



In the name of him to whom we owe all praise, dear friends in Christ: In the last two of our meditations on the evening hymns, I presented works that were fairly unfamiliar to you. That can't be said about tonight's hymn. It's one of the "golden oldies". It rates right up there with *Abide with Me* as of lot of people's personal favorite. And that's something else worth mentioning about the evening hymns in general: so many of them are dearly loved. There are many reasons for that, but one of them has got to be their power to take us back. They come connected to deep memories of evening services attended long ago with loved ones who have long since passed on to glory. They give us the sense of security too, almost like we are being tucked into bed by our heavenly Father. So it is with tonight's hymn.

We'll begin with a little background on it: it first appeared in 1695 in a manual of hymns written by an Englishman named Thomas Ken. He wrote it as a companion to a morning hymn he also wrote and with which you are familiar. It's number 868 in our hymnal: *Awake, My Soul, and with the Sun*. Please turn to it for a moment. Though it's set to a different tune than the hymn we're looking at this evening, they both have the same meter. It's called Long Meter (8-8-8-8). You'll notice that both hymns end with what we call the *Common Doxology*, which Thomas Ken also wrote, so he didn't have to plagiarize to end them both the same way. It was his intent that people would use this pair of hymns to begin and end each day with a song of praise to the Lord.

Turning back to tonight's evensong, you might like to know that the original version had twelve stanzas, but it was shortened to six for our hymnal. I guess they thought Lutherans would be in a hurry go to sleep. The tune we sang with it is called Tallis' Canon, and that's what is usually used with it. It's a simple tune that rises and falls like almost a musical scale exercise. It has a peaceful, calming quality to it. It's well suited for a bedtime song. In *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941 this hymn appeared with a second tune option appropriately named *Evening Hymn*. That's the one we used where I grew up. I much prefer it (even if organists don't because it has five flats making it much harder to play). The second tune is more robust and I think makes a stronger statement of faith. It's also twice as long as Tallis' Canon, so you have to sing two verses together each time through. The way I have it figured, it means that instead of six verses, you only have three. That makes the hymn shorter still and thus even more appropriate for Lutherans. We'll use the second tune for the close of tonight's service and you can decide which you like better.

With that let's dive into the hymn itself. We see at once that it is, like several of the others we've already studied, an evening prayer addressed directly to God. It begins with an ascription of praise; but note that it says "to *Thee*, my God". That sounds terribly formal to our ears, doesn't it? "Thee", "Thou", "Thy", "Thine" ... these words are not part of our modern vocabulary. It's a pity. It's especially a pity because though they sound stuffy and overly formal to us, when Thomas Ken wrote this hymn it was exactly the opposite. If you didn't know someone or wanted to speak formally, you addressed a person as "you". You'd speak about "your" stuff. Thou, Thee, and Thine were words you used when you spoke to family members and close friends. The use of these words expressed warmth and intimacy. That's the idea we want to recapture as we sing this. We're not singing a prayer to a cold, distant deity whom we hardly know; no, we're singing to our dear Father who loves and cares for us.

We're praising him for "all the blessings of the *light*". We want to understand that in two ways. On a surface level, the blessings of light can mean things like the light of day by which we see, and the light of the sun that gives the heat to the earth and causes plants to grow. It's

the light that makes life possible on this earth. On a deeper, more theological level, we remember that Jesus said that he is the Light of the World. He's the one who reveals God to us and illumines us with his Word. His blessings are forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. So we want to see all these things together as "blessings of the light".

Then after this ascription of praise and thanksgiving, the prayer moves immediately to its first petition, one for preservation during the hours of darkness. We now address the Lord as the King of kings, which reminds us of his almighty power. If anyone can keep us safe, it's him. And we ask to be sheltered beneath his "wings". Most of us probably visualize how a mother bird will gather her hatchlings and hide them under the protection of her wings, which is an acceptable image I suppose; but really what's in mind here is how in ancient days those who were weak and defenseless would ask their king for protection. He would indicate his willingness to do so by throwing a fold or "wing" of his long robe over them. It said to the world, "This person is in my safekeeping. You'd better not mess with them or you'll have me to contend with." It's this kind of security we're asking the Lord to provide for us.

The second verse is the prayer's second petition: this one for forgiveness for all the ill I've done today. And I like that it names the guilty party: me. Some of the other hymns we've looked at are vague about that. In this hymn we own the guilt of our sin and ask to be absolved of it for the sake of "Thy dear Son", which is the only way we can be forgiven. It's always in view of what Jesus has done for us by his suffering and death upon the cross, for without the shedding of his blood, there is no forgiveness. The immediate benefit of God's forgiveness is a threefold peace. Peace with myself now that I'm freed from a troubled conscience, peace with God who no longer condemns me, and peace with the world at large – and especially our brothers and sisters in the faith. The confession of sin in the Compline service reflects this. We confess our sins to God Almighty, the whole company of heaven, and "to you, my brothers and sisters". And when we speak the words of God's forgiveness we're saying that we forgive you too – for which of us can rightly hold a sin against someone whom God has forgiven? Can't do it.

I like verse three: "Teach me to live so that I may dread the grave as little as my bed." It's a prayer for unshakable faith in Jesus and in the power of his resurrection. Lord, I want to be just as certain of rising from death on the Last Day as I am of getting up tomorrow morning. And I'll bet you're like me in this: after a long day, the bed looks pretty good. I look forward to the rest. And so we ought to look forward to being released from our earthly struggles and labors – not that we should go out of our way to hasten death; but that we certainly should not fear it. And then, "Teach me to live so that I may rise glorious at the awe-full day." That's nice: we're all going to rise on the Last Day, but we ask to rise gloriously. The Scriptures speak of degrees of glory in the next life. Those who have lived most faithfully and have done much to extend God's kingdom with the talents and gifts entrusted to their care will be rewarded with higher honors. In this petition we ask the Lord to make us fruitful for him now, that we live the kind of life of faith and Christian virtue that is worthy of being recognized by him with a "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

The prayer continues in verse four with a request for sound and restful sleep, and a soul at perfect ease in Jesus. It's hard to overstate the blessings of a good night's sleep. And you know it if you're not getting enough sleep. You get cranky, have trouble staying alert, just feel yucky all over. And it's hard to function that way. Thus we ask for solid rest that will enable us to be on point the next day, to better serve God by serving our neighbors in our varied vocations.

Verse five means a lot more to me now that I'm older. Once upon a time I could sleep all night long; but that rarely happens anymore. Some nights I'll spend hours only wishing I were asleep. I'm guessing I'm not alone in this. And in those long hours the mind can wander into all kinds of dangerous places and evil thoughts. Thus we ask the Lord to fill our minds with heavenly things – as Paul told the Philippians, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. We think too of how David would sing psalms of praise to God in order to give relief to Saul, his mind troubled as it was an evil spirit. The Word of God is powerful. And when it's being spoken, sung, or meditated upon, the powers of darkness must flee.

And it's not only when we're awake at night that we ask for pleasant and godly thoughts; but also when we're dreaming. Nightmares can be very frightening. For some folks they're so severe that they are afraid to fall asleep. So we ask the Lord to guard our dreams as well that they not disturb our slumber.

And then at last the prayer comes to its close in verse six with another ascription of praise, this one to our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In it we recognize the Lord as the source of all life and blessing, who is to be adored by saints and angels in heaven, and all creatures he has made on earth below. The verse is, as I mentioned before, what we call the *Common Doxology*, but I'd like to point out that it is inherently baptismal. That's often overlooked. But according to Christ's command, we were all baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's the name God shared with us when he made us his children in the washing of rebirth and regeneration. It's the name he put on our heads when we were united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. So it's fitting that we end this beautiful bedtime prayer remembering that we are God's own, created, redeemed, and sanctified by his mighty work. Thus with this hymn we commend ourselves to his loving care and mighty keeping now and always, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***