

Poetry. Writing it well seems to be dying art. Reading it well appears to be defunct. It's not something you hear every day. It seems to be limited to lovers and losers in our society. Honestly, that's a shame. Much of the problem is that we just lack the command of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary necessary to produce decent poetry anymore.

Poems can do things emotionally that prose will not. Prose commands. Poetry entices. Prose addresses the mind. Poetry engages the soul. Prose instructs. Poetry models.

There's so much to be gained from a regular diet of poetry, not the least of which is a much greater appreciation for hymns. [Stick with me. This isn't one of those "hymns are better" kinds of articles.] Actually, this article grows out of a long-standing love for the singing and study of hymns and for the theology portrayed therein. As long as I can remember, I've loved hymns, but mainly for their theological insight and astuteness. There are hymns that, for their masterful use of the English language alone should make your heart ache, your knees weak, your voice crack. But when you consider the soul-searching way the truths of Scripture are exposed, you're moved mentally and emotionally. In fact, John Calvin wrote concerning the Psalms, that book of Hebrew poetry right in the middle of our Bibles,

"I have been accustomed to call this book... 'An Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul'; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here, the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed." (Preface to A Commentary on the Psalms, p. xxxvii)

Have you ever experienced that in the middle of singing a hymn during worship? I have. And, oddly enough, it's usually while singing a song I've sung thousands of times before. I don't know why. I don't know how to explain it, but it's true.

This is so true that I have, though not often enough or regularly enough, taught one-time stand-alone lessons based on the examination of a hymn. I've called it, for lack of a better term, Theology in Hymnody. It's actually a fun exercise that's part English class, part Sunday school.

A poet is a craftsman, words his tools, your heart his clay. Take a good work of poetry, but not from your typical English textbook; grab a hymnbook. Examine the meter, the rhyme scheme, the metaphors and similes used, the word pictures created. "Unpack" (my shorthand word for

“plumb the depths of in every way”) the poetic use of language, and the truths of Scripture conveyed.

Where do I start? There are actually two hymns in a row that would be well worth your time. *Jesus, thy Blood and Righteousness* and *My Hope is Built on Nothing Less* are #521 and 522 respectively in the Trinity Hymnal and are a great place to start.

I know what you’re thinking. At this point, you’re wondering why this article seems to come out of left field.

Well, honestly, it happened to me again. There are a few hymns that, no matter how many times we sing them, I find myself actually unable to sing. For example, I can’t help but think of Susan, John, David, and Drew, friends from another place, when we sing “Orphans no longer fatherless, nor widows desolate” in *Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand*.

At the Missions Conference, we sang *For All the Saints*. Can you really consider the Church Triumphant, the Church Militant, and the future state of believers alive today and **not** quiver? I couldn’t. The last 3 stanzas teach truths of Scripture that ought to well up a love for Christ from your deepest, innermost parts.

Let me show you what I mean. I’ll unpack *For All the Saints*, written by William W. How in 1864.<sup>1</sup> To be honest, the first stanza actually took me a while. For the longest time, I thought Mr. How was asking for blessing on the saints. I couldn’t exactly fathom that and I was thrown off by the “For” and the pause required by the music at the end of line 2. So I pressed on with the grammar (remember, I majored in Math!). Mr. How is blessing the name of Christ for the saints who have gone before, who faithfully confessed Jesus (“thee”) before the world. That makes SO much more sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Morgan, Robert J., *Then Sings My Soul: Book 2*, Nelson publishers, 2004, p.99.

**For All the Saints**  
William How

These saints  
confessed  
Christ publicly.

For all the saints who from their labors rest,  
Who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.

“labors” refers to life on  
this earth. Those who rest  
from that battle would be  
the saints in heaven, the  
Church Triumphant!

A Hebrew word  
meaning “let us  
praise Jehovah”

Alleluia! Allelu!

Gen 49:24; Deut 32:4  
1 Sam 2:2; **Psalm 31:2-3**  
Psalm 61; Psalm 59; 2  
Sam 22:29; John 8:12

Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might,  
Thou Lord, their Captain in the well fought fight,  
Thou in the darkness drear, their one true light.  
Alleluia! Allelu!

“soldiers” are those living  
the Christian life now.  
  
“saints who fought of old”  
is tantamount to Hebrews  
11, but would include all  
believers up to the present.

O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,  
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,  
And win with them the victor's crown of gold.  
Alleluia! Allelu!

1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8;  
1 Pet 5:4; Rev 4

The golden evening brightens in the west,  
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest,  
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest.  
Alleluia! Allelu!

Clearly, a poetic view of  
the end of life, the dawn  
of the new day “on the  
other side”, in paradise.  
There is rest there,  
because the battle is  
over.

1 Thess 4:16-18  
1 Cor 15:22-23  
Psalm 24

But lo! There breaks a yet more glorious day,  
The saints triumphant rise in bright array,  
The King of Glory passes on His way.  
Alleluia! Allelu!

Picture of the mighty warrior-  
king returning from battle and  
his subjects coming out to  
greet him

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,  
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,  
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Rev 5:9; 7:9  
Rev 21:21  
Rev 19