



A BIBLE STUDY ON GEORG SPALATIN

Luther's Friend and Political Adviser to Elector Frederick the Wise

“Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”

(TLH 387; LW 353; LSB 556)

(Ps. 98:1–3; 2 Tim. 1:9–10; Gal. 4:4–5; Rom. 3:28)

“In all this I fear nothing, as you know, my Spalatin. Even if their flattery and power should succeed in making me hated by all the people, enough remains of my heart and conscience to know and confess that all for which I stand and which they attack, I have from God, to whom I gladly and of my own accord entrust and offer all of this. If He takes it away, it is taken away. If He preserves it, it is preserved. Hallowed and praised be His name forever. Amen.”

— Letter by Martin Luther to Georg Spalatin,
Aug. 28, 1518

The years 1524 and 1525 were important to both the reformer Martin Luther and Georg Spalatin, secretary to Elector Frederick the Wise and librarian at the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Both were working feverishly to advance the Reformation in Germany and beyond, contemplating marriage and working on creating hymns for congregational singing. Spalatin saw Luther as his theological mentor and counselor. For his part, Luther cultivated a close friendship with the Saxon elector's secretary, consistently addressing Spalatin in his letters as “my dearest brother in the Lord” or “my dearest friend in the Lord,” sharing personal convictions and struggles, and regularly asking Spalatin to pray for God's mercy upon the Reformation efforts.

Luther's hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” first appeared in 1525, the same year Elector Frederick died and Spalatin married and moved to Altenburg to initiate church reforms there. Even after Spalatin's move, the two continued to work together. Many of their letters have been translated into English and are contained in volumes 48–50 of the American Edition of *Luther's Works*.

STANZAS ONE AND TWO

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, / With exultation springing, / And with united heart and voice / And holy

rapture singing, / Proclaim the wonders God has done, / How His right arm the vict'ry won. / What price our ransom cost Him!

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; / Death brooded darkly o'er me. / Sin was my torment night and day; / In sin my mother bore me. / But daily deeper still I fell; / My life became a living hell, / So firmly sin possessed me.

Many have seen in this hymn elements of Luther's own life. Nevertheless, the hymn is not about Luther but about God's great plan of salvation in the sending of His precious Son. This is the solid basis for our salvation and our eternal song of joy.

1. Compare the words of Ps. 98:1–3 with the words of the first stanza. True Christian joy is closely linked to proclaiming God's redeeming wonders and the greatness of His deliverance through His Son. Why must true faith in Christ and His redemptive work on the cross give glory to God and also share the Gospel with our neighbor?

2. Luther expertly describes the condition of helpless, sinful humanity after the fall. How can this be a portrait of the hell he suffered as a monk trying to earn the Almighty's favor? How is this the confession of every Christian on the basis of what is revealed in Holy Scripture? Why did Luther's agony increase when he attempted to counter his many sins with even more good works?

STANZAS THREE AND FOUR

My own good works all came to naught, / No grace or merit gaining; / Free will against God's judgment fought, / Dead to all good remaining. / My fears increased till sheer despair / Left only death to be my share; / The pangs of hell I suffered.

But God had seen my wretched state / Before the world's foundation, / And mindful of His mercies great, / He planned for my salvation. / He turned to me a father's heart; / He did not choose the easy part / But gave His dearest treasure.

The Word of God comes to bring despair to those who are comfortable in their sins — and to bring eternal comfort to those who despair of any human attempt to manufacture

their own righteousness. God's mercy and grace desire to have the last word for all weak and helpless humanity.

3. The judgments of God's Law, given through Moses, clearly show the wretched state of unredeemed children of a disobedient Adam and Eve. Why is it impossible for the unbelieving world (and our unbelieving nature) to confess to heaven and to earth what Luther presents in stanzas two and three? Why have so many religious bodies who call themselves Christian abandoned such a clear understanding of fallen humanity today?

4. Why is the cross of Christ the clearest portrayal of the depth of humanity's sin? Why is it also the greatest revelation of God's willingness to save an entire rebel race?

STANZAS FIVE AND SIX

God said to His beloved Son: / "It's time to have compassion. / Then go, bright jewel of My crown, / And bring to all salvation. / From sin and sorrow set them free; / Slay bitter death for them that they / May live with You forever."

The Son obeyed His Father's will, / Was born of virgin mother; / And God's good pleasure to fulfill, / He came to be my brother. / His royal pow'r disguised He bore; / A servant's form, like mine, He wore / To lead the devil captive

Read Gal. 4:4–5. In stanzas five and six, Luther paints a picture of the exchange between the Father and the Son in eternity. What was Christ called to come and accomplish for us according to these stanzas?

5. In the sixth stanza, Luther highlight's Christ's human nature. Why is this so important for Luther? Why is this nothing but pure comfort for the Christian under attack from the devil, the world and their own sinful nature?

6. Read Phil. 2:5–11. How can this "Christ hymn" be understood in light of the Servant Son revealed in Isaiah 52–53? According to Isaiah, of what did Christ empty Himself?

STANZAS SEVEN AND EIGHT

To me He said: "Stay close to Me, / I am your rock and castle. / Your ransom I Myself will be; / For you I strive and wrestle. / For I am yours, and you are Mine, / And where I am you may remain; / The foe shall not divide us.

"Though he will shed My precious blood, / Me of My life bereaving, / All this I suffer for your good; / Be steadfast and believing. / Life will from death the vict'ry win; / My innocence shall bear your sin, / And you are blest forever.

Luther changes the view in these stanzas. We see and hear things from Christ's own perspective. Who is Jesus speaking to? What truths are proclaimed here? What great exchange is revealed?

7. Luther and the Lutheran Reformation are known for emphasizing the historical events in the life of Jesus as righteous works accomplished in the stead of helpless sinners. Why does true faith believe that all Christ accomplished He accomplished "for me"? How is this completely different than simply believing that Jesus was a real person and even rose from the dead?

STANZAS NINE AND TEN

"Now to My Father I depart, / From earth to heav'n ascending, / And, heav'nly wisdom to impart, / The Holy Spirit sending; / In trouble He will comfort you / And teach you always to be true / And into truth shall guide you.

"What I on earth have done and taught / Guide all your life and teaching; / So shall the kingdom's work be wrought / And honored in your preaching. / But watch lest foes with base alloy / The heav'nly treasure should destroy; / This final word I leave you."

Luther presents the departing words of the crucified and resurrected Savior. They give comfort, a precious promise — but they also contain an admonition.

8. The exhortation by Christ to watch is reflected throughout the Holy Scriptures. How is it reflected in Christ's parables? In the letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation? In the writings of the Old Testament prophets?

9. Reflect on the mission of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ sends in stanza nine. How does Luther closely link this to Christ's ascension to the Father's right hand?