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Love Divine All Loves Excelling

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Love Divine All Loves Excelling: A Timeless Hymn of Grace and Glory

The hymn "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" is one of the most beloved and frequently sung pieces in the Christian hymnal. Penned by the prolific hymn writer Charles Wesley in 1747, this majestic song has resonated with believers for nearly three centuries. Its powerful lyrics call upon the divine love that surpasses all human understanding, asking for the fullness of God's grace to transform and perfect the soul. While many hymns fade with changing tastes, "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" remains a staple in churches across denominations, a testament to its theological depth, poetic beauty, and timeless appeal. This article explores the rich history, profound meaning, and enduring significance of this hymn, revealing why it continues to touch hearts and uplift spirits around the world.

The Historical Roots of "Love Divine All Loves Excelling"

To fully appreciate "Love Divine All Loves Excelling," one must understand the context in which it was written. Charles Wesley, along with his brother John, was a pivotal figure in the 18th-century Methodist revival in England. Wesley wrote over 6,500 hymns, many of which are still sung today. "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" was first published in 1747 in a collection titled *Hymns for Those That Seek, and Those That Have Redemption*. The hymn was heavily influenced by Wesley's deep study of Scripture, and its imagery draws directly from biblical passages, particularly from the Song of Solomon and the letters of Paul.

At the time of its composition, the Wesleyan revival was emphasizing personal holiness and the experience of God's love. The hymn was intended to be sung as a prayer for sanctification, the process by which believers are made perfect in love. It reflects Wesley's Arminian theology, which held that God's grace is available to all people, and that Christians can grow in grace until they are wholly conformed to the image of Christ. This focus on perfect love—a love that casts out fear and enables believers to love God and neighbor fully—is the central theme of the hymn.

Lyrical Analysis: A Prayer for Divine Transformation

The opening line, "Love divine, all loves excelling," immediately establishes the supremacy of God's love. Wesley contrasts this perfect divine love with all other human loves, which are incomplete and flawed. The phrase "Joy of heaven, to earth come down" points to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, where divine love took human form. The hymn thus begins with a plea for this heavenly love to descend and dwell within the believer's heart.

The first stanza continues: "Fix in us thy humble dwelling / All thy faithful mercies crown." Wesley asks for God's love to take up residence in the believer, much like a king being crowned. This imagery of dwelling and crowning suggests both intimacy and authority. The believer is not merely visited by divine love but becomes its permanent home. This idea is reinforced later in the hymn with the line "Take the power of sin away," highlighting Wesley's belief in the possibility of entire sanctification.

The second stanza expands on the theme of transformation: "Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit / Into every troubled breast." The Holy Spirit is invoked as the agent of change, bringing peace to the anxious soul. The hymn then prays for the fulfillment of prophecy: "Let us all in thee inherit / Let us find that second rest." The "second rest" is a reference to the Sabbath rest of God, a state of complete trust and union with the divine. Wesley believed that this rest was available to Christians in this life through the grace of sanctification.

The third stanza is particularly rich in biblical allusions: "Come, Almighty to deliver / Let us all thy life receive." This echoes the cry of Israel for deliverance from Egypt and applies it to the believer's need for salvation from sin and spiritual bondage. The stanza continues, "Suddenly return, and never / Never more thy temples leave." This line reflects the biblical promise that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Wesley implores God to take up permanent residence, never to depart.

The final stanza culminates in a vision of eschatological hope: "Finish then thy new creation / Pure and spotless let us be." Here, Wesley combines the themes of personal sanctification and the final restoration of all things. The believer longs to be made "spotless," a term drawn from the imagery of the bride of Christ in the Book of Revelation. The hymn ends with a doxology: "Let us see thy great salvation / Perfectly restored in thee." This points to the ultimate goal of Christian faith: to be fully and eternally united with God's love.

Musical Settings and Global Reception

While Charles Wesley wrote the lyrics to "Love Divine All Loves Excelling," the hymn's melody has varied over time. The most common tune used in English-speaking churches today is **Hyfrydol**, composed by the Welsh musician Rowland Huw Prichard in the early 19th century. The tune's joyful and stately rhythm complements the majestic lyrics perfectly. Other popular settings include **Beecher** by John Zundel and **Love Divine** by John Stainer. This diversity of musical arrangements has allowed the hymn to be adapted to different worship styles, from traditional organ-led congregations to modern praise bands.

The hymn has been translated into numerous languages and is sung in Christian communities around the globe. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" has been absorbed into local worship traditions, often with indigenous instrumentation. Its universal message of God's transformative love transcends cultural boundaries. The hymn is also a favorite in weddings, where its celebration of divine love makes it a fitting choice for couples seeking God's blessing on their union.

Theological Themes: Perfect Love and Sanctification

Understanding "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" requires a grasp of the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection. This doctrine, also called entire sanctification, teaches that God's grace can so transform a believer that they are enabled to love God and neighbor with a pure, unselfish love. The hymn is essentially a prayer for this experience. Every stanza asks God to act—to come, breathe, fix, finish—emphasizing that sanctification is a work of God, not human effort.

The hymn also reflects a Trinitarian theology. The "Love divine" honors God the Father, the source of all love. The reference to Jesus Christ as the one who came down from heaven points to the Son. The invocation of the Spirit in the second stanza ("Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit") completes the Trinitarian framework. This makes the hymn a holistic act of worship that engages all three persons of the Godhead.

Another key theme is the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of Christian salvation. The hymn acknowledges that believers already experience God's love but also yearns for its full and final realization. Lines like "Suddenly return, and never more thy temples leave" capture the expectation of Christ's second coming, while "Pure and spotless let us be" expresses the longing for moral perfection. This eschatological hope gives the hymn a forward-looking dimension that encourages persistence in faith.

Enduring Legacy in Worship and Culture

Few hymns have maintained such a strong presence in Christian worship as "Love Divine All Loves Excelling." It appears in virtually every major hymnal, from the *United Methodist Hymnal* to the *Lutheran Service Book* and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. It is also featured in the *Presbyterian Hymnal*, the *Baptist Hymnal*, and many

Catholic worship resources. This cross-denominational appeal is rare and speaks to the hymn's ability to speak to the core of Christian experience.

The hymn has also influenced modern Christian music. Contemporary artists such as Rich Mullins, Third Day, and Chris Tomlin have recorded versions of "Love Divine All Loves Excelling," introducing it to new generations. In 2020, the hymn was even included in the soundtrack of the television series *The Crown*during a royal wedding scene, further cementing its place in popular culture.

Beyond its musical impact, the hymn's theology has shaped the spiritual lives of countless individuals. Its message of perfect love offers hope to those struggling with guilt, fear, or a sense of distance from God. For many, singing "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" is not merely an act of worship but a personal prayer for transformation. The hymn invites believers to open their hearts to the limitless, perfecting love of God, and to trust that this love will indeed complete the work it has begun.

Practical Application: How to Use This Hymn Today

Whether in personal devotion or corporate worship, "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth. Here are a few ways to engage with the hymn more deeply:

- Meditative reading: Read the lyrics slowly, pausing after each line to consider its meaning. Ask yourself what it means for God's love to "fix in us thy humble dwelling." How could your life change if you truly believed that divine love is within you?
- Prayerful singing: Sing the hymn as a personal prayer. Focus on one stanza each day, turning the words into a conversation with God. For instance, the line "Take the power of sin away" can become a specific petition for deliverance from a particular struggle.
- Group study: In a small group or Bible study, analyze the hymn's biblical references. Compare the hymn with Wesley's own sermons on Christian perfection. Discuss how the hymn's theology aligns with your own understanding of sanctification.
- Musical exploration: Listen to different musical arrangements of the hymn. Compare the feel of Hyfrydol with Beecher. Notice how the melody affects the emotional impact of the lyrics. Consider learning to play the hymn on an instrument.

By engaging with the hymn in these ways, you can allow its message to sink deeper into your heart and life.

Conclusion

"Love Divine All Loves Excelling" is far more than a 250-year-old hymn. It is a living prayer, a theological treatise set to music, and a testament to the transformative power of God's love. From its origins in the Methodist revival to its current place in global worship, the hymn continues to call believers to a deeper experience of grace. Its words remind us that no human love can compare to the love of God, and that this divine love is available to all who seek it. Whether sung in a grand cathedral, a small country church, or a quiet room alone, this hymn has the power to stir the soul and draw it closer to the heart of God. As Charles Wesley penned, "Let us see thy great salvation / Perfectly restored in thee." This is the hope that makes "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" an eternal song of the church.

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