on some very important and deep topics. The Holy Spirit’s work is to bring each one of us to God and also to shape us to live as the people God intends. The hymn emphasizes the Spirit’s “pow’r and teaching.” The Holy Spirit defeats the sinful nature that lives in us and teaches us the truth. When that happens, we have “among your saints a place.” “Saints” are people who have been made holy. In the Bible, this word refers to all believers in Jesus, because we’ve been washed by his blood. The Spirit gives us membership among God’s people and makes us holy before God. Finally, the hymn points out that every good thing we do comes from God’s Spirit at work in us.

Looking back on everything that the hymn has said, the fifth stanza comes to this conclusion: How can we not be “filled with gladness?” How can we not praise God endlessly, even when we must face sorrow and suffering? If God has given us all these things, then we know the most important thing about what he is: his entire being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is love for us that knows no limits.

\* \* \*

There are two hymns in Christian Worship that share the title and first stanza of “Oh That I Had a Thousand Voices.” Both were written by Johann Mentzer (1658–1734), a pastor from Saxony, the heartland of the Lutheran Reformation. Nearly 40 years of his ministry took place in the town of Kemnitz, on the border between Saxony and Silesia. This region was the home of numerous poets and hymn writers, who are sometimes called the “Second Silesian School.” Mentzer’s hymns match the Silesian style.