

Of The Father's Love Begotten
John 1:1-5, 14
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Introduction:

Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was born around AD 350 in northern Spain. If you know your history timelines, then you know this was shortly after the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great, who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Prudentius lived at the same time as St. Augustine of Hippo, the greatest theologian of the early church fathers. He had an interesting combination of skills and careers, working as a lawyer, judge, and a governor. At the age of 57, though, he became disillusioned that his life had been wasted and his conscience led him to retire and seek God through sacred poetry and works defending orthodox Christianity. His poetry would be read a millennia later in the Middle Ages when they would influence writers of allegorical literature. He has been called "the prince of early Christian poets."¹ Two of his poems that were later set to music and have survived to the present are a hymn for Epiphany called "Earth Has Many A Noble City" and a Christmas hymn called "Of The Father's Love Begotten," the song we just sang.

Dr. Michael Hawn, a music professor, says that "by the time this hymn comes to us in our hymnal, it has traveled an amazing journey through 17 centuries and at least four countries: a Latin poem (written by) a Catholic Spanish poet in the fourth century, (given) a tune from Italy in the 11th century, a translation from an Anglican in 19th-century England and a harmonization in the 20th century by an American Episcopal musician." Hymnologist Albert Bailey, refers to it as a "fighting hymn." What did he mean by that, since it's not a hymn calling Christian soldiers to war? No, it was written to combat the heresy of its day. A man named Arius had taught that Jesus was a created being, that He did not exist from the beginning of eternity with God the Father. And since Jesus was a created being, therefore He was not equal with God.² The First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 had denounced Arius' teachings and set forth the doctrine of the full divinity of Jesus. This hymn also rejects Arianism, embracing the Nicene orthodoxy and giving us a rich picture of who Jesus Christ is that is taught all over the New Testament.

Every sermon that I'm going to preach in December will delve into the lyrics of a Christmas hymn, but also study a specific Scripture text. This morning, our text to help us understand this hymn better is John 1:1-5, 14:

"¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."
("The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever." Let's pray)

The four gospels that present the historical record of Jesus' life, each start a little differently. Matthew, who was writing primarily to the Jews, begins his gospel by tracing Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, the father of the Jews. Mark, the shortest, most action-packed gospel, just jumps into the story: within the first 20 verse, Jesus gets baptized, is tempted by Satan, starts teaching, and calling

¹ https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Biographies/aurelius_clemens_prudentius.htm

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-of-the-fathers-love-begotten1>

disciples. Just off and running. Luke tells the stories of Jesus' family members surrounding His and His cousin, John's birth. But the Gospel of John starts in a majestic way, with a prologue or introduction to Jesus' life that describes some of the grand theological mysteries of the workings of the Creator God with His creation. Before John tells us any stories about Jesus' life, he wants us to see the infinite majesty and glory of Jesus, so that we read the rest of the book with that foundational knowledge.

His gospel starts the same way that the Bible and the book of Genesis starts – *“in the beginning.”* I have always assumed that those two phrases referred to the same thing, the same beginning, but it's possible that they are not. Genesis 1:1 – *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”* is talking about the start of our universe and created time. But John may be starting even earlier, in what we would think of as the true beginning of all things. Although we have to admit that defining God and Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega is to say that He has no beginning or end, He has always existed. Regardless of what “beginning” refers to, though, the point is that Jesus has always existed with God and was involved in the creation of the material universe.

Why is Jesus called “the Word” here? John Piper had a sermon where he asked, “Why wasn't He called the Deed, the Thought, or the Feeling?” And he points out that deeds and feelings are ambiguous and can be understood and misunderstood a number of different ways. They are not understood clearly by others until they are put into words.³ Two people can see the same actions and facial expressions on someone, and one will conclude, “O wow, she's really mad,” and the other one will say, “No, she's just in a hurry.” You don't really know until she turns and says, “I'm mad!”

We have a God who allows Himself and wants to be understood, and so He used words. Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us that *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”* God spoke to us through His ultimate WORD. The person of Jesus was “God expressing Himself,” so that everything He did and said was a reflection of God the Father. This is one of the most important texts in understanding the Trinity, the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, united in one Godhead. And what these verses teach us is that the Word, the Son, Jesus, was both separate from God and defined as God.

Verse 14 tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us – what does that imply about His pre-incarnate existence? That He was spirit. His existence in the heavenly realm before coming to earth did not include the experiences of pain, hunger, exhaustion, and death. Having taken on human form, Jesus could experience all of those things. Almost all of the heresies of the early church were misunderstandings of Jesus' human and divine natures – either emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other, or keeping them separate, misunderstanding what we call the *hypostatic union*. From the beginning of his gospel, John wants us to get it right - that Jesus is fully 100% God and fully 100% Man – the Word is God and the Word is flesh, the only being to ever combine the two natures in one person.

Let's get back to our hymn. (*I have no points in this sermon, btw.*) The first verse of the hymn says: “Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be, He is Alpha and Omega, He the Source, the Ending He of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see evermore and evermore!” The first phrase introduces this idea that God the Father has begotten the Son. What does begetting mean? Here's what C.S. Lewis said:

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/in-the-beginning-was-the-word>

“When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a man makes a wireless set.”⁴

Essentially, the Son is not a creature; he’s not made; he’s not different from the very essence and nature of God. The Nicene Creed, from the Council I referred to earlier that rejected Arius’ teachings, phrased their view of Jesus like this: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.”⁵

The song goes on to define for us that Jesus Himself is an eternal being, sharing with the Father (and we would add with the Holy Spirit) the fact of being Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. And not only that, but the begotten Son was involved in creation, the source of all things, echoing John 1:3 – “*All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*”

Verse 2: “O that birth forever blessed, when the virgin, full of grace, by the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race. And the Babe, the world’s Redeemer, first revealed His sacred face, evermore and evermore!” This is the verse that captures the Christmas story: from the immaculate conception of the virgin Mary, Jesus placed inside her womb by the Holy Spirit, to the blessed day of His birth, when the Savior was first revealed to the world. The language reminds us that this birth that took place in a stable in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire affected everything for all time: “*that birth forever blessed,*” “*the Savior of our race,*” “*the world’s Redeemer,*” “*evermore.*” God becoming man was the pivotal moment in human history that changed everything.

Verse 3: “This is He whom heaven-taught singers sang of old with one accord, Whom the Scriptures of the prophets promised in their faithful word. Now He shines, the long-expected; let creation praise its Lord, evermore and evermore!” Here we are reminded that the Old Testament Prophetic Scriptures foretold and pointed ahead to the coming Messiah. Six to eight hundred years before Jesus was born, these things were written about Him:

-Micah 5:2 and Isaiah 9:1 tell us where these things were to happen: “*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.*” and “*...in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*”

-Isaiah 7:14 tell us how: “*The Lord Himself will give a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*”

-Isaiah 9:7 tell us who: “*For to us a child is born, to us a son if given... on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it.*”

-Isaiah 53 tell us how His life would end, the suffering servant rejected by His own people, crucified with criminals, a sacrifice for sin, “*wounded for our transgression; crushed for our iniquities... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*”

These and many more are the promises of Scriptures fulfilled after hundreds of years of waiting.

Verses 4 and 5:

“4) O ye heights of heaven, adore Him; angel hosts, His praises sing. All dominions bow before Him and extol our God and King. Let no tongue on earth be silent, every voice in concert ring, evermore and evermore!”

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), p. 57.

⁵ <https://www.christian-history.org/council-of-nicea-2.html>

“5) Christ, to Thee with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to Thee, hymn and chant and high thanksgiving and unwearied praises be. Honor, glory, and dominion, and eternal victory, evermore and evermore!”

These verses draw our vision to heaven and the eternal praise that rings out for God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. We are called to worship, to join the heavenly chorus that Revelation tells us day and night never ceases to praise Him. Philippians 2:10-11 is alluded to, that one day every knee will bow and “*every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” If you understand who Jesus is and what He’s done for you, the time to honor and worship Him is now.

No matter what you are facing in life - uncertainty, pain, anxiety, anger, betrayal, guilt, shame, loss, whatever it is - this hymn and its reminder of who Jesus is can speak to your heart. A woman named Nicole Bart talks about the fact that she chose this hymn “Of The Father’s Love Begotten” for her wedding, even though it was not anywhere close to Christmas time. She says that,

“I sang those verses on my wedding day as a fervent prayer. I had no idea what the future would hold, and the blank slate of days, months, and years ahead seemed too fuzzy and indistinct to bear. I knew that though this day held joy, my husband and I would face many more days that broke our hearts, challenged our faith, and tested our love. It was a terrifying leap to make, to link arms and jump into the future together... I was on the threshold of adulthood and just beginning to grasp the height and depth of a love that had sustained me from birth and brought me to this momentous day...

It was an invocation, a declaration, an acknowledgment of the Father’s deep, deep love... Even now, I can hardly read the first stanza without choking up. It’s too much. This love established the cosmos and yet pulses with the tender heartbeat of every living thing... We all know the sting of betrayal, the heartache of irreparably fractured relationships. We know cancer and sickness and financial crisis and doubt and fear. Wars rage and families fall apart and people we are sure we cannot live without die...

Maybe most of all... we *know* that we are unlovable. Unloved. Our dirty lies and dark sins and evil urges are the spawn of our headlong fall - the antithesis of Jesus, God’s love begotten. So we struggle to truly believe that God so loved the world. How could he? And, dear God, how could you possibly love *me*? But he *does*... We don’t deserve it and we certainly didn’t earn it, but here we are - hurt and bruised and scarred and wicked - not just invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb, but dressed in white as if we have never been anything but perfectly beloved and pure.”⁶

A few of us were at Joe Roy’s funeral yesterday, he was a longtime member of the church. It was wonderful to hear the stories and memories of his family members and friends. One of his grandchildren in his 20s spoke about how grateful he was that Grandpa Joe and Grandma Sheila were the first ones to take him to church when he was a child. But he also didn’t want anyone leaving that funeral until they heard the gospel clearly. He basically summarized the flow of Paul’s thoughts through the first eleven chapters of Romans – that we are all sinful, with no hope to save ourselves, but that God showed His love by having Christ die for us, and after we are united to Christ by faith we can never be separated from God even as we still struggle with our sin nature. He said that Grandpa Joe believed that and would want everyone to hear and believe it as well. It was a beautiful reminder that our hope in the face of death is to cling to Jesus Christ, to know that our faith in Him will raise us to new life after our deaths.

→ Communion

⁶ <https://inallthings.org/advent-the-fathers-love-begotten/>

