

Text: Isaiah 50:6
Songs of the Passion Series



Good Friday

Hymn: *O Sacred Head Now Wounded*

Our Sacred Head, Now Wounded

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: For this, the last in our series of Lenten devotions on the songs of the passion, I've chosen what many consider to be the quintessential Good Friday hymn: *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*. This one is truly a masterpiece from the "Golden Age of Lutheran hymns". It possesses a near perfect balance of reflective mood and theological substance. Its sober (some might say "haunting") melody, written by Hans Hassler, creates just the right Good Friday atmosphere. And because of it, the tune became a favorite of the great composer Johann Sebastian Bach who never seemed to tire of rearranging it and working it into some of his many chorals and cantatas. He used it especially at those points when he was describing through his music episodes of great crisis or conflict in the life of Jesus. At such times he wanted to move his listeners to feel the power and depth of the moment, and he used this tune to convey it.

The words of the hymn were written by Paul Gerhardt, a prolific German hymn writer who also gave us the Lenten standards *Upon the Cross Extended*, and *A Lamb Alone Bears Willingly*, as well as the Easter hymn *Awake, My Heart, with Gladness*, to name but a few. His *O Sacred Head*, however, is not entirely original. Gerhardt based it on a much earlier work that has traditionally been attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian monk who lived in the twelfth century. That work is actually an entire series of meditations on the various members of the crucified Lord's body. It has seven sections in all, addressed respectively to the feet, knees, hands, side, breast, heart, and finally the head of Jesus. Those of you who balk at any hymn having more than three or four verses are doubtlessly relieved that Gerhardt was satisfied to adapt only the section addressed to the head of our Lord.

But it makes sense that he would do this because when looking at someone, it is to the head that we naturally direct our attention. We identify people and learn to recognize them mostly by how their head looks: its shape, the arrangement of the facial features, the hair (or lack of it), and so on. That's why when police artists are making drawings of suspects, they only draw the head. And knowing that people who look at us are mostly looking at our heads explains why bathroom mirrors are designed to stare you in the face. Before we step out into the world, we want to make sure that what everyone will be looking at is more or less presentable. The head is also the most expressive member of the body. It's where we look to pick up most of the visual clues that reinforce and explain what someone means when they're talking to us. The tilt of the head, the arch of the brows, the focus and squint of the eyes, the angles at the corners of the mouth – they all tell us something. The same spoken sentence can mean a dozen different things depending on how you manipulate your head and facial features when you're saying it.

Theologically too the head carries great significance. In the Bible heads are crowned with glory, raised in exultation, lifted in expectation, bowed in worship, covered in submission, turned in repentance, hanged in shame, hidden in disgrace, dusted with ash in mourning, and crushed in defeat. The ultimate act of humiliation you could visit upon your defeated enemy was to put your foot on back of his head, thus making your enemy's head your footstool. And of course, on top of it all, the word *head* has more than one meaning. Even in the title of this hymn, it's not altogether clear if it's meant merely to indicate the physical head of the crucified Lord Jesus, or if it's referring to Jesus in his role as our leader, as in Jesus the head of the church

whose body we are. Just reading the first verse you can see that it could easily mean either one or both; and perhaps that's part of the genius of this hymn.

The biblical passage upon which the hymn is based is Isaiah 50:6, which was included in the responsive reading we had earlier; but I'd like to read just that one verse again. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah and looking ahead to his passion, the Spirit of Jesus says, "*I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.*"

Something I've learned from watching too many of those shows about crime scene investigation is that one of the things they look for on the bodies of what they suspect might be murder victims is what they call *defensive wounds*. It happens that people who are shot in the head or cut on the neck sometimes have wounds on their hands and forearms. The reason for it is that if someone is being assaulted, there's an involuntary response born of the instinct for self-preservation that causes them to raise their hands to defend themselves – especially when the attack is directed against their heads or throats. It's not that anyone could possibly stop a bullet with their hands; it's that they can't help it – it's a natural response of the body. Similarly, when you see something coming at your face, you naturally recoil, turn your head, and close your eyes. Your body is designed to protect its most sensitive and vital members in this way.

But what this passage of Scripture says is that Jesus faced his passion head on. He suppressed the natural impulses to protect himself and offered himself freely – not just to death (as if that weren't enough) but also to all the abuse he suffered in the long, agonizing process. He *offered* his back to the pitiless gouging of the whip. Instead of trying to defend himself – even by involuntarily flinching or trying to block blows to his head – he turned his face toward the onslaught and let his enemies do their worst: spitting, mocking, striking him with a staff, and pulling out his beard by bloody handfuls.

The power of this hymn is that it directs us to look into the face of Jesus as he suffers for us in this way. It's necessary that we do because just as we have the natural inclination to protect our bodies from injury, we also want to protect our souls from assault. We want to defend ourselves from attacks on our image, our pride, our self-esteem, our sense of our own inherent goodness, and so on. And when we look into the face of the suffering Savior, all that façade of personal strength and self-righteousness we have is instantly stripped away. You think of Peter, who claimed he would stand by the Lord and defend him to the death. He wanted Jesus to know what a good and faithful disciple he was. Bold, brave, "I don't need anyone to save me, thank you very much, Lord, I can do it myself" Peter. There is some of him in each of us. And recall that just a few hours later, far short of offering to help and defend like he swore he would, when questioned by a young housemaid he denied three times even having met the Lord, just as Jesus had said he would. Then the cock crowed; but it wasn't until Peter looked into the battered face of Jesus and their eyes met that his prideful spirit was broken. Looking at the bruised and bloody face of the Savior he saw his own pathetic weakness, shame, and disgrace. He saw there the bitter fruit of his sin being borne by the holy Lamb of God, and it cut him to the quick.

You know, we have lots of hymns that are about the *cross* of Jesus. We sing, "in the cross of Christ I glory", how "I'll cherish the old rugged cross", how we'll "lift high the cross", and how we as Christian soldiers march onward as to war with the cross of Jesus going on before. They are some fine hymns, make no mistake. But I suspect that sometimes we focus our attention on the cross of Jesus precisely in order to avert our gaze from *Jesus* who is actually suffering and dying on it. To speak or sing of the cross by itself is so much safer ... it's more

abstract ... less personal ... less like a mirror showing us the ugliness within that we want so much to deny is there.

The devastating strength of this hymn is that it directs us to look at *Jesus* nailed to the cross. It's meant to draw our focus to his very expressive sacred head, drained of its color and cruelly crowned with thorns, dripping with sweat and blood, and to really, without looking away in self defense, *to behold the man* ... the Son of God made flesh and sent into the world to bear our sins ... and to look him in the eyes, as it were, and see him face to face, up close and personal ... close enough to hear his wheezing death rattle, and smell the acrid vinegar on his breath. It draws us to his tortured countenance so that confronted by the horrific spectacle of his agony we might understand the burning wrath of God poured out upon him – the judgment we so justly deserve – and to see there as well, in his forgiving eyes, the infinite love of him who so willingly gave himself for us. It invites us to embrace that head and hold fast to it.

That's what this hymn does; but only if you allow it to – that is, if you lower that internal guard you have that instinctively protects your fallen nature against such an attack. It's possible to sing these words with the mouth and still, within the soul, to look the other way. We need to resist that urge and turn towards him, because by inviting us not to hide our sin-stained hearts from the face of the One crucified, it encourages us instead to hide our sin and shame within him on the cross. That's the thought expressed by verse four: "My Shepherd now receive me; My Guardian, own me Thine." Yes, Good Shepherd, who laid down your life for the sheep, own me. I belong to you. You are my head. I am a member of your own body.

That is your confidence as a Christian: not your own strength, merit, worthiness, or faithfulness; but seeing yourself as a member of the body of Christ Jesus your head, who did it all for you by his death for your sin. That is your one hope for the future as well, for it assures you that even when you fail him through your faithlessness, he always remains faithful to his promises. That's what's captured by the prayer in the fifth verse that says, "O make me Thine forever! And should I fainting be, Lord let me never, never, Outlive my love for Thee."

And understanding that you are bound as one flesh in one body with Christ as your head, you are made certain that just as his death is yours, so also is his life after death. When the Head rises, so does the whole body – a body made perfect, sinless, and incorruptible, a body that will, with its sacred Head, live and reign forever. May this be our only consolation and source of joy throughout our lives that we, like our Head, may not turn our faces away from the crosses God appoints. And may it be our supreme confidence and shield of faith when we with him come to the hour of death. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!