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## GIVING THANKS IN TIMES OF ADVERSITY AND STRIFE

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BY WILLIAM WEEDON

The contents of this essay were presented at the International Disaster Conference held at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind., in September 2014. The conference provided a forum for international Lutheran church leaders to consider both the theology of mercy and the practical implications for implementing it in their churches.

“It is indeed right and salutary that we should at *all* times, and in *all* places, give thanks to you holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.” At all times, in all places.

Really? When the tornado or the typhoon has swept through and obliterated houses, businesses, church, lives? When plague snatches children from their parents’ arms? And parents from their children? And neighbor begins to look at neighbor in fear and suspicion? When war arises and sweeps over an area and brings what war always brings: rape, pillaging, torture and bloodshed? When the earth trembles beneath your feet and houses topple, roads lay in pieces and even water is hard to come by? When fire sweeps out of the mountains and consumes houses and lives? When weeping and sorrow become your daily bread, such are really times and places for thanksgiving? Really?

Really! The words tumble off our lips, week in and week out, and we seldom think how radical they are, how the whole Church of Jesus Christ is solidly grounded in the age to come. That’s what you are. That’s what the Church of Jesus Christ is. It’s a colony from the future. We are a people who belong to an age that is truly coming and that all will finally see, but that now is hidden and often hidden deeply beneath suffering. The Church of Jesus Christ has stood for these 20 centuries before high altar or lowly table, and she has sung out her praise and her thanks to God, the Father, for the gift of His son, Jesus Christ. Come hell or high water, the Church gives thanks for the new life of Baptism, for the gift of the Savior’s body and blood, for our forgiveness and eternal life. People loved by God, these are gifts that are stable. They are secure. They cannot be shaken when everything else in your life wobbles and falls to the ground. The Church goes on speaking and singing and proclaiming out into the world these unshakable promises of Christ. Through war and bloodshed, through tempest and plague, through persecution and death, she goes on raising to heaven a song of thanks and praise for Jesus Christ, who overcame death from the grave and who opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.



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The Church is paradise restored. Have you ever thought about how Isaiah describes what Eden really was? Look at these words: “The Lord comforts Zion. He comforts all her waste places and nature wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord.” Now, do you know your Hebrew parallelism? What’s it then to be like Eden, like the garden of the Lord? Look! Joy and gladness will be found in her thanksgiving, in the voice of a song. She sings out the Lord’s comfort for Zion, for a suffering people, a comfort that reaches the waste places, all the places where her life has become wilderness and desolation. She has the power to change things, and she changes them by singing. She changes them by singing praise and thanksgiving to God. She makes the desert bloom as she trumpets the promises of God.

So, let’s look at this in Lutheran history. What does it look like in operation? Let’s look at a small town in Westphalia, Germany, in 1597 called Unna and observe a tragedy in the making and its pastor’s response. The pastor’s name was Nicolai. He saw his congregation decimated by plague. Think about this in your life — 300 funerals in his congregation in the month of July alone! And it didn’t stop. By the time the plague ran its course in January 1598, a course of seven months, more than 1000 lives were lost. I suppose he could have fled the plague, but then again he had Luther’s words. Luther wrote in his little document on whether you could flee the plague. He says, “Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees.”

When people are dying, they need a spiritual ministry that strengthens and comforts their consciences by Word and Sacrament, and in faith, overcomes death. So, Nicolai wasn’t about to flee; he stayed put, and he preached and he kept on baptizing because children still were born. He kept on administering the Sacrament every Sunday, and he prayed for his congregation over and over again. He visited the sick and the dying constantly, and he buried some more. And what do you think he also did? He decides to write a book!

The name of the book is *Freudenspiegel* (Mirror of Joy), meaning the joy of eternal life. It’s a great book. Here are the opening words:

As often as I call to mind, the surpassing comfort of the promise of eternal life in our heavenly home, my heart bursts out with joy, and my soul rejoices in God my Savior. Oh, think of it, there we believing Christians will behold with joyful eyes, the almighty King of glory, our only Redeemer and Savior, Jesus Christ, who for us trampled the ancient serpent. There, we will gather with the holy patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, and there we will see again with overflowing joy those we loved on earth, father, mother, brothers, and sisters, husband and wife, children, and all our acquaintances who have blessedly fallen asleep in the Lord and have gone before us in the true faith. There, God will wipe away all tears from our eyes, and he will transform our morning into dancing. He will clothe us with joy so that our hearts rejoice for all eternity, and this awesome joy no one can ever take from us. There we will enter into the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. We will be brought into the company of many thousands of angels and to the assembly of the first born who are written in heaven, and in that place, joy will simply overwhelm us as we contemplate the awesome gifts that our God has bestowed on us. To think that heaven should be ours, that everything which Christ has is now our imperishable heavenly treasure. God Himself will be our very great reward, our temple, our light, and our awe. Why would we trade all the world’s perishable splendor, honor, joy, and glory for what God has in store for us? Our future is that we will see and laugh together with the holy angels. Indeed, the entire heavenly host will call us blessed because we believed in Jesus Christ and trusted His unfailing word even today.

That’s just the opening of the book! It goes on like that, page after page, joy after joy, my personal favorite is the middle of the book. He is just talking about Adam and Eve and paradise, and he is like, “How did they know that they were naked?” This one just blows me away. He said, “Well, they knew that they were naked because their bodies stopped shining.” Because of sin, all of us had fallen short of the glory of God, and our bodies no longer shined the way God meant them to and the way they will in the Resurrection. I’ve never thought about Genesis the same way again. Anyway, it’s a great book, but that’s just the beginning, and yet you can see it puts a smile on your face, thanksgiving in your heart. And guess what else it does? It puts a song on your lips.

Nicolai also wrote a few songs. One is known as the queen of the Lutheran chorales, a spiritual bride-song of the soul who believes in Jesus Christ, our heavenly bridegroom, based on Psalm 45, a song of the bride of Christ to, to her beloved bridegroom. He wrote a second hymn that’s the midnight call of the wise virgins who greet the bridegroom,

*“O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright.”*

*4 Almighty Father, in Your Son!  
You loved us when not yet begun  
Was this old earth's foundation!  
Your Son has ransomed us in love  
To live in Him here and above:  
This is Your great salvation.  
Alleluia!  
Christ the living,  
To us giving  
Life forever,  
Keeps us Yours and fails us never!*

*5 O let the harps break forth in sound!  
Our joy be all with music crowned,  
Our voices gladly blending!  
For Christ goes with us all the way —  
Today, tomorrow, ev'ry day!  
His love is never ending!  
Sing out! Ring out!  
Jubilation!  
Exultation!  
Tell the story!  
Great is He, the King of Glory!*

*[LSB 395: 4,5]*

Do you see what he did? He took the promises, and he wrapped them up in music, and he gave them to his people, so they could take them in hand and throw them at death and throw them at fear, so that they could rejoice in God and give thanks to the Father in all circumstances. Let's do the other one, too. Last verse of this one.

*6 What joy to know, when life is past,  
The Lord we love is first and last,  
The end and the beginning!  
He will one day, oh, glorious grace,  
Transport us to that happy place  
Beyond all tears and sinning!  
Amen! Amen!  
Come, Lord Jesus!  
Crown of gladness!  
We are yearning  
For the day of Your returning!*

*[LSB 395: 6]*

In the face of unspeakable tragedy, to families where mothers had lost sons, and daughters their fathers, and sisters their brothers, and brothers their sisters, and husbands their wives, with absolutely no family left untouched by the horror of death, square in the midst of unspeakable tragedy, faithful Pastor Nicolai wrote and sang the hope of heaven into the hearts of his people. It's the fulfillment of “in at all times and in all places.” Is it any wonder that these two pieces became known as the king and queen of the two chorales? They just are amazing for what they give us. I think that it is high treason for a Lutheran, for any Christian, to be deprived of the comfort and the joy of such great hymns, and they abound. Those are just two, but in Reformation hymns, they shine at its finest. They sing of Christ and belief in the comfort of Christ against the darkness. They hold tight to the joy of what will be when Christ renews all things. They proclaim Christ is your Christ, and Christ will come again, and they add the promise, “And He did it all for you!”



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So, they do what the prefaced Communion summons us to do. They become the vehicles for giving thanks to God, even in times of tragedy and loss. These songs are like David's stones aimed at Goliath's head. So, they really capture what St. Paul sang about: "Whom shall separate us from the love of Christ? You think trouble is going to do it? Tribulation? Distress? Persecution? What about not having anything to eat? Or not having any clothes? Or danger? As it written, for your sake, we are being killed all day long. We are counted like sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us. I'm sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present or things to come, nor fires, nor death, nor anything in all creation is ever going to be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

So, there was another one. His name was Paul Gerhardt. He is known as "the man sifted in Satan's sieve." Well, he happened to be a good preacher. So, all the good confessional Lutherans hated him because he kind of showed them up. He didn't like to argue and fight. The real hard-nosed people thought he wasn't hard-nosed enough, and he was unyieldingly Lutheran. When the prince said, "You are going to stop preaching that doctrine of the Lutheran Lord's Supper, or you are going to lose your job, buddy," he said, "So fire me." The prince did.

After losing four of his five children and his wife, Gerhardt had only one son left, and he had been restored to the ministry of the Church for just about two years when he was approaching his 70s. In his 70th year, he decided to write a will. He didn't have anything to give his son, no earthly goods at all, except for some pieces of advice. I'm not going to actually give you the pieces of advice, but listen, listen to the opening of this man's will:

After reaching the 70th year of my life and truly having a joyful hope in my loving and gracious God that in a short time he will deliver me from this world and lead me into a much better life than I've had so far on this earth, I thank God ahead of time for all the kindness and faithfulness He has given me and demonstrated, even from my mother's womb, in body and soul, everything until this hour. I pray from the bottom of my heart that He would grant me when my last hour comes a happy departure and take my soul into His fatherly hand. Give my body a gentle rest on the earth until He returns on the wonderful judgment day, and then I will be with all my family whom have died and with those who will die in the future, and I will awaken to see my precious Lord Jesus in whom I believe even though I have never seen Him. I will see Him then, face to face.

Are you shocked then to learn that a man who could write that at the end of such a miserable ministry would be key in leading us to sing in thanksgiving to God at all times and in all places? Of course not. Here is another one. It's not as popular as the two that we just did, but I want you to sing it with me again, and I need you up here again to go verse by verse with us here. It's a beautiful little tune too. Think of that life that I just described to you, and then think of these words [*"Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me"*]\*:

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>1 <i>Why should cross and trial grieve me?</i><br/> <i>Christ is near</i><br/> <i>With His cheer;</i><br/> <i>Never will He leave me.</i><br/> <i>Who can rob me of the heaven</i><br/> <i>That God's Son</i><br/> <i>For me won</i><br/> <i>When His life was given?</i></p>  | <p>3 <i>God gives me my days of gladness,</i><br/> <i>And I will</i><br/> <i>Trust Him still</i><br/> <i>When He send me sadness.</i><br/> <i>God is good; His love attends me</i><br/> <i>Day by day,</i><br/> <i>Come what may,</i><br/> <i>Guides me and defends me.</i></p> | <p>5 <i>Now in Christ, death cannot slay me,</i><br/> <i>Though it might,</i><br/> <i>Day and night,</i><br/> <i>Trouble may dismay me.</i><br/> <i>Christ has made my death a portal</i><br/> <i>From the strife</i><br/> <i>Of this life</i><br/> <i>To His joy immortal!</i><br/> <p style="text-align: right;">[LSB 756]</p></p> |
| <p>2 <i>When life's troubles rise to meet me,</i><br/> <i>Though their weight</i><br/> <i>May be great,</i><br/> <i>They will not defeat me.</i><br/> <i>God, my loving Savior, sends them;</i><br/> <i>He who knows</i><br/> <i>All my woes</i><br/> <i>Knows how best to end them.</i><br/> <i>Think of this verse:</i></p> | <p>4 <i>From God's joy can nothing sever,</i><br/> <i>For I am</i><br/> <i>His dear lamb,</i><br/> <i>He, my Shepherd ever.</i><br/> <i>I am His because He gave me</i><br/> <i>His own blood</i><br/> <i>For my good,</i><br/> <i>By His death to save me.</i></p>             |  |

\*LSB #756 *Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me*, text (sts. 4-5) ©2004 Stephen P. Starke, admin. By CPH. Used with permission under license number 15:9-4. [cph.org](http://cph.org).



Do you notice the theme of joy again? This is a hymn written by a man who had lost so much, who had suffered so much, but all he could think to do is sing praise to God in his time of suffering, in his hour of disaster. I could point you to so many more in our hymn book, old and new. The hymn *"In Thee Is Gladness."*\* This is the joy of the Lord as your strength.

<i>In Thee is gladness</i>	<i>Since He is ours,</i>
<i>Amid all sadness,</i>	<i>We fear no powers,</i>
<i>Jesus, sunshine of my heart.</i>	<i>Not of earth nor sin nor death.</i>
<i>By Thee are given</i>	<i>He sees and blesses</i>
<i>The gifts of heaven,</i>	<i>In worst distresses;</i>
<i>Thou the true Redeemer art.</i>	<i>He can change them with a breath.</i>
<i>Our souls Thou wakest,</i>	<i>Wherefore the story</i>
<i>Our bonds Thou breakest;</i>	<i>Tell of His glory</i>
<i>Who trusts Thee surely</i>	<i>With hearts and voices;</i>
<i>Has built securely;</i>	<i>All heav'n rejoices</i>
<i>He stands forever: Alleluia!</i>	<i>In Him forever: Alleluia!</i>
<i>Our hearts are pining</i>	<i>We shout for gladness,</i>
<i>To see Thy shining,</i>	<i>Triumph o'er sadness,</i>
<i>Dying or living</i>	<i>Love Him and praise Him</i>
<i>To Thee are cleaving;</i>	<i>And still shall raise Him</i>
<i>Naught can us sever: Alleluia!</i>	<i>Glad hymns forever: Alleluia!</i>

[LSB 818]

Do you notice that theme? "And we'll raise Him glad hymns forever?" That's what heaven's all about. When you get there, that's what it's going to be: singing the praises of the land forever, in joy and gladness. Right now, the Church on earth gives a foretaste, a teasing taste of that blessedness of that heaven itself. That is the very gift of the Church's worship in times of disaster. She shouts for gladness. She triumphs over sadness, loving and praising and still raising our wonderful triune God. She can do this because of the one before whom she stands and for whom she sings. He is no stranger to suffering. He knows what it is to be a refugee in a foreign land, hunted down. He knows what it is to go without food and of hunger. He knows what it is to be homeless. He knows what it is to be so tired that you just can't put one more foot in front of the other. He knows what it is to have friends die and to cry beside their bodies. He knows, in His own flesh, the hatred of those who think that they offer God's service by dishing out torture and violence. He knows it all, and through it all, His love did not fail. His love remains strong and secure and firm through it all. So, He has a life that does not end, and that is where He reaches us, and that is what the gift of the Church is, a gift of a love so strong that no hatred thrown its way is going to be able to overcome it, a joy so big, and the forgiveness of sin and gift of eternal life that nothing that is tossed our way will be able to destroy it.

We have seen a few examples from standard Lutheran hymnody, but a few years ago, one of my close friends, Rev. Randy Asbury, went to Sudan and visited with Lutherans there who many times suffered greatly from their Muslim neighbors, and he learned there a song they sing as they face intense persecution. I wish I could sing it for you. I can't. Look at the English words though:

*Come and see. Come and see. Hallelujah!*  
*Nothing can defeat our God. Hallelujah!*  
*Nothing can defeat God.*  
*Come and see. Love is filled. Hallelujah!*  
*Nothing can defeat God. Hallelujah! Nothing can defeat God.*  
*Though you don't have food? Hallelujah!*  
*Nothing can defeat God. Hallelujah! Nothing can defeat God.*  
*Though you don't have your mother? Hallelujah!*  
*Nothing can defeat God. Hallelujah! Nothing can defeat God.*  
*Though you don't have your father? Hallelujah!*

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*Nothing can defeat God. Hallelujah! Nothing can defeat God.  
Though you don't have your son? Hallelujah!  
Nothing can defeat God. Hallelujah! Nothing can defeat God.*

This is the Church. She goes on singing and offering praise and thanksgiving to the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in one unbroken sacrifice of praise. This is the big point I hope you get: When things are going pretty good for you in your life, that's the time for you to practice the praise, the hymns, the songs, so that you can continue to sing them when tragedy strikes, whether it's a big communal tragedy like you all are here to talk about, the horrible mess that we just heard of in Lebanon and Syria, or whether it's the doctor walking back in to your room and having a look on his face so that he doesn't really need to say anything else. All of liturgy and hymn to God is practice. The real moment will come that we are all rehearsing for, because what we want to do as the people of God is to march our way through the gate of death singing its defeat, singing sin's forgiveness, singing Christ's victory in life that has no end. We want to look its horror and its stink right in the face, and as the Church of God, announce and declare, "You have not won. You have won nothing at all. We are baptized. We live on promises stronger than you." So, spend the time when things are not falling apart, singing and teaching yourself and others the songs that will sustain you when everything begins to fall apart.

Will you pardon me if I throw one more at you? It's an old German hymn. Luther's musician, Johann Walter, wrote the hymn. It's got a lively tune written by Pistorius. Pistorius is really important, because he had to live through a bit of the ups and downs of 30 Years War. What happens to your worship when you don't have musicians? Your music gets simple, but it doesn't stop singing. The joy doesn't stop. You may not have all the orchestra up there to make the beautiful sound that you are accustomed to, but you still sing, and you still bless God. "*The Bridegroom Soon Will Call Us*,"\* this is a real treasure of a hymn.

*1 The Bridegroom soon will call us,  
"Come to the wedding feast."  
May slumber not befall us  
Nor watchfulness decrease.  
May all our lamps be burning  
With oil enough and more  
That we, with Him returning,  
May find an open door!*

*[LSB 514:1]*

It's a dance, and look, the joy keeps unfolding verse by verse. Next verse:

*2 There shall we see in glory  
Our dear Redeemer's face;  
The long awaited story  
Of heav'nly joy takes place:  
The patriarchs shall meet us,  
The prophets' holy band;  
Apostles, martyrs greet us  
In that celestial land.*

*[LSB 514:2]*

The Church is never alone. In the Church, it's always together. That's why I dislike the hymn "I Come to the Garden Alone." Nonsense! No one comes to the garden alone! You come to the garden with all of God's people! And so when you're welcomed home, you're not alone. The patriarchs are there. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. He's there to throw your arms around. Joseph! The story of Joseph, right? Disaster after disaster! How can God possibly bring good out of this? Sitting in prison, wondering, "Has God forgotten me?" And then the exaltation, and it all comes out and paints such a picture of Jesus. He's there waiting to meet you, to put those arms around you and say, "See, it comes out good in the end! You meant it for evil. God meant it for good for the saving of many lives, lives to this day."

\*LSB #514 *The Bridegroom Soon Will Call Us*, text (st.1)©1982 CPH. Used with permission under license number 15:9-4. [cph.org](http://cph.org).

3 *There God shall from all evil  
Forever make us free,  
From sin and from the devil,  
From all adversity,  
From sickness, pain, and sadness,  
From troubles, cares, and fears,  
And grant us heav'nly gladness  
And wipe away our tears.*  
[LSB 514:3]

And it has to end in music because that's where it is.

4 *In that fair home shall never  
Be silent music's voice;  
With hearts and lips forever  
We shall in God rejoice,  
While angel hosts are raising  
With saints from great to least  
A mighty hymn for praising  
The Giver of the feast*  
[LSB 514:4]

At all times and in all places, giving thanks to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. That's what the Church does at times of disaster, and in times peace, she prepares us to face the moments of calamity and the joys of our sin's forgiveness and in the certainty of death's defeat, and in the joy of eternal life. That's it.