

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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Lenten Hymn Series

Zechariah 13:1

***“There Is A Fountain Filled
with Blood”***

**Hymns: 351 – 99 –
Distribution: 112, 105 – 128**

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Zechariah 13:1 – On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.

Has mental illness touched your life? Have you ever had a friend afflicted with some sort of depression? Has a family member of yours struggled, due to a mental condition? Have you yourself been afflicted in this way?

In our day and age, more is known about mental illnesses than ever before. Depression, bipolar conditions, schizophrenia, manic depression, hearing voices, and even suicidal tendencies are not rare. In fact I would guess that everyone here today is acquainted with a person or family who has had to deal with these difficulties.

If so, the hymn and the composer that are the focus of our service today will be quite meaningful to you. This Lent we're focusing on a different hymn and composer each week. Today we examine the Scripture

text and hymn verses of ***“There Is A Fountain Filled with Blood,”*** penned by William Cowper. Today let's first learn about the life of the composer. Then we'll examine the Scripture verse that this hymn is based on. And then we'll look at how the hymn verses convey these Biblical truths to us in a very comforting way.

1 – William Cowper (pronounced “Coo-per”) was born almost 300 years ago in 1731 in England. His father was a minister. In fact, he was the rector of the prestigious St. Peter's Church and a chaplain for King George II. William's mother died when he was only six years old. This had a lasting, profound effect on him the rest of his life. William could be characterized as a bit frail and instable, and he struggled to fit in at the private school where his father enrolled him.

As he grew to adulthood, he studied to become a lawyer. As he approached his bar exam, he was recommended for an appointment as a clerk in the House of Lords in England. However, his appointment was challenged by a rival political group. He was to undergo a rigorous public examination to see whether he was fit for the position. Here's where major troubles began. As his public examination loomed, William became more and more anxious. He had a breakdown. He was 32 years old at the time. During his breakdown he attempted suicide unsuccessfully three times. When he was discovered, he was admitted to an insane asylum for 18 months.

After he came through that period, he moved in with a retired minister and his wife. He became very close with this couple. They moved into a place that was next door to Pastor John Newton, who became the pastor and friend of William Cowper. You might remember that John Newton wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

The following years brought many ups and downs to William Cowper's life. In 1773 he suffered another breakdown that required him to be in an insane asylum for three years. He suffered from nightmares that God was going to send him to eternal damnation, because he was haunted by the thought that perhaps he had committed the sin against the Holy Spirit.

After that time, he and John Newton released a hymnal with many of their hymns in 1779. William Cowper became quite renowned in England as a poet, as he went through good times and bad for the rest of his life. When he was in his right mind, he wrote quite comforting poetry. The Good Shepherd led him into the springs of his Word to give him comfort, and put people around him in his life to encourage him along the way until he died in 1800.

2 – Turning to the Bible text on which this hymn is based, Cowper had Zechariah 13:1 in mind as he wrote his verses. There we read, *“On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.”*

What do you remember about the prophet Zechariah and the book he wrote? Zechariah's ministry came at the time when the exiles were returning from Babylon after the seventy years of captivity. His book is 14 chapters long. In the first half, he was given many visions by God much like the language in the book of Revelation. Then the Lord revealed many more “concrete” prophecies about the coming Messiah and the Messianic Age he would usher in.

Zechariah knew this Messiah promised by God well. He wrote things like:

- 9:9 – *“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and*

riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

- 13:10 – *“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered...”*
- 12:10 – *“They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”*
- 11:13 – *“(The Lord said), ‘If you think (my covenant is) it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.’ So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the LORD.”*

Familiar Lenten thoughts to us!

Back to the text that's before us today, Zechariah wrote: *“On that day a fountain will be opened...”* We doubt that the prophet knew all the details about Good Friday, but it's obvious that by revelation of God he was thinking ahead to it. Fountains, or springs, were extremely important in the Holy Land. The dry, dusty landscape made water a valuable commodity for travelers, farmers, herders, and everybody. They were a welcome sight! Fountains also serve another purpose. Many in our day and age around the world are simply for beauty. Perhaps you can recall seeing some beautiful fountains in your travels. But in the poorer countries of the world fountains also serve as a place people go to wash themselves and their dirty clothes. The fountain Zechariah mentions will also serve this purpose!

He writes that this fountain will be opened *“to cleanse them from sin and impurity.”* These two words are quite interesting that the Bible uses for what people need to be cleansed from:

- **SIN** – This is a literal word for archery. It’s the word for what happens when you make a bad shot and miss the mark. Spiritually, the Bible uses the word to picture that God has set up the target of his good laws and we daily “take our shot” at keeping them. What is the result day after day after day? We “miss the mark” – badly! Or, translated here, we “sin.”
- **IMPURITY** – This also is quite a vivid word. Literally, it is a disgusting, distasteful word. It means “filthy.” It’s the word that’s used for what comes at the time of a woman’s cycle each month. I’m sorry to bring that up, but it’s important to know how God views you and your sinful actions. They are disgusting and repulsive to him. Are you offended by that? If so, you need to search your heart and your life for the truth. We use a term sometimes called “tough love.” It means that it may be difficult to tell someone the truth or to do something that is for their benefit, but love will make you do it. God has “tough love” for us because he speaks the truth to us about our repulsive condition. Instead of righteously being offended when he tells us the truth, the intent is to lead us to say repentantly, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

We rejoice in what Zechariah tells us about this fountain, or spring. He says it “cleanses” us. This brings to mind some verses in the New Testament that shed even more light on this:

- *“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 Jn 1:7)*

- *“You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” (1 Peter 3)*

This Lent, the picture Zechariah gives us hits so close to home. The Messiah, the Christ, has come. We see how he was treated during his suffering and death. He was arrested, put on trial, beaten, spit on, flogged, and crucified. Can you imagine the blood involved as Christ went through this torture for you and for me? In the Old Testament we hear God tell his people not to drink blood or eat meat with the blood still in it because the blood is the “life” of a creature. How true this was for Jesus, and for our salvation as he shed his blood and gave his life for all mankind. In him we now have forgiveness. We have the sure hope of eternal life in heaven because Jesus gave his blood for us.

3 – Let’s turn now to the hymn that William Cowper wrote in 1771, in which he intended to capture the thoughts of Zechariah 13:1.

Verse 1 begins:

**There is a fountain filled blood –
Immanuel was slain...**

The older version of this hymn actually says, “...Drawn from Immanuel’s veins.” The word that jumps out at us immediately is “Immanuel,” that Christmas name for Jesus. This tells us the reason for the cleansing power of this blood. Christ was Immanuel – “God with us.” He was true God. As we confess in the Nicene Creed, **“Eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true**

God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father.”

How fortunate for us that this is true! The costly blood of Jesus is the price needed to pay for our salvation. Psalm 49 says, *No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough...*” No mere mortal could have won our salvation.

Verse 1 continues,

**...And sinners who are washed therein
Lose every guilty stain.”**

Judging by commercials on television one would think there is absolutely no stain which cannot be removed by some brand of detergent: Dirt, grass stains, food, etc. One advertisement even insists that it will make clothes “whiter than white.” Yet there are no detergents on the market that will remove the stains of sin that we have talked about. And what tremendous news it is that the blood of Jesus will remove “every guilty stain!” How glad we are to hear this from William Cowper’s pen, as we remember how he struggled with the concept of whether God would hold his sins against him in the end. God gave him the comfort that his sins were totally washed away by Christ.

How sad we are to hear some church bodies today teach that Christ’s blood was not sufficient for your forgiveness and you must earn part of God’s favor by your good works. This is heresy. There is no comfort in the Catholic purgatory where sinners are supposed to be cleansed after death so they can enter into God’s presence.

The second verse goes on:

**The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day
And there have I, as vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.**

The dying thief, of course is the criminal who was crucified next to our Lord. Perhaps you remember that Jesus was crucified between two criminals on that first

Good Friday. That criminal had done evil deeds that had deserved to be punished by crucifixion, and he even joined in the mockery of the masses at first, who heaped their scorn on Christ. But somewhere along the way he had a change of heart. What brought this about? Was it:

- The manner in which he saw Christ carry his cross?
- The silence with which Jesus bore his suffering?
- The sign that they posted over Christ’s head, proclaiming him to be the King of the Jews?
- The words, “Father, forgive them” that came from his lips?
- The way he cared for his mother, even while dying by crucifixion?

We don’t exactly know, but when he prayed, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus assured that criminal, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise.” No wonder that dying thief rejoiced that day!

Cowper becomes very personal here. He remembers his former sins, doubts, and fears and admits that he is just as vile as the criminal. Yet by God’s grace in Christ, he is washed just as clean. Paul said the same thing in 1 Tim 1: *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst.”* We also say the same thing this Lent as we realize the depth of our own guilt.

Verse 3 continues,

**Dear dying Lamb, your precious
blood shall Never lose its power
Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved and sin no more.**

Earthly elements lose their power. A tea bag might last for four or five cups, but that’s it. Or, a nemesis of mine is

continually trying to keep everyone's flashlight going at our house because of batteries and bulbs that keep running out of their power. But the precious blood of Christ has saving power until Judgment Day no matter how many people it cleanses: People from the Scriptures who believed, people in Medieval times, and people we witness to. We know that whomever we share Christ with, that blood still has the power to save!

Verse 4 says,

**E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Your flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme
And shall be till I die.**

Overwhelmed by what Christ's blood has done for him, William Cowper declares that it will be his theme till he dies. A "theme" of a book or story is the underlying message or lesson. It is the point of the whole narrative. Cowper's theme will be the comforting message he believes and will witness about. This is the "theme" not just of pastors and teachers but of everyone today who has experienced the power of Christ's blood. How can anyone who has been cleansed and renewed refrain from telling others about it? Such a person would need to be converted again! May we say the same about our life's "theme."

Finally, verse 5 closes with:

**When this poor lisping, stammering
tongue
Lies silent in the grave,
Then in a nobler, sweeter song
I'll sing your power to save.**

Cowper closes his hymn with thoughts of eternity, that he will never stop singing this song. It's reminiscent of the words of Revelation 7: *"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,*

saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

So ends our thoughts today on this Lenten hymn that has brought so much comfort to Christians down through the years. As we close our thoughts, how remarkable that God brought this hymn down to us through a man who was plagued by mental illness his entire life. Some today look down on those who struggle with this, but may we praise God that he brought this song to us through it! And may we always praise the Lamb of God who shed his precious blood that we may be forgiven! Amen.

Based on a series first done by Pastor Arthur Graf in "Joybells of Life."
