



In the name of him who is ever our Light in the darkness, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned before the service, I've chosen the evening hymns as the focus of our Lenten devotions for this year. It occurred to me that you may be wondering what the rationale behind that is, so as we begin this series together I thought it would be good to explain. There are several considerations. First, the evening hymns are wonderful devotional aids that we simply don't use very often because, with the exception of Lent, we don't hold evening services. The result is that a handful of these hymns like *Abide with Me* are well known and dearly cherished; but many others that are equally worthy of our attention are all but unknown. My hope is that when you become more familiar with some of them they too might become treasured and maybe even become part of your personal or family evening devotions. And yes, every home should have a hymnal, even if you don't sing.

Second, the evening hymns reinforce for us that it's good Christian discipline to end the day with a time of spiritual meditation. Once the day's work is done, and the noise and chaos of our hectic lives have settled down a bit, it's a wholesome and faith building thing to spend a few moments in God's Word and a time of prayer, reflecting on the day's ups and downs, joys and sorrows, successes and failures. It's a time to take inventory, asking such questions as: What went well today that I should be thankful for? Where did I go wrong? What could I have done better? What sins need to be repented of? And how in the future and with the Spirit's help can I show more Christ-like love and care for the people around me?

Third, the nightly ritual of turning in and going to sleep is an ongoing reminder of our limitations. We can't keep on going; our minds and bodies won't permit it. We wear out, and we are wearing down. That each day your work and pleasure come to an end and that you must to surrender to sleep sets before you the inexorable truth that ultimately you will arrive at the long night when no one can work and you will succumb to the deep sleep of death. That is due to the curse of sin that infects us all. As a consequence the flowers of youth fade, our works perish and are forgotten, and we must return to the dust from which we were taken: as the Lord told Adam, "Dust you are, and to the dust you must return." And that, of course, is a fitting theme for Lent; as the priests would say in Latin when imposing ashes on the foreheads of the penitents, "Memento mori": "Remember your death." And after death comes judgment. The evening hymns often reflect this theme; but they also remind us that just as we rise again in the morning, so also will we rise again on the Last Day. Each night's sleep then, is a rehearsal of death and resurrection, and the daily practice of lying down in faith and hope in the Lord is preparation for dying in the peace that passes all understanding.

Good. That's the rationale. I hope you're on board with me. And with all this being said, I chose for our first meditation an evening hymn that is deceptively simple. It's easily recognizable as a child's bedtime prayer set to music, yet it manages to cover all the bases.

"Now the light has gone away." It's that time of reflection I spoke of earlier. The day is done. It's dark out. It's time to retire; but first, a word with the Lord. "Father, listen while I pray." These words remind us of Luther's explanation of the introduction of the Lord's Prayer: that "God tenderly invites us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father." The door's open. Climb up into your Father's lap and tell him what's on your mind.

"Asking Thee to watch and keep" is an admission that it's when you are asleep that you are most vulnerable. You can't control anything when you're sleeping. There's no way to

defend yourself; no way to ward off danger. And that can be frightening—unless you've got someone who's watching out for you: someone strong and mighty like the One who watches over Israel and neither slumbers nor sleeps. And that, in turn, is what leads to quiet sleep. Knowing and trusting that all things are in the hands of the Lord who loves you and only wants what's best for you is what allows you to set aside all your worries and cares, and not spend the night tossing and turning while you fret about what may or may not be. As the psalmist says: "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."

The second verse is a prayer for forgiveness – for Jesus to wash away sin. I'd have liked it better if the lyricist had made it more personal and written, "All that I've done wrong today". The generic approach he opted for seems to avoid taking responsibility. Then again, maybe he was attempting to point out that we are so sinful that we aren't even aware of many of the things we do that are wrong. Thank God that the blood of Jesus our Savior washes us from *all* sin. What continues is more personal: a request that Jesus would strengthen the new person of faith within and reshape *me* in his own image – that I might learn to love as he does.

In the third verse we entrust our loved ones to the care of the Lord. You can almost picture a child kneeling beside the bed and saying, "God bless Mommy, God bless Daddy," and so on. And this is an example of becoming more Christ-like: that we would pray for the good of others even as Jesus prayed. Thus we commend them to the care of the Lord, asking him to bring them safely through trials and temptations of this life, and keep them steadfast in the true faith until the end, that we with them may come to the place he has prepared for us in his eternal home.

The fourth verse is a hymn of praise to Jesus first and foremost for his sacrifice on the cross, his great work of salvation in which he bore the death and torment we deserved for our sin, and by which he gives us life. It's the Gospel pure and sweet, and for it we can never express too much gratitude. The verse concludes with recognition that all good things come from the Lord's amazingly generous hand, that he is the source of all blessing, and that his goodness knows no bounds.

In the final verse we look ahead. The faithful Friend who loved us and gave himself for us will certainly never fail to keep us in his loving care. He will be faithful to the end, the end of this life when we lie down for the last time. In view of this it concludes with a petition, that since you, Lord Jesus, are so faithful to me, cause me also to increase in Christian faith, hope, and love all my life through.

That's it: simple, short, and sweet: a fitting reminder that our prayers do not have to be complicated, long, and drawn out. A child's prayer can say all that needs to be said. And since we are children of the Heavenly Father, it's good and right that we pray this one in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!