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Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
www.nph.net
© 2017 Northwestern Publishing House
Published 2017
Printed in the United States of America
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Luther’s Small Catechism is a treasure that has graced the church ever since it was first published in 1529. Throughout the centuries since, the catechism, along with its exposition, has been the textbook used by hundreds of thousands of students to learn the truths of Scripture.

But Luther understood that the value of this treasure was not limited to young people. He used the catechism throughout his life, and he urged others to follow his example.

Those two factors have influenced the design and development of this Reformation Anniversary Edition of the Small Catechism.

Because of the catechism’s enduring role as an instructional tool, this book contains a clear and orderly presentation of Bible doctrine. The Bible verses that follow the questions let Scripture speak for itself and encourage students to search the Scriptures to discover God’s answers. Often, additional explanations are included to summarize Bible truths.

Because of the catechism’s potential to serve as an ongoing source of encouragement and guidance, its contents have been designed to flow for a more natural read. The text and its indices will always permit Christians to search out a particular topic and the Bible verses that apply. However, introductions as well as transitional thoughts also promote the reading of the material as a unit. And transitional units promote the reading of the catechism as a book.

Two other features are noteworthy:

- As saint and sinner, each Christian faces an ongoing struggle with sin. The transitional units highlight the role of law and gospel in this new-self-versus-old-self struggle.
- To highlight even more the catechism’s potential as an ongoing spiritual tool, each of the 51 units ends with a Connections section that could be the basis of an individual or joint family devotion. The participants are guided through a Bible history narrative and corresponding thought questions, which apply the truths learned in that unit. Those are followed by a related
quote from Luther or the Lutheran Confessions and a closing hymn. We hope that this section will also help the students grow in appreciation of their Lutheran heritage.

The Lutheran church is a catechetical church. We consider it a remarkable, though undeserved, privilege that we have been able to participate in the development of this book. We pray that you will use your catechism regularly, throughout your entire life, and that God will bless you through it.

Professor Stephen Geiger, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Professor Joel Otto, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Pastor John Braun, Northwestern Publishing House
Pastor Ray Schumacher, Northwestern Publishing House
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
As the head of the family should teach them
in the simplest way to those in his household.

The First Commandment
You shall have no other gods.
What does this mean?
We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

The Second Commandment
You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
What does this mean?
We should fear and love God that we do not use his
name to curse, swear, lie, or deceive, or use witchcraft,
but call upon God’s name in every trouble, pray, praise,
and give thanks.

The Third Commandment
Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
What does this mean?
We should fear and love God that we do not despise
preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy and gladly
hear and learn it.

The Fourth Commandment
Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with
you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.
What does this mean?
We should fear and love God that we do not dishonor or anger our parents and others in authority, but honor, serve, and obey them, and give them love and respect.

The Fifth Commandment
You shall not murder.
What does this mean?
We should fear and love God that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.

The Sixth Commandment
You shall not commit adultery.
What does this mean?
We should fear and love God that we lead a pure and decent life in words and actions, and that husband and wife love and honor each other.

The Seventh Commandment
You shall not steal.
What does this mean?
We should fear and love God that we do not take our neighbor’s money or property, or get it by dishonest dealing, but help him to improve and protect his property and means of income.

The Eighth Commandment
You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
What does this mean?
We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way.
The Ninth Commandment

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God that we do not scheme to get our neighbor’s inheritance or house, or obtain it by a show of right, but do all we can to help him keep it.

The Tenth Commandment

You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, workers, animals, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God that we do not force or entice away our neighbor’s spouse, workers, or animals, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

The Conclusion

What does God say about all these commandments?

He says, “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

What does this mean?

God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. Therefore we should fear his anger and not disobey what he commands.

But he promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore we should love and trust in him and gladly obey what he commands.
God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets at Mount Sinai.
The Ten Commandments are a summary of God’s will for us in our lives. Many people think of the commandments as out-of-date rules that take away our freedom to do the things we want and should have the right to do. But the more we study the commandments, the more clearly we see that they are given to us to bless us. They remain important. We have every reason to want to learn what they mean, and we have every reason to obey them.

*Note: When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, he did not assign numbers to individual commandments. Luther chose to keep the numbering used by the ancient church and the church of his day. Others have numbered the commandments in a different way, keeping the number at ten but changing the way they are numbered.

God’s Will for Our Lives

20. To understand why the Ten Commandments are blessings for us, we first have to grasp the condition of our relationship with God.

At birth what is wrong in our natural relationship with God?

- **Genesis 2:16,17; 3:6** (When Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they brought sin and death into the world.)
- **John 3:6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.
- **Romans 5:12** Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.
- **Psalm 51:5** Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Adam and Eve sinned when they chose to disobey God. Their sin brought them guilt along with many other consequences, including death. Because “flesh gives birth to flesh” (John 3:6), their descendants have been born with that sin and, therefore, are guilty and subject to death. Psalm 51 makes it very clear that at the moment of conception in our mother’s womb, we each became guilty of sin. The consequences of sin were devastating for Adam and Eve. The consequences we inherit from them by birth are devastating to us also.
21. What are the results of our inborn sin?

Ephesians 2:1,3 You were dead in your transgressions and sins. . . . Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Romans 8:7 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

Matthew 15:19 Out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Isaiah 59:2 Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

Because this guilt comes to us from our forefather Adam and so thoroughly corrupts our nature, we often refer to our natural sinful condition as our old Adam, sinful nature, inherited sin, or original sin. This sinful nature puts us under God’s judgment, makes us enemies of God, and leads us to sins of thought, word, and deed, which separate us from our holy God.

22. How do we know that this description applies to us?

Romans 3:23 All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 5:12 Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.

1 John 1:8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

23. How do we come to the realization of our sin?

Romans 7:7 I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

Romans 3:20 No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

Some people try to avoid medical tests because they fear the results, but medical tests can uncover diseases that, without treatment, could kill us.

God's commandments uncover the truth about the evil thoughts and deeds that spring from our old Adam and earn death for us.

24. Why is the work of the law a blessing as it uncovers our sins?

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Luke 13:3 Unless you repent, you too will all perish.

God's law shows us that by ourselves we are lost because of our sins. It shows us that we are unable to save ourselves and that we need a Savior. It prepares our hearts so that we are ready to hear God’s wonderful promise.
25. Who alone kept God’s law?

**Romans 3:12** All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

**Hebrews 4:14,15** Since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

**Hebrews 7:26** Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

26. Why is it important to us that Jesus kept the law for us?

**Galatians 4:4,5** When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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**A CLOSER LOOK**

**Redeem:** to pay a ransom; to buy back; to pay the price required to free someone from slavery or captivity

**Vicarious:** taking the place of another; substitutionary

**Atonement:** establishing peace between God and us by removing the guilt of sin through Christ’s perfect life and death

Jesus kept God’s law perfectly in our place—as our substitute. He also died as our substitute, paying for the guilt of our sins. We refer to this as vicarious atonement.

27. The result of Adam’s sin is devastating for us. **How has the result of Jesus’ life and death turned our lives around?**

**Romans 5:17** If, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

**Ephesians 1:7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.

**Ephesians 2:1,3-5** You were dead in your transgressions and sins. . . . Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of
his great love for us, *God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ* even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

**1 John 1:7** The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

**2 Corinthians 5:17,18** *If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:* The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

**Ephesians 4:22-24** You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, *to put off your old self,* which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; *to be made new* in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Once we were controlled by the old Adam and were dead in sin and enemies of God. When we came to faith, a new person came to life within each of us, with a new attitude toward sin and righteousness. We often refer to this as the new person, the new self, the spiritual person (being).

**28.** Though the new self has come to life within us, the old Adam is still alive within us too. **What is the result of having both the old Adam and the new self within us?**

**Galatians 5:17** The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. *They are in conflict with each other,* so that you are not to do whatever you want.

**Romans 7:18-23** I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For *I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: *Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.* For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

**29.** We so often give in to the old Adam and fall into sin. But God’s promise of forgiveness in Jesus strengthens the new self within us. **How does the new self within us respond to the gift of forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus has earned for us?**

**Romans 12:1** I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to *offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,* holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

**2 Corinthians 5:14,15** Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And *he died for all,*
that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

30. Some people think of the commandments as rules that take all the fun out of life. In Genesis 3:1-6, we see how Satan deceived Eve into thinking that disobeying God would bring happiness. The results of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, however, were misery, slavery to sin, and ultimately death. These things are always the results of sin. Obedience to God’s commands, on the other hand, does bring blessings. **What blessings are ours as we obey his laws?**

**Psalm 19:7,8,11** The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

**Psalm 119:14,35,45** I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.

**Matthew 5:3-10** (In this section of blessings, Jesus teaches that obedience to God’s will is the way of true happiness.)

31. **Why is God’s law (the Ten Commandments) a blessing for us as we wish to show our gratitude to God for saving us?**

**Psalm 119:105** Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

**CONNECTIONS**

Sometimes unpleasant experiences are actually blessings. Even pain can be a good thing. Pain can be the signal that tells us something serious is happening inside of us so that we get help from the doctor. Pain can also cause us to pull away from something that is hot and could burn us and do permanent damage. God might also use pain to lead us to his Word for hope and comfort. The result is a stronger faith. The experience of looking into God’s law is not always pleasant. Sometimes it is downright painful. God’s law shows us that we fall short of what he wants us to be. It reveals the painful truth that we are sinners who deserve God’s everlasting punishment. As unpleasant and painful as those truths are, they are blessings because they show us that we need a Savior. God shows us our sins and what we deserve because of them, but
then he graciously points us to the forgiveness we have in our Savior. Read the account of Jonah; see how God’s law accomplished its purpose of bringing an entire city of people to realize their sins.

**Jonah 1–3**

Notice how God brought the city of Nineveh to repentance. He used the words of his prophet. How has God shown you your sin? How has he assured you of his love and forgiveness? What Bible truths or passages have been most comforting to you when you have felt the guilt of your sin?

**Luther**

If the Law accuses me of not having done this or that or being unjust and a sinner in God’s record, I must confess that all these charges are true. . . . To be sure, according to the Law, which computes my guilt, I am a poor, damned sinner. However, I appeal from the Law to the Gospel; for, in addition to the Law, God has given us another message called the Gospel. This bestows on us His grace, the forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness and life. *(What Luther Says, Ewald M. Plass, p. 743, par. 2300)*

**Salvation Unto Us Has Come (Stanzas 2–4)**

What God does in his law demand
And none to him can render
Brings wrath and woe on ev’ry hand
For man, the vile offender.
Our flesh has not those pure desires
The spirit of the law requires,
And lost is our condition.

It is a false, misleading dream
That God his law has given
That sinners can themselves redeem
And by their works gain heaven.
The law is but a mirror bright
To bring the inbred sin to light
That lurks within our nature.

Yet as the law must be fulfilled
Or we must die despairing,
Christ came and has God’s anger stilled,
Our human nature sharing.
He has for us the law obeyed
And thus the Father’s vengeance stayed
Which over us impended.
With the First Commandment, God plainly teaches us that we should have no gods other than him, the only true God. As Christians, we may think that it will be easy to keep this commandment. After all, we believe in the true God who tells us about himself in the Bible. But as we study this commandment, we will see that we often break this commandment by honoring other gods. We often place more importance on something or someone other than God, making that something or someone our god. We need God’s strong reminder to fear, love, and trust the true God above all things.

32. The greatest blessing we have, our most prized treasure, is to know the true God. **Why is it so important for us to know the true God?**

- **John 17:3** Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.
- **Acts 4:12** Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.
- **1 Peter 3:12** The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.
- **John 16:23** Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.
- **Psalm 46:1** God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.
- **Psalm 67:1** May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us.
Psalm 145:15,16 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

33. Who is the true God?

1 Corinthians 8:4 There is no God but one.

Isaiah 45:21 There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.

Matthew 28:19 Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

34. People break this commandment in many ways. What are some ways people dishonor the true God?

Psalm 14:1 The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

Psalm 115:4 Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands.

Isaiah 44:12-19 (The prophet speaks of the foolishness of people who bow down to idols. He talks about the blacksmith who creates an image of metal that can’t satisfy his hunger. He describes a craftsman who takes a block of wood, using half of it for fuel to cook his food and the other half to create an image that can do nothing.)

Some people believe that there is no God. They are called atheists. They want to believe that they are masters of their own destinies and that they aren’t responsible to anyone else. Other people acknowledge that there may be a god, but they say we can’t know for sure. They are called agnostics. Neither atheists nor agnostics believe what the Bible tells us. They don’t believe in the true God. It is worth noting the demons described in James 2:19. Though these demons believed there is one God, they had reason to shudder in fear.

35. We understand what the words love and trust mean. However, when we speak of loving and trusting God, those words take on special significance. To love God means to treasure him and his Word above everything else. To trust him is to be confident that his Word is true and that he always provides everything we need, keeps us safe, and gives us everything he has promised. Unfortunately, our actions often reveal that the sinful nature lives within us and leads us to love and
trust in other gods instead of in the true God. **What are some of the ways that we may be guilty of sinning against God by breaking this commandment?**

**Matthew 6:24** No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

**Psalm 62:10** Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

**Proverbs 11:28** Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

**1 John 2:15** Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.

**Matthew 10:37** Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Our material possessions, our families, and our friends are all blessings from God. We thank him for them. But when they become too important to us, they begin to take God’s place in our hearts; they become our idols. We love them more than we love God.

**Proverbs 3:5** Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

**Jeremiah 17:5** This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD.”

God has blessed us so we can learn many things. We know more about this complex world than previous generations did. We develop medicines and invent technology that can do amazing things. But if we trust our human knowledge so much that we believe we do not need God’s care, love, and forgiveness, we make gods of our understanding, knowledge, and technology.

**John 5:23** Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

**1 John 2:22,23** Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Many people claim to believe in the God of the Bible but don’t believe that Jesus is true God. They really believe in a god created by human imagination. In reality, they are following an idol.

**36.** In his explanation of the First Commandment, Luther says that we are to love and trust God above all things. If we love and trust other things more than God, we are making them into false gods. **In the**
explanation, he also tells us to fear God above all things. What does that mean?

Matthew 10:28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Ephesians 3:20,21 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

1 Samuel 12:24 Be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.

Daniel 6:1-23 (Daniel feared God more than the king’s decree. He was willing to die rather than bow down to the king.)

To fear God doesn’t mean simply to be afraid of him. To fear God means to recognize his power and authority and be filled with great awe and respect. When our sinful flesh leads us to sin, God wants us to fear the punishment that we deserve because of our sin. But we do not receive punishment; we receive forgiveness. As we rejoice in the forgiveness of our sins, our fear of God includes appreciation that his power and authority gave us a Savior.

37. All of us struggle with this commandment. We don’t always fear, love, and trust in God more than anything or anyone else. **How can we then hope that God will love us as his children, that he will listen to our prayers, and that he will someday take us to heaven?**

Matthew 4:1-10 (Jesus was tempted to put himself first, but he didn’t. He put God first.)

Romans 5:19 Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

We are sinners who have heard the wonderful message that Jesus kept God’s commandments in our place. Out of thanks to Jesus for saving us, we turn away from our sins and want to obey God.

38. **How does God’s Word serve as a guide for those of us who want to keep the First Commandment?**

Matthew 22:37 Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

Psalm 73:25,26 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Genesis 22:1-19 (Abraham so feared, loved, and trusted God that he was willing to offer his son.)
1 Samuel 17 (David trusted that God would give him victory against Goliath.)

1 Peter 5:6,7 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

The connections:

**Fear. Love. Trust.** Those three words summarize Luther’s explanation of the First Commandment. We fear God above all things when we are afraid of his punishment because of our sins and when we are filled with such awe and respect that we don’t want to sin. We love him above all things when his promise of salvation through Jesus is our most valuable treasure and the focus of our hearts. We trust him above all things when we bring all of our challenges and needs to him in prayer, believing he can help us. We demonstrate that trust especially when we look to him to help us with our greatest problem—our sin—and believe his promise that he has forgiven us through Jesus. In the Bible we can find many examples of people for whom the promises of God were more valuable than even life itself. In the book of Daniel, read about
how three men feared, loved, and trusted God to the point that they were ready to die rather than worship a false god.

Daniel 3:1-18
God miraculously rescued these three men from the fire. But before the men were thrown into the flames, they did not know what God would do. They were willing to risk their lives because they believed God was more important than life. Describe a time when putting God first means you might lose something. What Bible truths can help you when you are in such a situation?

Luther
You shall have me alone as your God. What is the meaning of this? . . . Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a god is nothing other than trusting and believing him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust is right, then your God is also true. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God [Hebrews 11:6]. Now, I say that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god. (Large Catechism, I, par. 1,2)

The Ten Commandments Are the Law (Stanzas 2,11,12)
“I am your Lord and God alone!
No other god but me enthrone!
Put your whole confidence in me;
Give me your heart totally.”
Have mercy, Lord!

God gave these laws to show therein,
O child of man, your life of sin,
And help you rightly to perceive
How unto God you should live.
Have mercy, Lord!

Our works cannot salvation gain;
They merit only endless pain.
Forgive us, Lord! To Christ we fly,
Our mediator on high.
Have mercy, Lord!
I Am Trusting You, Lord Jesus (Stanzas 1, 4, 6)
I am trusting you, Lord Jesus,
Trusting only you,
Trusting you for full salvation,
Free and true.
I am trusting you to guide me;
You alone shall lead,
Ev’ry day and hour supplying
All my need.
I am trusting you, Lord Jesus;
Never let me fall.
I am trusting you forever
And for all.