

## To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray

What matters most when everything else is taken away? That's a popular question for reflection in our society. And we'll hear lots of different answers: the people we care about, the things we dedicate our lives to, or the impact we have on others.

Jesus once asked a similar question, but he suggested a different answer: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). Jesus meant that there will be a time when everything in this world passes away—the things we've worked for, the people we love, and our own bodies. At that time, when everything else is taken away, there will be only one thing that matters: our faith in Jesus.

This is the driving thought in "To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray." In the present translation of the hymn, we ask that God would give us "the true faith needed on our way." But in the original German words, the idea is a bit stronger: "We pray to the Holy Spirit for true faith *above all else*." When we sing this hymn, we're recognizing that the thing that matters beyond anything else on our walk to heaven is trust in Jesus. There is only one treasure God gives that matters on the day we die—faith.

And so, in this hymn, we're turning to the person of the Trinity whose special work is to give us faith: the Holy Spirit. The hymn begins at the end of our lives, that moment when everything is taken away. It prays about those last hours of our homeward journey and asks that the Spirit would "defend and attend" us.

The hymn then turns to a more general discussion of everything for which we need the Spirit's work. It looks at this from three different angles. And with each of those angles, it calls the Spirit by a different name that describes his work: "Love," "Comfort," and "Light."

The name "sweetest Love" comes from a beautiful part of the Bible that talks about the relationship between God's love and our love. God began when he sent Jesus for our sins, John says. And so: "We also ought to love one another... If we love one another, God lives in us." And, John says, "this is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us his Spirit" (1 John 4:7–12).

The Spirit works love. And the hymn looks at *who* the Spirit makes us love: our sisters and brothers, namely, those fellow believers who are baptized into the same Triune God. This love also extends to strangers—the Spirit leads us to welcome outsiders and to share what we have received from God. Christian hospitality comes from the Spirit.

The Spirit's second title comes from Jesus, who called the Holy Spirit "another Comforter" for his followers after he left (John 14:16). And they would need his "transcended comfort." Persecution was coming. Paul, one of the Apostles, put it this way: "Just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:5). He knew that the hate and hurt that he received for the gospel were the same as those Jesus had received. He also knew that Jesus' victory was his victory.

This hymn is asking for courage in moments of trial. Behind what the world might think and do to us, it is really "the foe"—Satan—who is taunting us. Satan knows that suffering for our faith can tempt us to give it up. We need the Spirit's comfort, his encouragement, so we do not "heed" (be concerned about) the Devil's attacks—whether he's threatening "scorn" or "death."

The Spirit's final title, "precious Light," is talking about the work of the Spirit to show us the truth and lead us to God. The fourth stanza asks that the Spirit would teach us "to know Jesus Christ aright." In the Bible, "knowledge" of the Lord means the full relationship that a believer has with God. It includes understanding what God has done, trusting his promises, and following his will. Even though we've never physically seen Jesus, the Holy Spirit guides us to know him and to "abide" in him—to remain faithful to him until God brings us home.

Finally, we observe that every stanza of this hymn ends with the words, "Lord, have mercy!" Christians often hear, speak, and sing these words and think about repentance. However, in the Bible and in traditional Christian liturgies, this phrase has a different meaning. In a way, it's similar to the word "amen." It reinforces the request. "Lord, have mercy!" pictures us as people who are coming lowly and needy before God our King, asking him to see what we need. We're entrusting ourselves to God's kindness and goodness, because we know that he loves us and will care for us in the very best way.

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The current version of "To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray" was created by Martin Luther in 1524, probably for Pentecost. He wanted congregations to be able to sing a hymn that taught about the Holy Spirit's work, and so he wrote stanzas 2-4 and attached them to a much older *leise*, a kind of chant from the liturgy. The hymn has been translated several times. In older hymnals, it often appeared under the name "We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost."