**Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee**

**History of Hymn**

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), was born during the “Dark Ages” to a noble family in Burgundy, France. During this era, the Roman Catholic Church shaped nearly every aspect of European society; the term “Dark Ages” reflects the depth of confusion and corruption in the Church. “The moral standards of many of its prominent leaders were characterized by utter disgrace and shame.”[[1]](#footnote-1) “Dark Ages” also refers to the wide-spread lack of literacy among society—only a small percentage of the population could read and write. Bernard was one of those elite few.

Though born in a land and era dominated by poverty and corruption, Bernard's father was a land-owning knight, and his mother a woman of “radiant goodness.” From his youth, Bernard “showed a bent for piety and learning.” Physical beauty, an abundance of natural talents, and keen leadership skills opened to him a world that offered many secular opportunities. He could choose to pursue “court, camp, university, or Church.” While yet in his early 20's, a vision inspired him to devote his entire life to the Church and consequently to join the Citeaux monastery, even though he knew full well that joining the monastery meant relinquishing all earthly claims to the land and wealth that would naturally fall to him as son of a land-owner. Having made that decision, he promptly employed his powerful persuasive skills to influence all his brothers old enough, as well as his uncle, to likewise choose the life of a monk.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Bailey reports that afterwards Bernard spoke with the youngest brother, yet too young to join a monastery. “Well, brother Nivard, to you alone our land will have to look.” The insightful boy replied, “Does that mean to you, heaven; to me, the earth? The division has not fairly been made.” Later both Nivard and his father followed Bernard and the other brothers.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Three years after joining the Cistercians, Bernard's superiors, noting his obvious leadership skills, sent him open a new monastery in Clairvaux, France, “a valley of forests, wholly wild and desolate, the haunt of robbers.”The first winter this venture included such scarcity of food that Bernard and his men were reduced to “a diet of beechnuts and roots.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Many sources speak of Bernard's unmatched piety. One example given reports that one day, coming upon robber being led to his death, Bernard “seized the halter, took the man to court and begged his life for the monastery, converted, and made a useful man of him.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Bernard's influence spread far and wide in Europe. “He commanded kings, emperors and prelates and they obeyed him. He settled a war, all leaders being won by his impetuous eloquence. Single-handed he arbitrated the quarrels of rival popes and put Innocent II on his seat in Rome.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Bernard also holds the dubious honor of inspiring thousands of men to join the Second Crusade. Commissioned by the Pope to “preach a new crusade,” Bernard's passionate preaching aroused such religious fervor that the male population of whole towns prepared to march toward Jerusalem. “Women hid their husbands and sons to keep them out of reach of Bernard's powerful eloquence.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Most sources believe the hymn “Jesus the Very Thought of Thee” comes from an original 192 line Latin poem written by Bernard. Centuries later, Edward Caswall of England (1814- 1878) “translated portions of the lines for this hymn text.” Caswall, who “is best re­mem­bered as a trans­lat­or of an­cient hymns[,]” was influenced by the same Oxford Movement as Fredrick Faber and left the Anglican Church to join the Catholic church.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The tune for this hymn, entitled “St. Agnes,” originates with John B. Dykes who wrote over 300 religious tunes. Many of his compositions are still widely used today.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Literary Stucture**

* Meter: 8.6.8.6
* Poetic Feet: Iambic
* Rhyme scheme: abab
* Poetic devices and figures of speech:
  + Alliteration
    - A **s**weeter **s**ound than thy blest name, O **S**avior of mankind
    - O **H**ope of ev'ry contrite **h**eart!
* Anadiplosis
  + Stanza 3 ends with “How good to **those who seek**” then

stanza 4 begins with, “And **those who find** Thee, **find** a bliss.”

* + - Climax
      * Jesus, the **very thought** of Thee with *sweetness* fills my breast; but *sweeter far* **Thy face** to see and in **Thy presence** rest (stanza 1)
      * Nor **voice** can sing, nor **heart** can frame, nor can the **mem'ry** find a *sweeter* sound than Thy blest name . . . (stanza 2)
      * Jesus! Be Thou our glory **now**, and thro' **eternity** (stanza 5)
* Repetition—I didn't find a proper term for this, but it feels significant
  + Jesus! Our only joy be **Thou**, As **Thou** our prize wilt be; Jesus! Be **Thou** our glory now . . . (stanza 5)

**Thought Content**

The Church Hymnal points to Colossians 3:11 as a Scriptural basis for this hymn: “Christ is all, and in all.” Adoration of Jesus and His Name certainly is the focal point of Clairvaux's words. After speaking of the sweetness of experiencing Jesus and the preciousness of His Name, he addresses Jesus as Savior, Hope, and Joy. The singer is constantly reminded of the centrality of Jesus by the frequent use of the words “Thou” (used four times), “Thy” (three), and “Thee” (two).

Clarivaux, who had left all earthly possessions in lieu of following Jesus, rejoices in having found Jesus to be all he could need or want. Although he knows the bliss of man's present life in God cannot be adequately described (because no other human experience can compare), nevertheless, he attempts to put his present joy into words. Intertwined with expressions of the present sweetness of life in Jesus, he anticipates an eternity of yet much greater bliss.

**Musical Characteristics**

* Melodic Movement: although most of the tune goes step by step, it also has two bigger jumps, one is a jump from so to mi and the other from fa to ti.
* Meter: 3/4
* Form: ABCD

**Evaluative Questions**

The easy flowing music of this hymn fits well with its glorious theme. Even young children can sing most of the notes with relative ease.

Since many of the thoughts flow together fluidly, rather than only pulling out individual words or phrases to explain, younger children will benefit from the teacher taking some stanzas by thoughts. Spacing the explanations would also aid comprehension. Depending on the schedule and memorizing-of-words-goal, this could be a stanza a day, or perhaps one a week.

* “Jesus, the very thought of Thee, With sweetness fills my breast”: Reminisce with the children some special highlight that involved a person (one common experience if possible) such as the time the principal played with them at recess or a visitor surprised them with stories or a snack . . . Encourage the children to talk about how they feel inside in thinking about that. That will lead to understand Clairvaux's meaning of the thought of Jesus filling his breast with joy.
* “But sweeter far thy face to see, and in Thy presence rest”: Keep thinking of the above special incident (needs to involve a relationship). Would they rather just think of that person, see photos of them or actually be with them and maybe sit on their lap? This picture would help children understand the last part of stanza one.
* Stanza two can go by phrases
  + “Nor voice can sing”: nor means not, indicating at least two things will be mentioned
  + “nor heart can frame”: use the word imagination here
  + “Nor can the mem'ry find”: nothing we have ever experienced
  + “A sweeter sound than Thy blest name O Savior of mankind”: Talk about how we all love to hear our name. It is of the most precious things to us, we identify strongly with it. Even in the midst of lots of noise and other distractions we quickly hear our name spoken. It is of the first words a baby learns to recognize. The Name of Jesus is the very best sound the human can hear; He is the Savior, the Rescuer, of all mankind. Have them look for names of Jesus in the words of the next stanzas. Some will recognize capitalized words as indicators.
* Stanza three:
  + “Oh, Hope of every contrite heart”: contrite—humble, opposite of proud, repentant. Children understand the idea of repentant versus sullen or rebellious when watching body language or listening to the tone of voice. The teacher could demonstrate both the negative and positive here. Jesus is the Hope of the repentant heart.
  + “O Joy of all the meek”: I don't think I would attempt to differentiate much between contrite and meek. They both have the idea of humility.
  + “To those who fall, how kind Thou art!” Have children help answer how God would be good to those who fall. They can think of their compassionate responses at recess when a classmate falls and hurts himself.
  + “How good to those who seek!”: How would God be good to those who seek? They know how good it is to find something they have been looking for. God lets Himself be found by those who look for Him.
* Stanza four:
  + “And those who find Thee, find a bliss”: bliss is pure joy
  + “Nor tongue nor pen can show The love of Jesus what it is”: do they remember the meaning of nor from stanza two? How would the tongue or pen try to show things? What is it the tongue and pen cannot describe?
  + “None but His loved ones know”: explain that all mankind is loved by God, but this is referring to those who love Him back, who respond to Him.
* Stanza five:
  + “Jesus, our only joy be Thou”: this could be hard. Clarivaux is not telling us we should not enjoy anything except reading the Bible and praying. God gives us many earthly pleasures as a means of showing us His love. However, they turn into addictions when we see the activity itself as the source of joy rather than the means through which God gives us joy. (Example: food, games, etc.) They have heard of the addictions of smoking and drinking, but seeing addictions as a bigger problem, a very real one, (yes among Christians too) will likely surprise them. Talking about this carefully—emphasizing more that God is the Source of all real pleasure and His delight in giving us joy than the addiction side—can plant good seeds and is not beyond their level of understanding. Young children are very perceptive.
  + “As Thou our prize wilt be; Jesus! Be Thou our glory now, And thro' eternity”: this is a grand anticipation of all God intends to do.

Only the Christian who has come to grips with the futility of life without Christ identifies with Clairvaux's ecstatic adoration of God. Although Clairvaux's eloquent thoughts reach beyond the mental comprehension of young children, they give valuable pictures of the surpassing treasure of abiding in Jesus.

Bibliography

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1. Kenneth W .Osbeck, 101 Hymn Stories. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982). 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Albert Edward Bailey, The Gospel in Hymns. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.) 248-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bailey, 249-250. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bailey, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bailey, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bailey, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bailey, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Edward Caswell,” The Cyber Hymnal, 4 September 2005, <<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/c/a/> [caswall\_e.htm](http://www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/c/a/caswall_e.htm)> (28 April 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Osbeck, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)