

Our Father Forever

M.W. Bassford
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Introduction.

- A. As I mentioned in the sermon last week, for the next month or two, I will be preaching sermons based on some of the hymns that we are shortly to receive here in a new hymn supplement. For some of you, this may sound like a flashback to the English classes you had and hated in high school, but there's going to be one significant difference. In high school English, we spent our time analyzing writing that was pointless and often not very good; here, we'll be looking at writing that is relevant to our lives and is good.
- B. This is not a matter of subjective opinion, either; this is a statement based on our study of last Sunday evening. Using Scripture, we established that any hymn is good only to the extent that it bases its content on Scripture and presents that Scripture in a useful and understandable way to its audience. All of the hymns we'll be looking at excel according to this standard. Just as the Bible is relevant, so too they are relevant.
- C. In fact, this evening's hymn addresses a problem that many, if indeed not all, of us have struggled with. There have probably been times in all of our lives when we've felt alone, wondered if God cared about what we were going through, and weren't sure at all whether God was going to help us. This hymn is our answer in those times. It points first of all to the power and knowledge of God, power and knowledge that are far beyond the grasp of any of us, and then shows how God will use that power and knowledge to come to our aid. Best of all, these things aren't the author's opinions. They're all based on Scripture. Let's examine, then, this interaction of Scripture, real-life problems, and real-life solutions in "Our Father Forever."

I. The First Verse.

- A. Naturally, we need to begin our understanding of this hymn by looking at the first verse. Even without considering the Scripture, it is apparent that this is a well-written verse. It begins by asking two rhetorical questions: the first about who has the power to bind the stars, the second, about who has the power to shape children in the womb. It answers its own question by pointing out that God the Creator is the one who orders these things still and through them, demonstrates His providential care to us today.
- B. Now, that's a neat thought in and of itself, that we can consider the natural world and from it learn that our Father is watching over us. However, it's certainly not original to the hymnist. Let's go through the hymn now to see where he drew his content from. To begin with, the idea that God guides the stars is not his own invention. In fact, this language comes from Job 38:31-33. In context, these are questions that God is asking of Job to emphasize to Job the difference between God's understanding and power and Job's own. Even today, friends, is there anything in the natural world that more clearly demonstrates the might of God than His control of the stars? I can remember growing up in semi-rural Missouri and taking walks by myself at night during the winter, and looking up and seeing the Milky Way overhead. For you city dwellers who haven't seen it, it's amazing. It's a huge band of stars all the way across the sky, stretching an unimaginably far distance. As impressive as it is, though, even our galaxy is only one of a possibly infinite number of galaxies. It makes our heads hurt just trying to think about that, but it doesn't make God's head hurt. He leads infinite numbers of galaxies through the sky with the same ease that we would walk our dog. That's how awesome God is.
- C. The next question, about the child in the womb, is also drawn from Scripture. We see this content appear in Psalm 139:13-15. These are the words of David, and just as God's control over the stars illustrates the massiveness of His power, so too His attention to the child as it forms within the womb illustrates the precision of His care. There are a number of women in this congregation who are expecting now, and that means, folks that there are miracles taking place in this building now. Just imagine: starting out with a single cell, and nine months later, finishing with something as perfect as a newborn baby! When we think about all the amazing, complex things that must happen exactly right to achieve that result, how can we fail to see the hand of God?
- D. Of course, it's not surprising that God can do these astounding things, when He was the one who created everything in the first place. The word pair that the hymnist uses here, "sea and land" is actually taken from Psalm 95:5. God has created it all, He continues to sustain it all, and we can be assured when we consider the witness of the natural world that He is attending especially to us and considering our hours with love.

II. The Second Verse.

- A. This brings us to the second verse of the hymn. As we can see, it is constructed according to the same pattern as the first verse: Two rhetorical questions answered in the last four lines. Without getting too much into the technical details, one of the signs of a good hymn is this kind of parallel structure between the verses. The subject matter here is slightly different. The writer begins by asking who can hear the softest prayer, and then, even beyond that, who is capable of hearing the prayer that hasn't even made it to words yet. The

answer, of course, is that God, even though He is unimaginably far away from us, is still intimately close to us, hears us, and will willingly deploy His angels for our protection and our comfort.

- B. As before, though, there's a reason why this content is so good. It's so good because it's taken from the Bible. Let's look at the first two lines. At a guess, this idea is drawn from the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:10, 13. Here, Hannah is grieving before the Lord at the tabernacle because of her barrenness. She's so emotionally overwrought that she can barely get the words out, and, in the midst of this despairing cry for help, the high priest Eli comes up and accuses her of being drunk. Have you ever been where Hannah was? Have you ever been at a place where it seems like everyone couldn't care less about this massive problem that's crushing you? If you find yourself there, go to God, and you'll find the same answer Hannah did. Eli might have thought Hannah was drunk, but God understood her whispered, brokenhearted prayer, and shortly thereafter, she gave birth to a son who would become the prophet Samuel. Even if He's the only one, God hears.
- C. More than that, though, God hears the prayers we can't even put into words. This is the point of the next two lines, and it echoes the point of Romans 8:26. Sometimes, even for those of us who earn a living by talking a lot, sometimes, we just can't find the words to express to God what we feel and what we want. Even then, God through His Holy Spirit can understand us. He knows not just what's on our lips, but what's on our hearts.
- D. All this is true, even though, as the hymn observes, God's throne is located beyond the realm of the physical. This thought is drawn from, among other places, Psalm 103:19. God has founded His throne in heaven, and controls everything Himself from that spiritual location. Even though this is so, even though I'm not sure that sound in the sense that we think of sound can even exist in heaven, God hears the prayers we can barely utter, and He even hears the prayers we can't. God is infinitely far away, yet infinitely close at the same time.
- E. Nor does God regard our entreaties with contempt or even with indifference. Instead, He exerts His powers on our behalf, even employing His angelic servants to help us. Scripturally, we see this in Psalm 91:11. Ironically enough, we remember this passage most for the way that Satan misquotes it during the temptation of Jesus, but just as there is a false way to read it, there is a true way. We shouldn't go jumping off buildings to see if angels will catch us, but we can know that they are actively helping God's people today. How precisely that works is not revealed to us, but we can trust in the promise of the word of God.

III. The Third Verse.

- A. As we turn our attention to the third verse of the hymn, we see content that is equally as Scriptural and meaningful. The same question-and-answer pattern holds true, but this time, the verse first asks who it is who goes through the depths, depths that are both literal and metaphorical. It then inquires who has the power to shatter the gates of death like a battering ram with his voice alone. The answer once again is God, who will fulfill the purpose of creation, redeem His children, and take them to see His face forever.
- B. As always, all of this beautiful imagery is not taken from the mind of the hymnist, but from the revelation of God. As we look at the first three lines, we see that they all come from the same place: Job 38:16-17. God is the one who is completely familiar with every inch of the ocean floor and who can go to spiritual places that are incomprehensible to us. No living man has seen the gates of death, but God has. The point is that when God promises us eternal life in His word, He knows exactly what He is talking about.
- C. Furthermore, the knowledge of God is matched by the power of God. Once a human being is dead, for all that we are capable of accomplishing, he stays dead. Not so with what God is capable of accomplishing. He can take a human being who has been dead for five thousand years and make him alive again. Look at the language of Ephesians 5:14 to see how this works. God will bring about the final resurrection with arguably less trouble than we would have awakening a slumbering teenager.
- D. As the hymn moves on to describe what God will do for His people on that day, once again, he does not stray far from Scriptural language. Indeed, these next two lines are taken from two different verses in Romans 8: Romans 8:21, 23. This is an interesting thought from Scripture that we usually don't think about very much. From the very beginning, the physical world was created with a purpose in mind. Earth exists to give us a place to stand while we get to heaven, and once all of God's people have completed their service, that purpose will also be completed. I've heard it said that a high-end sports car practically strains to be driven as fast as it will go, because that's the purpose for which the sports car was created. In the same way, the physical creation groans for the time when it will be freed from its servitude. That time will come when we as Christians are once and for all redeemed by the blood of Christ to reign with Him forever.
- E. The hymn then continues to describe the reward of the faithful Christian. We will ascend to heaven with our Father, and there we will see His face forever. Once again, this thought refers back to Scripture, this time to Revelation 22:3-4. As with much of Revelation, this is metaphor. We shouldn't take this to mean that God has a literal face, or even that we have literal eyes. Instead, the point is that in that day, we will finally directly experience the nature of God. We have some idea of what God is like here, but that idea is limited both by our understanding and by our lack of goodness. In heaven, we won't have those problems. Our minds will see God as He is, and our reward will be the opportunity to dwell with Him forever.

Conclusion. If you want to experience these heavenly blessings, you need to become a child of God first.