

Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise

A favorite of Jana Libby.

1982 Hymnal #423; sung as Opening Hymn on July 12, 2020

You may enjoy listening to one of these as you read the history and story of this much-loved hymn.

Royal Garrison Church of All Saints, Aldershot Garrison, England

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfu1dqKCGd8>

Grace Community Church - Sun Valley, California

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD2e2N9NvbK>

And then join us at 10 a.m. on Sunday, July 12 to enjoy Vincent's rendition of this hymn. If you are at home, you can sing along; for those in church, we will simply hum, nod heads, tap our toes. The broadcast is via FaceBook Live and recorded for future enjoyment. The words of the hymn are at the end of this article.



Musicologist Erik Routley (31 October 1917 – 8 October 1982) was an English Congregational minister, composer and musicologist. He became Professor of Church Music at Westminster Choir College, Princeton, New Jersey in 1975. This is what he wrote about "Immortal, Invisible"

"Immortal, Invisible should give the reader a moment's pause. Most readers will think they know this hymn, the work of another Free Kirk minister. But it never now appears as its author wrote it, and a closer look at it in its fuller form shows that it was by no means designed to be one of those general hymns of praise that the parson slams into the praise-list when he is in too much of a hurry to think of anything else but a hymn about the reading of Scripture. Just occasionally editorial tinkering changes the whole personality of a hymn; it has certainly done so here.



How do you express the inexpressible mystery of the Creator whose name was unutterable in Hebrew Scriptures, save the self-described "I AM"? How do you put into words what cannot be known? How do you sing about the One who is ineffable -- beyond all words?

Walter Chalmers Smith (1824-1908) attempted this in his classic hymn, "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise." A Scottish Free Church minister educated at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh, Smith served congregations in London, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

This hymn is the only one of his volumes of poetry that remains in common use. Hymnologist Albert Bailey says composing poetry was for Smith "the retreat of his nature from the burden of his labors."

The original version in six stanzas appeared in Smith's *Hymns of Christ and the Christian Life* (1867). After a number of revisions, the four-stanza version was included in the influential *The English Hymnal* (1906), assuring its fame to the present day.

The obvious scriptural foundation for stanza one is I Timothy 1:17: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." (KJV)

The central metaphor of light suggests the transcendence of the One who was known as I AM. Stanza one refers to this One as "light inaccessible hid from our eyes." In stanza two the metaphor is elaborated by describing the Holy One as "silent as light." Stanza four has two references to light: "thou dwellest in light" and "'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee."

In spite of this "invisible" one whose identity is obscured by brightness, our attention is called to the actions and attributes of the I AM, giving us some indication of who this being is.

In stanza two we find that this unseen One "rulest in might." This One also is a being of "justice like mountains high soaring above" and "goodness and love" reflected in the "clouds like fountains" that sustain life on earth.

It is stanza three that reveals even more of the Holy One's nature: the source of all life "to both great and small." The Holy One's unchanging nature is the antithesis of living creatures that "blossom and flourish" and then "wither and perish."

Stanza four reveals that the Holy One is adored by angels -- suggesting not only that the Creator is a cosmic being but that we should follow the angels' example and render our praise.

This classic expression of faith that acknowledges human finiteness in the face of the One hidden by the "splendor of light" contrasts with more evangelical hymns

that express a desire for an intimate relationship with Jesus. Perhaps this indicates a need for balance between the intimate and ineffable.

The Jewish tradition expresses this balance well in the prayer book, *The Gates of Prayer*: "O God, how can we know You? Where can we find You? You are as close to us as breathing, yet You are farther than the farthestmost star."

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Smith's words are usually sung to the tune known as "St. Denio", originally a Welsh ballad tune, which became a hymn (under the name "Palestrina") in *Caniadau y Cyssegr* (1839). The 1982 Hymnal lists the tune as "St. Denio."



1 Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, your great Name we praise.

2 Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

3 To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish, like leaves on the tree,
then wither and perish; but nought changeth thee.

4 Thou reignest in glory, thou rulest in light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all laud we would render: O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.