

H Y M N S

Longings for Mercy

- 1 When I am in the natural man,
How very strong I feel I am,
I do not know, I cannot scan
How weak I am.
- 2 When in the world I have my life,
I cannot sense my failure rife,
But boasting in my earnest strife,
I forward press.
- 3 When I within the darkness dwell,
My shallow state I cannot tell,
I only think how I excel,
And proudly dream.
- 4 But when at last I come to Thee,
Thy searching light uncovers me,
I see what I could never see—
My self exposed.
- 5 I wither 'neath Thy piercing ray,
And all my strength dissolves away,
My self-esteem in dust I lay,
And lowly bow.
- 6 How blind and foolish is the pride
With which my soul was fortified;
From my dark heart, self-satisfied,
It issued forth.
- 7 There's not a thing that pride can claim,
There's not a member but is lame,
There's only deep regret and shame,
How can I pray?
- 8 Thy blood from judgment saveth me,
Thy life from wrath delivers me,
How filthy yet in poverty
I really am.
- 9 I want to pray, but faith have not,
I fain would seek Thee as Thou art.
Oh, canst Thou e'er renew my heart,
Have mercy, Lord!

The most common condition that keeps a man from the rich experience of knowing and loving God is his vain thinking. A man in his natural being is full of darkness and self-deception. Jeremiah 17:9-10 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (KJV). Solomon, in his wisdom, declared

that "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool" (Prov. 28:26, KJV). Many men have proven by their foolishness the insight of the Scripture, but few of us comprehend the real nature of our plight. Only when we come under the penetrating gaze of the Lord's burning eyes of fire (Rev. 1:14; 2:18), do we realize that we are without covering before our God. Hence the prophet Isaiah, when he saw the Lord lifted up on His throne, cried out, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:5, KJV).

The burden of this hymn focuses on the writer's discovery of his real condition before the Lord. When he lives in the darkness of his natural disposition, he is unaware of his profound failure and weakness. But when he comes under the searching light of the Lord's penetrating and exposing gaze, he is ushered into deep contrition and remorse. The hymn was written by Watchman Nee. In *The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit*, he wrote:

Sooner or later a servant of God discovers that he himself is the greatest frustration to his work....Many servants of the Lord are fundamentally unfit for the Lord's work because they have never been dealt with by the Lord in a fundamental way. Without this dealing, they are basically unqualified for any work. All excitement, zeal, and earnest pleading is vain. This kind of fundamental dealing is the only way for us to become a useful vessel to the Lord. (7)

In this hymn the author leads us through a journey of self-discovery that results in utter brokenness before the Lord. Being broken is not the goal of the journey, but without such breaking, man can never become unconditionally dependent on the Lord as his life supply and energizing source. The discovery of the self begins with an observation: "When I am in the natural man, / How very strong I feel I am, / I do not know, I cannot scan / How weak I am." In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul refers to the *natural man* as the *soulish man*. There he says that the *soulish man* is not able to receive the things of the Spirit of God because they are foolishness to him. It is commonly thought by many Christians today that the spirit and the soul of man are synonymous terms. The Bible, however, clearly shows that the spirit is the crucial organ for knowing and contacting God, whereas the soul is under the influence and sway of man's fallen humanity (1 Cor. 2:14; Jude 19).

Richard C. Trench in *Synonyms of the New Testament* says that classical Greek philosophy “knew of nothing higher than the soul of man; but Revelation knows of the Spirit of God, and of Him making His habitation with men, and calling out an answering spirit in them” (268). In the realm of the soulish or natural man, we have no consciousness of lack and cannot even imagine the depth of our weakness. We are darkened in our understanding and hardened in our heart (Eph. 4:18).

Not only is our natural man dark, but the world is also a realm full of darkness, intensifying our inward insensibility: “When in the world I have my life, / I cannot sense my failure rife, / But boasting in my earnest strife, / I forward press.” The world, as revealed in the first Epistle of John, consists of a system that competes for the hearts of men who were created to love the Father God (2:15). John exhorts us to love neither the world nor the things in the world—things related to human necessities for our living such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation. Religion, culture, education, industry, commerce, and entertainment are also constituents of the world. Furthermore, John tells us that the whole world lies in the evil one (5:19). Hence, once we give our allegiance to the world, we are brought under darkness. Paul was sent to preach to others “to turn them from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). The gospel is given to deliver us from the darkness of this world under Satan’s authority into the light of God’s kingdom. So, when we live in the world, we are deceived and feel that, by our earnest striving, we are doing well. In reality we are dwelling in darkness. “When I within the darkness dwell, / My shallow state I cannot tell, / I only think how I excel, / And proudly dream.” Because of the obfuscation of the world, we cannot fathom the superficiality of our person and living. We linger in a fantasy of illusions, imagining that we surpass others in our virtues and actions.

Stanza 4 marks the turning point in the experience of the writer—“at last I come to Thee.” The only deliverance from all forms of self-deception, pride, and misguided perceptions is to come to the living person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In His presence, His searching light uncovers and discovers every hidden thing. We are exposed. In stanza 5 the searching light of His penetrating gaze becomes a “piercing ray,” a kind of lightening bolt of revelation, stripping away all of the false coverings and leaving one naked and without defense before Him. At such a time we experience the dreadful feeling of the apostle who wrote, “There is no creature that is not manifest before Him, but all things are naked and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we are to give our account” (Heb. 4:13). “I wither” before this probing brilliance, “and all my strength dissolves away, / My self-esteem in dust I lay, / And lowly bow.” According to Hebrews 4:12, the piercing ray is the word of God: “The word of God is

living and operative and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow, and able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The word of God is able to pierce like a sharp two-edged sword and divide the soul from the spirit. The writer of Hebrews uses a striking comparison—the dividing of the joints and marrow is like the dividing of the soul from the spirit. The marrow is within the bones, and the bones must be broken to expose the marrow. Similarly, the spirit is within the soul, and the soul must be broken to discover the spirit. Once the spirit is liberated from the darkened soul, the real thoughts and intentions of the heart are fully known. How much we need to come under the piercing ray of the word of God to awaken within us a profound awareness of our real condition before God! Without such an unmasking, we will exist in the blindness and foolishness of vain imaginations.

Stanza 6 describes the absurdity of a man boasting in his soulish haughtiness, arrogant in his self-satisfaction which issues out of his dark heart. Stanza 7 acknowledges in abject humiliation the desperate condition of a man under the scrutinizing look of the living God. He is like Peter, who after boasting that he would never forsake the Lord, wept in utter despair for his cowardly denial, when he faced the searching eye of the Savior (Luke 22:33-34, 60-62). All boasting is gone, every limb is out of joint, and the soul is filled with deep regret and shame.

Under such condemnatory illumination, there is finally openness to avail oneself of the saving grace of our compassionate Savior. The apostle urges us to “come forward with boldness to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help” (Heb. 4:16). This hymn in like fashion cries out in relief: “Thy blood from judgment saveth me, / Thy life from wrath delivers me.” Yet there is the lingering awareness: “How filthy yet in poverty / I really am.”

We might expect the final stanza to celebrate in grateful praise the saving blood and the delivering life of the Savior. However, the weakness of the believer under God’s shining is complete. He cannot rely on his own faith or on his seeking heart. The hymn does not end in triumph and victory but in the pensive and sober cry of one who has abandoned himself in desperation to the mercy of the Lord. To those who have never seen their real condition, this hymn may appear to be a melancholy exercise in self-abnegation. But to those who are being made clear concerning the duplicity of their own deceitful hearts, it is a welcome companion in the journey of self-discovery. We also whisper in sincere desperation, “Oh, canst Thou e’er renew my heart, / Have mercy, Lord!”

by Gary Kaiser