# Issues, Etc.

# JOURNAL





Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this issue of the Journal, Pr. Will Weedon has written an essay that looks in detail at the hymn "From God Can Nothing Move Me." It was written during a plague in 1563 and is as current today as ever.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature comes from Marcus Gray, also know as Christian rap artist Flame. Flame is a convert to the Lutheran confession from "Bapticostal" and charismatic teachings and Reformed Baptist Calvinism. He tells us his story.

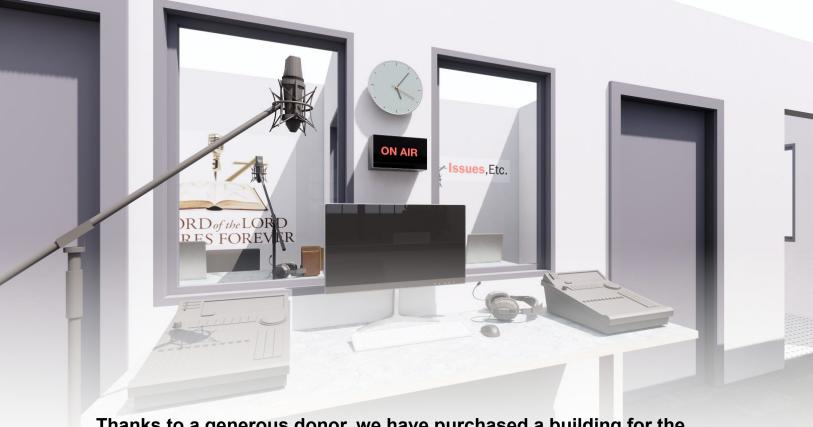
You'll also find a list of sponsoring congregations at the end of the Journal.

Enjoy this edition of the Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host **Issues, Etc.** 

Ton Und



Thanks to a generous donor, we have purchased a building for the new studios and offices of Issues, Etc., The Word of the Lord Endures Forever and Lutheran Public Radio!

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# On Lutheran Dirges and Such

### by Will Weedon

I can't tell you how often I've heard folks (even some Lutherans who should know better!) disparage the hymns of our Church, calling them dirges and such. I think it's because our hymns do not tend to be of the light and fluffy variety—they don't sparkle and fizz like "Shine, Jesus, Shine," to pick on one. Rather, they deal with matters of seriousness and consequence. But they do so from a perspective of deep and abiding confidence and joy, born of the Word of God. They do not yield their treasures at a quick glance. Still, when their words have been pondered and put into our heart and onto our lips, we will find that sometimes they rise unbidden to give a much longed-for comfort and peace.

This happened to me as the "shelter at home" order was given in our state, and we were basically cut off from gathering as a Church. Dark days, indeed. No gathering, no singing together, no Eucharist, no Bible study together. And no one knows (even as I write this) when it will all end, or how. But out of the blue, there came to my mind a melody and some words: "And though the days grow rougher and bring me great distress." I pulled out my hymnal and sang through the whole hymn. You can find it in our *Lutheran Service Book* as hymn #713. It was perfect. Just perfect for the time and circumstances, and no wonder!

You see, the hymn was written in 1563 at a time when the city of Erfurt (where Luther had studied as a young man decades earlier) was experiencing a horrible plague. This latest bit with coronavirus has reminded us that our experience of *not* knowing times of plague is actually the exception in human history, not the rule. As the plague arrived, claiming lives, those who were able fled the city. That included the University's rector and his wife. They were close friends of the author of this hymn, Ludwig Helmbold, who served as a lecturer at

the University. Before they left town, parting from dear friends and uncertain when they'd see each other again—in a time of great distress, fear, anxiety and uncertainty—Helmbold dashed off a poem to strengthen his friends, to hearten their spirits as they parted ways. We call it: "From God Can Nothing Move Me."

If you're unfamiliar with the tune, I'd encourage you to look it up and play it, or you can sing along right here, courtesy of Concordia Publishing House: <a href="https://voutu.be/IGNZ3UgOtHk">https://voutu.be/IGNZ3UgOtHk</a>.

The whole hymn forms an extended reflection on the beautiful words of Psalm 73:23-26: "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Let's work our way through it stanza by stanza:

From God can nothing move me;

He will not step aside

But gently will reprove me

And be my constant guide.

He stretches out His hand

In evening and in morning,

My life with grace adorning

Wherever I may stand.

We might paraphrase that as "I'm sticking by Him, because He's sticking by me." He's never going to leave or abandon us. Instead, He speaks His word to gently reprove and be our constant guide. No matter where the storms of adversity take us, we'll find Him there. The same hand and voice that stilled the waves of the Sea of Galilee stretch out over our lives every single day. He

speaks a word of grace, a word of His forgiving love that holds believers no matter where the Christian may find him or herself.

When those whom I regarded
As trustworthy and sure
Have long from me departed,
God's grace shall still endure.
He rescues me from sin
And breaks the chains that bind me.
I leave death's fear behind me:

His peace I have within.

It certainly happens, if you live any length of time in this world, that death sweeps between you and those you never imagined living without: parents, siblings, spouse, and even children sometimes. But death can never sweep away God's grace. The salvation that He gives you in His Son breaks the chains of sin, drives out the fear of death, and fills you with peace. They are not gone. They are gone ahead. And Christ will bring you with them into the light of eternal day.

The Lord my life arranges;
Who can His work destroy?
In His good time He changes
All sorrow into joy.
So let me then be still:
My body, soul, and spirit
His tender care inherit
According to His will.

Man proposes, but God disposes. We plan, but the outcome of the plans is never really in our hands. We know that. He arranges our life, and no one can stand against Him and His plans. And His plans? He intends to turn all sorrows into joy. It's going to happen. The day of the Resurrection will be a day of

celebration indeed, and the party will never end! So I pray for stillness, for trust in God's arrangements for the tender care of my whole being. "Thy will be done!" is the prayer of peace indeed.

Each day at His good pleasure
God's gracious will is done.
He sent His greatest treasure
In Jesus Christ, His Son.
He ev'ry gift imparts.
The bread of earth and heaven
Are by His kindness given.
Praise Him with thankful hearts!

This stanza is really a reworking by Dr. Gregory Wismar (former chairman of the Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) that disproves the general rule that the original is best. The original lacked in only one regard: it wasn't explicitly Christological. Dr. Wismar more than answered that, focusing this stanza on the good will of God to give us Jesus and in Him all things. You can hear St. Paul exclaiming in the background: "He who did not withhold His only Son, how will He not with Him freely give us all things?" (Romans 8). Indeed He will, and so our thanks and praise rise to Him from the heart.

Praise God with acclamation
And in His gifts rejoice.
Each day finds its vocation
Responding to His voice.
Soon years on earth are past;
But time we spend expressing
The love of God brings blessing
That will forever last!



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Here is what time is given to us for! Here's the reason for existing at all! To praise God and rejoice in His gifts, listening to Him as He speaks His words to us, and answering back in obediently serving however He wills. The amazing thing is that when we spend time praising and worshiping Him, we're doing now what we will be doing forever. So that's never "wasted" time (God forbid!). It's actually time that's been redeemed.

Yet even though I suffer
The world's unpleasantness,
And though the days grow rougher
And bring me great distress,
That day of bliss divine,
Which knows no end or measure,
And Christ, who is my pleasure,
Forever shall be mine.

There is all kinds of unpleasantness that befalls us in our sojourn through this world. Some days you wonder: "Can things get any worse?". And then, to your dismay, you find out: of course they can! But when the days grow ever rougher and your distress seems to know no end, remember that a day is coming that really will have no end. The worst of times in this age are all bounded. They have an end sooner or later. Not so with the Day when Christ appears; Christ who is forever yours and brings you to a wonderful day, a day that has no evening in the kingdom of His Father.

For thus the Father willed it,
Who fashioned us from clay;
And His own Son fulfilled it
And brought eternal day.
The Spirit now has come,
To us true faith has given;

He leads us home to heaven.

O praise the Three in One!

Behind all that your Jesus has accomplished for you stands this awesome fact: God the Father willed Him to do it all. Your Maker wanted you to share in His own endless life, and so He sent His Son. And the Son fulfilled perfectly everything His Father gave Him to do for your salvation. The result is that eternal day. The perfect day with no sun going down to end it! You've probably had a foretaste of that in your life. It was such an awesome day you really didn't want that sun to sink below the horizon and bring it to an end. But when Jesus returns, He will bring in a day on which the sun will never set. To get you there on that day, He sends His Holy Spirit to you, to give you true faith, to lead you to your true home, to heaven, where you will forever praise the Blessed Trinity!

As I said, no sparkle or fizz in this piece. But it speaks even into the darkest days a reflection on God's Word that will calm the anxious heart and set it at rest. Not a dirge, but a true proclamation of promises that bring peace. If you know it, sing it again! If you haven't learned to sing it yet, learn it and be blessed!



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# Wittenberg Trail: A Divine Fluke

## by FLAME

When I was sixteen, God created faith in my heart. From there I became zealous to share my newfound hope in Christ Jesus. I had begun to compose rap music to tell my story when I learned about a Christian rap group named Cross Movement. After a series of events, I was asked to join them on a tour. Here I was, on a tour bus traveling throughout the nation with my favorite rap group. We made time daily for devotionals and discussion.

One afternoon, a member from the group asked me if I was a Calvinist or an Arminian. To which I replied, "Huh? Can you say that again?" After his brief summary of the two schools of thought, I responded that I was simply a Christian and that I had never heard of either of those guys. During the two months of the tour, I learned about the distinctions between Arminianism and Calvinism. I was fairly sure that these guys leaned closer to the Calvin guy over the other.

As the tour was coming to an end, I left a week early to start my first semester of Bible college (I had enrolled prior to the tour after being inspired by this same rapper). Back in St. Louis, while attending my Full Gospel Baptist church, the charismatic and prosperity components in the preaching became too blaring for me to ignore. I felt lost as I stepped on the campus of Missouri Baptist University wondering, was this a Calvinist or an Arminian school? I wondered if my church home was more Arminian. If so, should I leave it?

In many ways, I returned home from the tour discouraged and afraid. I began to fear that if my grandmother wasn't a Calvinist, was she really present with the Lord? What if there were no Calvinist churches in the inner city, what

would God think of me? Would I be lost and forgotten? Oh, what a terrible season that was! There were many days of despair and spiritual fatigue as I longed for more of that "Calvinistic stuff" I was exposed to on tour.

One day, a guy by the name of Paul Washer showed up on campus and preached a fiery sermon that brought me to my knees. He spoke of the need to deeply examine yourself to see if you were a true Christian. I became so afraid I wasn't a real Christian that I ditched my next class to weep on the chapel floor and beg God to save me. After making many vows and promises to God, I felt something akin to what Washer described as true conversion. I left chapel feeling renewed. Not too long afterwards, I was exposed to the Puritans, and John Piper, James White, Wayne Grudem, and John MacArthur. Swimming in these richly Reformed doctrines, I began to detox from "Bapti-costal" and charismatic teachings to ingest Reformed Baptist Calvinism.

This is where things got interesting. I grew up in the inner city of north St. Louis, with two parents who had their own challenges. This primed me for the core emphasis of Calvinism, God's sovereignty. As an African American male, I faced many unique challenges to basic survival and thriving. Those challenges were compounded with being raised by a mother who was schizophrenic, and a father addicted to drugs and alcohol. This made the inspirational style of preaching from the "black church" that much more appealing. There was a heavy emphasis on the simplicity of God's Word and the practicality of living it out. Yet, there was also a cultural sensitivity to both the systemic and ethnic struggles of the black experience, packaged in the presentation of Christianity. This included: God's love for us. His desire to see us flourish. How we were created in His image and reflect attributes of His own. Being reminded that Jesus thought us worthy to die for, and that we were His good creation. And a commission to spread this good news to all those like us. This "positive preaching" spoke life

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"Maybe I could be a pastor..."
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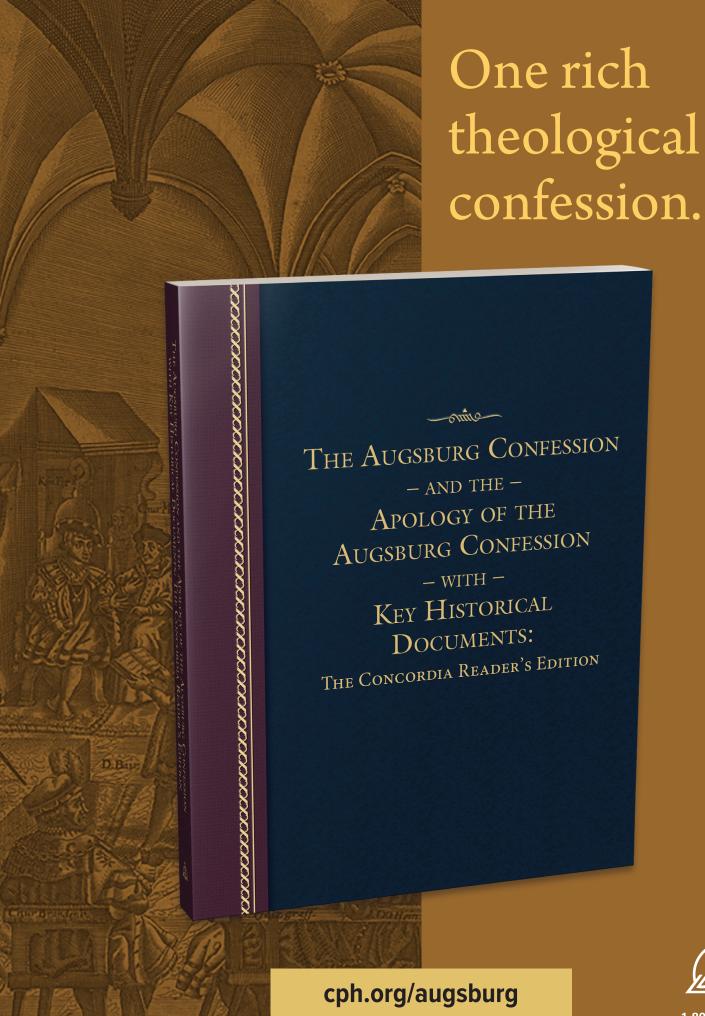
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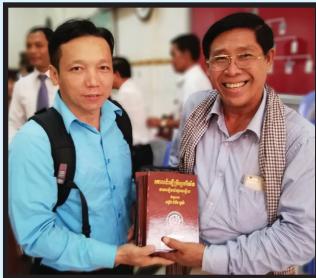
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into areas that were relevant to the people of our culture.

As I began to further embrace Calvinism (from the Reformed Baptist sect), I found a heavy emphasis on the sinfulness of the human race. The doctrine of total depravity informed us how vile we are as humans, undeserving of any good thing. The Puritans were particularly skilled in describing the wretchedness of human beings, and elevating God's wrath as His chief attribute (at times it felt like His only attribute). The shift in tone and emphasis was tricky for me, an only child raised in a turbulent home. This apparent dark perspective on who I was before God was difficult to decipher when contrasted with what I was accustomed to hearing from my church culture.

The emphasis on God's sovereignty caused me to find God behind all deeds, both good and bad. Initially, the Reformed version of sovereignty brought much comfort. It served as an overarching explanation for all the things I struggled to understand about myself, my culture, and society. Now I knew God was in control and caused all the good, bad, and confusing things in my life to happen for my benefit. It made sense at the time. Most importantly, God's sovereignty over who will go to heaven or hell was based on His predestination and good pleasure. He secured the place of a select group of chosen ones by sending His Son to die only for them.

In fact, He also decided in advance those He elected (dare I say, created) for hell. Welcoming this doctrine into my mind carved an irreparable category in my conscience. Maybe I would prove to be one of the ones who was never chosen. My only hope was to really, really, really, believe what Jesus accomplished on the cross for my sin, and to align my affections and morality up with my profession of faith.

This hyper-attention to God's sovereignty became morbid and draining.

Across many pulpits flowed the preoccupation with explaining what God was up to, or thinking on matters that oftentimes extended beyond scriptural revelation. It was almost as if we Reformed folk had God figured out. It started to make Him appear small and more like one of us: less loving and more wrathful, in many regards.

Eighteen years of being horrified by Scriptures was haunting. As taught by Reformed Baptists, Matthew 7:21-23 means that it's possible to have never been known by Jesus. To overcome such fears, people must thrust themselves on the mercies of their conversion experience and their progression in spiritual growth (oftentimes spoken of as sanctification). Did you really change and go from darkness to light? Are you hating your sin more and more each day? Are you checking your heart's motivations for your good deeds? Are you glorifying God in increasing measure as you expand your satisfaction in Him? And so on.

Was every day miserable? Not at all. Actually, I'd say most days I lived in the assurance of faith alone. However, when those dark clouds came looming, the storm that struck was unbearable. It was frightening enough to snatch the strongest person's faith in an instant. As Calvinism finally ran its course on my soul, I pondered and seriously plotted my departure from Christianity altogether. After all, I knew enough to not become an Arminian. What other options were there? Christianity was reduced to only two options, Calvinism or Arminianism.

I gave nearly two decades to the synchronization of my heart's affections with God's affections. I maintained faithful church membership and accountability. I vigorously exercised living in community with transparency. I read all the prominent scholars and lay leaders. Attended all the big conferences. I met and made friends with many prominent Reformed pastors, leaders, and influencers. I faithfully spread the "Doctrines of Grace." I attained a bachelor's degree in biblical counseling from the crème de la crème of Reformed Bible institutions, so

as to attack this deep-seated disconnect between my head and my heart. I was dead set on helping others who struggled like I did, only to find ineffective and insufficient solutions. The theology was disjointed from the reality of the human life experience.

Then, through a series of events and what seemed like a fluke, I found Concordia Seminary in my hometown. Although I knew it was a Lutheran school, I thought Luther and John Calvin were lockstep on all things. After I enrolled and tested into the school's graduate program, I began to notice subtle nuances that diverged from what I knew of the Reformation. Wait, did the professor just say, "here's where John Calvin got it wrong"? I was both taken aback and curious.

We were discussing the nature of faith and justification in one of my introductory courses, The Lutheran Mind. Throughout that quarter I was confronted with "new" views on universal atonement and the Lord's Supper. Perhaps the most provocative teaching of all was baptismal regeneration. As a Reformed Baptist thinker, I was flabbergasted by the notion that God would use water to save anyone, let alone infants. How dare they assert such things! Yet, I was confronted with Scriptures which led me to a fork in the road. Do I go with what the Scriptures actually say? Or do I distort them to fit my paradigm? Moreover, in these "new" teachings I began to hear the whispers of objectivity. Could it be that God knew of troubled consciences in advance? Did He graciously give us external means of grace to cling to amid doubt and devilish lies?

It was the Lutheran understanding of justification that nurtured me back to the purity of Paul's teaching, and into the comforting arms of our Lord Jesus Himself. If faith is a gift that God alone grants, and we as believers simply receive His promises, then I wanted that. I needed it. I was no longer steered toward my spiritual growth for assurance of my salvation. Obedience, which naturally flows

from the faith God created in my heart, was for the benefit of those around me. It was not to prove I was saved.

Eventually, through much kicking and screaming, I began to see the Sacraments as tangible connections to the objective reality of what Jesus accomplished on the cross for sinners: forgiveness of sin. It is through baptism that God applies His grace to needy people like ourselves. I am reminded of my baptism as the location of my deliverance from darkness and placement into Christ himself. It is through the bread and the wine at the Lord's table that I receive, in my mouth, the body and blood of my Savior for life and forgiveness. Just as the Israelites knew that their sins were atoned for by the sacrifice and eating of the lamb, my assurance is found in the partaking of the Lord's Supper:

Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. -Matt. 26:26-28

He and I become one as I too am united with all the saints who eat at the table of blessing.

I've never felt so armed against the flesh and the devil. In fact, feelings no longer lead the charge. They can ebb and flow as much as they want. No longer do I search for assurance in my ability to keep God's perfect standard. I do not rely on my mind's ability to drum up its best cognitive recall of what Jesus did for me, and my proper mental appreciation and admiration of it. No longer am I threatened by adjectives asking if I "really," "genuinely," or "sincerely" believe. No longer am I confused by arbitrary measures to judge my performance on any given day. I now look to His constant coming to me, to us, at the Lord's table.

Rooted in the wonderful work He accomplished in His life, death, and resurrection, I experience Him afresh as often as we sup with Him during the Divine Service.

A few have said, "You never truly understood Calvinism in the first place."

To which I reply, "I believe the problem is that I understood it all too well and am now experiencing the joy of true *sola fide* that only exists in shadows elsewhere."



FLAME is a GRAMMY® nominated hip-hop artist. He is a well-versed leader in the Christian hip-hop scene with a growing list of accolades, including a GRAMMY® nomination, several Dove and Stellar Award nominations, and multiple Billboard chart toppers. He was born and raised in the inner city of St. Louis, MO. For over a decade, FLAME has traveled throughout North America & the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and Asia performing music that has impacted the masses. In addition to touring, writing, recording and co-producing his own projects, FLAME founded and helms Clear Sight Music, a boutique record label that contributes Christian music to the world. His most recent project, "Extra Nos," was released in January 2020. Flame has a Master's degree in theology from Concordia Seminary.

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