# THE SOUL IN PARAPHRASE

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*A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems*

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CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems*



Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187



Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2018

Printed in China



All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-5861-0
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5864-1
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5862-7
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5863-4

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Ryken, Leland, editor.
Title: The soul in paraphrase: a treasury of classic devotional poems / Leland Ryken, editor.
Other titles: Treasury of classic devotional poems | Devotional poems
Description: Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018005833 (print) | LCCN 2018014966 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433558627 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433558634 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433558641 (epub) | ISBN 9781433558610 (hc)
Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life—Poetry. | Christian poetry, English. | Christian poetry, American. | Religious poetry.
Classification: LCC PN6071.S615 (ebook) | LCC PN6071.S615 S63 2018 (print) | DDC 821.008/03823–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018005833

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

RRDS 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

for
Margaret and Jeff

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# Editor's Introduction

This book is an anthology of the best devotional poetry in English. It begins with the oldest surviving poem in the English language and ends with the modern era. The structure of the book is chronological, but this is a convenience of organization only. Christian poetry is timeless and universal. What the poems in this anthology share with each other is more important than traits arising from when they were written, giving us a new slant on the apostle Paul's formula of "the faith that was once for all delivered" (Jude 3).

No single definition can encompass the genre of devotional poetry, so in the next several paragraphs I will describe it from complementary angles. The first thing to note is that devotional poetry is not in any sense to be equated with so-called inspirational verse of the type that appears on greeting cards. The more I surveyed existing anthologies of "Christian verse" (or a variant), the more disillusioned I became. Most of the material is versified prose. The content is thin and confined, producing what I call "bits and pieces" poetry. The poems in this anthology are substantial in the ways I am about to define. In order to be included in this anthology, poems needed to lend themselves to the kind of literary analysis that I conduct as a professor of literature and writer of literary criticism. If all that a poem lends itself to is mere reading as opposed to analysis and explication, it needs to be judged to be of limited substance.

Most devotional poetry takes specifically spiritual experience for its subject matter, though I will shortly qualify that. While Christian poets are free to take all of life as their subject—and in fact it is highly desirable that as a group they do so—devotional poetry tends to take specifically religious life as its subject. Examples are the person and

work of God, conviction and confession of sin, forgiveness, worship of God, and the church calendar with events like Christmas and Easter.

Devotional poetry is also definable by its effect on a reader. If a poem prompts us to think about God and spiritual truth, if it deepens our spiritual insight and experience, and if it awakens a greater love of God and desire to be like him, it has served a devotional purpose. Devotional poetry fixes our thoughts on the spiritual life and inspires us toward excellence in it. To define devotional poetry by its effect is a subjective definition, balancing a more objective definition based on the content of a poem.

Defining devotional poetry by its effect opens the door to a broader field of candidates. Inclusion now depends on how a reader assimilates a poem. If a given reader experiences a poem as defined in the preceding paragraph, it fits the category of devotional poetry for that reader.

We can place this line of thought into the following paradigm for all of literature. Literature as a whole divides itself into three groups, viewed as existing on a continuum.


On one end of the continuum we find the literature of Christian belief, and on the other end the literature of unbelief. Between these stands a category that can be called the literature of common experience or the literature of clarification (meaning that its chief feature is that it clarifies life). The literature of common experience does not signal a specifically Christian identity but is congruent with Christianity (if it were not, it would belong to the literature of unbelief). A work in this neutral category may have even been written by a Christian.

When Christian readers assimilate such literature in terms of who they are as Christians, the literature can become devotional. We might think of the transaction in terms of imposing a fuller Christian understanding on material that stopped short of such an understanding. Another formula by which to understand the situation is this: if as Christian readers we cannot read X [a specific work belonging to the category of common experience and humanity] without thinking of Y [an aspect of the Christian life], the work has yielded a Christian reading experience.

In this anthology I have included several poems that belong to the category of the poetry of common experience or clarification. I will use

my accompanying commentary to show how these poems can be read devotionally. My rationale for including them is twofold: (1) they are too good to bypass in an anthology of my favorite devotional poems, and (2) I want to plant a seed in my readers that can lead them to nudge ideationally neutral literature into their repertoire of Christian reading.

Devotional poems are lyric poems. Lyric poems, in turn, are either (a) meditative and reflective in nature, or (b) emotional and affective. In the first instance, the poet shares more and more of his or her thought process as the poem unfolds. In an affective lyric, we learn more and more about the poet's feelings.

Two English poets of towering stature have provided an additional helpful way of understanding this. John Milton, who turned from a possible ministerial career to his life's calling as a poet when his Puritan convictions prevented him from entering the Anglican Church, was so convinced of the worthiness of poetry that he claimed that the poet's abilities "are of power beside [equal to] the office of a pulpit" to produce good in people and societies. One of these effects, according to Milton, was that poetry can "set the affections [the old word for emotions] in right tune."

To this we can add a similar viewpoint expressed by the nineteenth-century poet William Wordsworth. Wordsworth was of the opinion that "a great poem ought to . . . rectify men's feeling, to give them new compositions of feeling." If we extend this principle to a reflective lyric, we can say that poetry can rectify our thinking as well as our feeling.

Applied to the poems that comprise this anthology, we can read the poems as setting our thoughts and feelings in right tune, and also some of the time correcting them. The same is true when we read the Psalms, and this is a good place to remind ourselves that devotional poetry of the type that appears in this anthology finds its prototype in the Bible.

The poets who composed the poems in this anthology are ministering spirits to us, serving us in ways that they could never have imagined. Their poems have two aspects—form and content. Both are important. Because the content is what expresses the specifically devotional aspect of the poems, it would be possible to overlook the artistry and verbal beauty of their poems.

To overlook the artistry would be a great mistake, for at least three reasons. First, there is no content without the form in which it is expressed, so it is ultimately impossible to disregard the poetic form. Second, it is true of any discourse that beauty and skill of expression

increase the impact of what is said, so we need to honor that beauty and skill. Third, beauty matters to God and to poets as they ply their trade as creators made in God's image. For that reason, we need to ensure that beauty also matters to us as readers. The artistic dimension of the poems in this anthology is an important part of the poems' ability to set our thoughts and feelings in right tune, and I have accordingly paid this artistry its due in my explications of the poems.

I am reminded in this regard of a comment that a literary scholar made about Milton's funeral poem entitled "Lycidas," written on the occasion of the death by drowning of a fellow college student. The critic offered the opinion that the beauty of the poem actually consoles, in a spiritual as well as artistic sense. That expresses exactly how I have always experienced the poem. Milton himself said that one of the effects of Christian poetry is that it sets the emotions in right tune, and the verbal beauty and broader artistic effects of a poem are among the qualities that enable that to happen.

A poem that requires more pondering and analysis from us than a poem that requires less is a poem that yields more. In saying that, I am not endorsing obscure poetry but rather poetry that possesses a certain degree of complexity and a multi-layered quality. The more we need to wrestle with a poem's language, structure, and turns of phrase, the more profundity of meaning and richness of experience it will reveal. A perfect example is the four-line medieval poem "Sunset on Calvary" (see page 31). I am sure that some of my readers will be surprised by the quantity of analysis I provide for only four lines, but this is a tribute to (a) how much there is in the poem and (b) how much spiritual devotion is available to us if we unpack the riches.

The main title of this anthology, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, is taken from a poem by George Herbert. In its original context, this epithet is applied to prayer, but it is equally accurate as a description of devotional poetry. To paraphrase something means to put it into our own words. That is what the poets represented in this anthology have done: they have put the spiritual motions of their soul into their own words. In doing so, they have become our representatives, saying what we too want said, only saying it better.

I have taken the liberty of modernizing spelling, capitalizing, and punctuation in all instances where I thought that not doing so would be an obstacle to my readers. Much poetry from bygone centuries was originally published with arbitrary indentations of lines. Usually I have

regarded this as an unnecessary impediment to my readers (as it is to me), so I have generally started all lines flush with the left margin.

I have divided my commentary on the poems into two units. I have labeled one of them "notes on selected words." Much of my "close reading" of the poems appears in this unit, which should be regarded as essential rather than optional. Composing this unit has greatly enlarged my understanding of the poems, and I can see belatedly how much I have missed during the past half century by not paying closer attention to every word in a poem. The second unit of analysis is simply "commentary," which I slanted in two directions—general enhancement of a reader's experience of the artistry of a given poem and notes on the specifically devotional aspect of a poem.

The last nine entries in this anthology are pairs of poems on a common theme. These poems are too brief to be an entry by themselves, but they form a perfect combination for devotional thought when paired together.

The subtitle of this anthology calls the collected poems a treasure. That is what they are. They are one of God's greatest gifts to the human race, waiting to be cherished by Christians.

# Caedmon's Hymn

Caedmon (seventh century)

Now we must praise the Keeper of Heaven's Kingdom,
The might of the Maker and his wisdom,
The work of the Glory-Father, when he of every
wonder,
The eternal Lord, the beginning established.

He first created for the sons of earth
Heaven as a roof, Holy Creator,
Then middle-earth the Protector of mankind,
Eternal Lord, afterwards made,
The earth for men, the Lord Almighty.

**Notes on selected words.** *Keeper*: guardian or ruler. *Might*: power. *The Maker*: could also be translated "the Measurer," with architectural overtones. *Wisdom*: "mind-plans" in the original Old English, with the implication of thoughtful purpose and careful planning. *The Glory-Father*: God of glory. *Heaven* [line 6]: the sky. *Middle-earth*: standard term for earth in the Old and Middle English periods.

**Commentary.** This poem (originally written in Old English and here translated by Leland Ryken) is the oldest surviving poem in the English language. The story of its origin is as famous as the poem. The story was recorded by the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the*

*English People* (c. 730). Caedmon was an illiterate farmhand residing at Whitby Abbey in northeast England. Whenever the harp was passed around the dining hall at feasts so residents of the abbey could take turns singing, Caedmon found an excuse to leave the meal early. On one of these occasions, Caedmon went to the barn and fell asleep. In a dream, he heard someone telling him to sing something. Caedmon replied that he did not know how to sing. "Sing about creation," the visitor replied. Thereupon Caedmon sang the song known as "Caedmon's Hymn." The new poetic gift never left Caedmon. English poetry thus began with a miracle of the word.

"Caedmon's Hymn" is an example of the artistic category that we can call "the simple as a form of beauty." Only nine lines long, the poem follows the biblical genre known as the psalm of praise. The content of the praise comes straight from the creation story in Genesis 1. It is an abbreviated account of that story, taking a wide-angle view of God's first creating the entire world and then the earth specifically as a provision for people.

The poem does three things that praise psalms typically do: (1) it begins with a formal call to praise God (the first stanza); (2) it provides a list or catalog of God's praiseworthy acts; and (3) it rounds off the praise with a note of closure in the last line. This simplicity is played off against two pleasing forms of stylistic formality and artistry. First, Caedmon loaded his poem with phrases and clauses that name the same phenomena with different words, a technique influenced by the biblical verse form of parallelism. Second, our spirit is elevated by exalted titles for God, a technique known as epithets. For example, the first epithet in the poem is *the Keeper of Heaven's Kingdom*.

Structurally the poem falls into complementary halves, as signaled by the stanzaic arrangement. The first stanza praises God's sovereignty in creating the entire cosmos, and the epithets for God accordingly stress his transcendence. The second stanza praises God's creative acts on behalf of humankind, as the cosmic imagery of the first stanza gives way to a vocabulary of earth and people.

# The Dream of the Rood

ANONYMOUS (POSSIBLY EIGHTH CENTURY)

Listen, I will tell of the best of visions,
which came to me in the middle of the night. . . .
Lying there a long while,
in sorrow I beheld the Savior's tree,
until I heard it utter a sound;
the best of wood began to speak these words:

*[The personified cross tells the story of the crucifixion:]*

It was long ago—I still remember it—
that I was cut down from the edge of the forest,
ripped up by my roots. Strong enemies seized me there,
made me their spectacle, forced me to bear criminals. . . .
I was raised as a cross; I lifted up a mighty King,
the Lord of heaven; I did not dare to bend.
They pierced me with dark nails; I bear the scars,
the open wounds of hatred. . . .
They mocked us both together. I was drenched with blood
that flowed from that man's side after he had sent forth his
spirit. . . .

*[The personified cross describes its present glory in the world:]*

Now the time has come
when men will honor me far and wide
over the earth and all this glorious creation,
and pray to this beacon. On me the Son of God
suffered for a while. I am therefore glorious now,

and rise under the heavens, able to heal
each one of those who will reverence me. . . .

*[The cross entrusts the speaker/dreamer with a task:]*

Now I command you, my beloved man,
that you reveal this vision to men;
tell them in word that it is the tree of glory
on which almighty God suffered
for mankind's many sins
and Adam's ancient deeds.
Death he tasted there, yet God rose again
by his great might to help mankind.
He ascended into heaven. He will come again
to this middle-earth to seek mankind
on doomsday. . . .

*[The speaker's testimony to the power of the cross:]*

Then I prayed to the cross with a happy heart
and great zeal, where I was alone
with little company. My spirit was inspired
for the journey forward. . . .
    It is now my life's hope
that I might seek the tree of victory
alone more than all men,
to honor it well. My desire for that
is much in my mind, and my hope of protection
is fixed on the cross. . . .
    May the Lord be my friend,
he who here on earth suffered
on the hanging-tree for the sins of man.
He ransomed us and gave us life,
a heavenly home. . . .
The Son was victorious in that venture,
mighty and successful, when he came with a multitude,
a great host of souls, into God's kingdom,
the one Ruler almighty, to the joy of angels
and all the saints already in heaven,

dwelling in glory, when their Ruler,
almighty God, came to his rightful homeland.

**Notes on selected words.** *Rood*: cross. *The best of wood*: an epithet denoting the cross. *My beloved man*: the speaker in the poem; the one who received the vision that the poem records. *Adam's ancient deeds*: original sin; the disobedience in the garden and its effects in the world. *Middle-earth*: medieval designation for the earth. *Doomsday*: the judgment day, or last day.

**Commentary.** This poem was originally written in Old English and is here translated by Leland Ryken. The poem as printed here is excerpted from a longer poem.

The devotional potential of this poem lies in its theme, namely, the power of the cross. Everything in the poem relates to that. The poem draws upon a favorite genre of the Middle Ages known as the dream vision. This genre is prominent in the Bible and in subsequent literary history (with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* being a famous example). In this genre, a speaker or narrator pictures himself as receiving a vision. This is only the external framework; the content of the imagined vision is what the poem is actually about. The opening lines of this poem introduce this visionary framework, as the speaker announces to us that he heard the cross of Christ speak to him in a dream.

After this opening, the poem unfolds in four movements, each one represented briefly in the excerpted version above. First the cross describes the circumstances of Christ's crucifixion; the devotional aspect is that we are led to ponder the physical suffering and torture of Christ's crucifixion. Next the cross asserts that glory has come to it because of the victory that Jesus achieved on the cross. Third, the cross charges the speaker/dreamer with the task of testifying about the cross in the world by declaring the gospel to humankind. The poem then reaches its climax in the concluding section, where the speaker testifies to what the cross means to him in his journey of life. At the very end of this section, the poem draws upon