

## If Your Beloved Son, O God

If you listen to contemporary Christian music, you're probably familiar with songs that draw a contrast between the darkness of life before knowing Christ and the joy we have after we understand the gospel. It's not surprising why this is a popular theme—the Bible says that before we had faith, we were “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). It's only natural that we recognize the awful place that God has rescued us from and the new peace and joy that he gives us.

In many ways, hymns like “If Your Beloved Son, O God” are the ancestor to that kind of contemporary Christian music. During the Middle Ages, Christian hymns focused on the idea that Jesus was the Savior of the Church *in general*. They didn't have much hope to offer the individual sinner with an aching conscience. The Catholic Church often talked about God's perfection and righteousness, but it failed to consistently teach that Jesus has given his righteousness to us as a gift, so that God sees *us* as perfect. People were often left worried and afraid. Had they been good enough for God to accept them?

When the Church rediscovered the fullness of the gospel in the Reformation, the burden of all that guilt and fear was lifted from countless people's backs. So many of the hymns from this time reflect on the darkness and hopelessness of a works-righteous life, and they look at God with new eyes of trust and joy.

“If Your Beloved Son, O God” is one of those hymns. At the start, it takes us to a very dark place in a very dramatic and uncommon way. It makes us ask a terrifying question: “What would life be like if Jesus hadn't saved us?” The answer it gives is awful—but true. We would have nothing but an eternity of hell to look forward to. And it would only be our own fault: hell is a just punishment for our “transgression,” that is, our lives full of law-breaking. We could only “pine,” knowing that we had lost out on the joy of being with God.

But there really isn't any reason for us to dwell too long in that hopeless state. Jesus did come to save us. If a life without the gospel is dark, life knowing what Jesus has done for us is the perfect source of “peace and rest.” The hymn tells us about how Jesus has set us free from all the power sin has over our lives—despair, sorrow, and guilt.

The second and third stanzas talk about how Christ has freed us from the power of sin. When Jesus went to the cross, he carried all the sins that every one of us will commit during our entire lives. Instead of holding all our wrongdoing against us, God punished Jesus in our place. The blood that Jesus shed brings us “abiding peace.” He “reconciled” us with God,

that is, he mended the relationship that our sin had broken. God has washed us and made us pure, so that we can stand and live before him forever. The joy that we can find in all these beautiful truths isn't just an answer to our guilt and fear over sin. It's also the one source of hope and peace that can never be taken away from us.

But there is something that threatens this peace: works-righteousness. If our salvation is dependent on something that we can do, then we can't have all the confidence and joy that Jesus won for us. Instead, we wrestle with the same question that so many people worried about at the time of the Reformation: Have I really been good enough? This is the topic that the fourth stanza talks about, and the topic wasn't just relevant to life in the early years after the Reformation. All of us tend to act like Pharisees—to see our relationship with God in terms of the rules we have followed and the good things we have done.

But this kind of self-focused righteousness, the hymn reminds us, is “vain”—it is useless. The question all comes down to whether Jesus' death is enough or whether it isn't. Did Jesus' blood really pay for all my sins, or didn't it? If we treat salvation as if there is some part that is still up to us, then instead of trusting what the Bible tells us, we are saying that Jesus' sacrifice was truly not enough to pay the price for our sins. In the end, having true hope in Jesus comes from knowing that he has done everything for us and that there is nothing left we need to do to be saved.

The final stanza follows a frequently used pattern of hymn ending, addressing a short prayer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But in this hymn, the prayer to each is focused on that Person's part in our salvation. The Father punishes the Son; the Son pays for our sin, and the Holy Spirit gives us new life and faith in Jesus.

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The decision that Johann Heermann (1585–1647) would become a pastor happened very early in his life—as the only surviving child of his parents, his mother promised to God that if he lived, she would send him into the ministry. By age 26, he had become the lead pastor at Köben (today Chobienia, Poland), where he served for over 20 years until his poor health forced him to give up his work. His career was marked by faithfulness in the face of trials: Köben was plundered four times during the brutal Thirty Years' War, suffered an outbreak of the plague, and was severely damaged in a great fire. Personally, Heermann battled long-term illness and lost his first wife. He is remembered as one of the Lutheran Church's most gifted poets, and several of his hymns have been translated and included in English language Lutheran hymnals.