



Yea, as I Live, Jehovah Saith

Text: Nikolaus Herman (1480-1561)

Tune: Jeremiah Clarke (1670-1707)

When Luther began his hymn writing, he did it so people could be better taught what the Church believed and confessed. In his time, people would travel from place to place to sing the day's news, and by their songs the residents would learn the day's goings on. He adapted this form for use in the Church, and it has been mightily successful in teaching the faith. However, it is easy for us to think of Luther and forget the other co-writers of Reformation-era hymnody. Today we learn more about the relatively obscure Nikolaus Herman and his work for the Church.

Nothing is known of Herman's early life. The first record of him is in 1518, and his name does not appear again in church records until 1524. In that time, he was serving as Kantor (theologically-trained director of music) at the church in Joachimsthal in Bohemia, just over the mountains from Saxony. He also served as Master in the town's Latin School. Toward the end of his life Herman suffered from gout, and the disease caused him to resign from his posts. He died May 3, 1561.

He was a great helper of his Pastor, Johann Mathesius. When he preached a particularly good sermon, Herman would immediately begin to take its ideas and turn them into a hymn he would teach to the school students that week. Sadly, many of his hymns never made it into wide use in the Church. Though his works were among the best catechetical hymns of the Reformation era, very few of them survived. But his work was not limited to hymn texts. Because he was a gifted organist, he also composed several tunes to accompany his texts, although only one marriage of text and tune still exists, Herman's Christmas hymn, "Praise God the Lord, Ye Sons of Men."

"Yea, as I Live, Jehovah Saith" was originally titled "A hymn on the power of the keys and the virtue of holy absolution; for the children of Joachimsthal." Herman wrote this hymn to teach the children Confession and Absolution and the Office of the Keys, which Luther addressed in the Fifth Chief Part of his Small Catechism. The Office of the Keys is the authority which Christ has given to His Church to forgive and retain sins. The name comes from Jesus' command in Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." On this command given to the Church by Jesus, Luther taught: "The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent." He went on to explain that when we teach this Office, we believe that, "when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command...this is just as valid and as certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."

Herman wrote this hymn in eleven stanzas, of which we have eight. The omitted stanzas are 5, 7, and 9 which read:

They who believe when ye proclaim	However great our sin may be,
The joyful tidings in My Name	The absolution sets us free,
That I for them My Blood have shed,	Appointed by God's own dear Son
Are free from guilt and Judgement dread.	To bring the pardon He has won.

This is the power of Holy Keys,
It binds and doth again release;
The Church retains them at her side,
Our mother and Christ's holy Bride.

This hymn skillfully walks through God's desire that no sinner dies eternally (Ezekiel 33:11, from which verse stanza one takes its text) and Christ's fulfilment of that desire, by His death and resurrection and the sending of Pastors to give His forgiveness (stanzas 2-4). In stanza five we confess that the words of forgiveness are Christ's not the Pastor's, and that this forgiveness delivers the forgiving power of Christ's Blood (st. 6). Finally, the hymn concludes in two stanzas of praise to Christ for His forgiveness and the creation of His Church to give this forgiveness, and a prayer that He would keep us in this forgiveness to eternity.