

HYMNS OF THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR

A Tribute to the Dying Saviour

*Ah, holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended,
That man to judge Thee hast in hate pretended?
By foes derided, by Thine own rejected,
O most afflicted!*

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee:
I crucified Thee.*

*Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;
The slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered;
For man's atonement, while he nothing heedeth,
God intercedeth.*

*For me, kind Jesus, was Thine incarnation,
Thy mortal sorrow, and Thy life's oblation;
Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter passion,
For my salvation.*

*Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay Thee,
I do adore Thee, and will ever pray Thee:
Think on Thy pity and Thy love unswerving,
Not my deserving.*

JOHANN HEERMANN, 1630.

Times of suffering and affliction have often brought forth great poets. This was especially true of that troublous period in European history known as the "Thirty Years' War." Although it was one of the most distressing eras in the Protestant Church, it gave birth to some of its grandest hymns.

It was during this dreadful period, when Germany was devastated and depopulated by all the miseries of a bloody warfare, that Johann Heermann lived and wrought. He was born at Rauden, Silesia, October 11, 1585, the son of a poverty-stricken furrier. There were five children in the family, but four of them were snatched away by death within a short time. Johann, who was the youngest, was also taken ill, and the despairing mother was torn by fear and anguish.

Turning to God in her hour of need, she vowed that if He would spare her babe, she would educate him for the ministry.

She did not forget her promise. The child whose life was spared grew to manhood, received his training at several institutions, and in 1611 entered the holy ministry as pastor of the Lutheran church at Koeben, not far from his birthplace.

A few years later the Thirty Years' War broke out, and all of Germany began to feel its horrors. Four times during the period from 1629 to 1634 the town of Koeben was sacked by the armies of Wallenstein, who had been sent by the king of Austria to restore the German principalities to the Catholic faith. Previous to this, in 1616, the city was almost destroyed by fire. In 1631 it was visited by the dreadful pestilence.

Again and again Heermann was forced to flee from the city, and several times he lost all his earthly possessions. Once, when he was crossing the Oder, he was pursued and nearly captured by enemy soldiers, who shot after him. Twice he was nearly sabred.

It was during this period, in 1630, that his beautiful hymn, "Herzliebster Jesu," was first published. One of the stanzas which is not usually given in translations reflects very clearly the unflinching faith of the noble pastor during these hard experiences. It reads:

Whate'er of earthly good this life may grant me
I'll risk for Thee ; no shame, no cross shall daunt me;
I shall not fear what man can do to harm me,
Nor death alarm me.

The hymn immediately sprang into popularity in Germany, perhaps through the fact that it reflected the feelings of Protestants everywhere, and partly because of the gripping tune written for it in 1640 by the great musician Johann Cruger.

Heermann has been ranked with Luther and Gerhardt as one of the greatest hymn-writers the Lutheran Church has produced. Because his hymns were written during such times of distress and suffering, they seemed to grip the hearts of the German people to an extraordinary degree.

One of his hymns, published in 1630 under the group known as "Songs of Tears," is entitled "Treuer Wachter Israel." It contains a striking line imploring God to "build a wall around us." A very interesting story is told concerning this hymn. On January 5, 1814, the Allied forces were about to enter Schleswig. A poor widow and her daughter and grandson lived in a little house near the entrance of the town. The grandson was reading Heermann's hymns written for times of war, and when he came to this one, he exclaimed, "It would be a good thing, grandmother, if our Lord would build a wall around us."

Next day all through the town cries of terror were heard, but not a soldier molested the

widow's home. When on the following morning they summoned enough courage to open their door, lo, a snowdrift had concealed them from the view of the enemy! On this incident Clemens Brentano wrote a beautiful poem, "Draus vor Schleswig."

Another remarkable story is recorded concerning Heermann's great hymn, "O Jesus, Saviour dear." At Leuthen, in Silesia, December 5, 1757, the Prussians under Frederick the Great were facing an army of Austrians three times their number. Just before the battle began some of the Prussians began to sing the second stanza of the hymn. The regimental bands took up the music. One of the commanders asked Frederick if it should be silenced. "No," said the king, "let it be. With such men God will today certainly give me the victory." When the bloody battle ended with victory for the Prussians, Frederick exclaimed "My God, what a power has religion!"

Other famous hymns by Heermann include "O Christ, our true and only Light," "Lord, Thy death and passion give" and "Faithful God, I lay before Thee."

Many other noted hymn-writers belong to the period of the Thirty Years' War, among them Martin Opitz, George Weissel, Heinrich Held, Ernst Homburg, Johannes Olearius, Josua Stegmann, and Wilhelm II, Duke of Saxe Weimar.

Opitz was somewhat of a diplomat and courtier, as well as a poet. He was a man of vacillating character, and did not hesitate to lend his support to the Romanists whenever it served his personal interests. However, he has left to posterity an imperishable hymn in "Light of Light, O Sun of heaven." He is credited with having reformed the art of verse-writing in Germany. He died of the pestilence in Danzig in 1639.

Homburg and Held were lawyers. Homburg was born near Eisenach in 1605, and later we find him practising law in Naumburg, Saxony. He was a man of great poetic talent, but at first he devoted his gifts to writing love ballads and drinking songs. During the days of the dread pestilence he turned to God, and now he began to write hymns. In 1659 he published a collection of 150 spiritual songs. In a preface he speaks of them as his "Sunday labor," and he tells how he had been led to write them "by the anxious and sore domestic afflictions by which God ... has for some time laid me aside." The Lenten hymn, "Christ, the Life of all the living," is found in this collection.

Held, who practiced law in his native town of Guhrau, Silesia, also was a man chastened in the school of sorrow and affliction. He is the author of two hymns that have found their way into the English language -- "Let the earth now praise the Lord" and "Come, O come, Thou quickening Spirit."

Weissel, a Lutheran pastor at Konigsberg, has given us one of the finest Advent hymns in the German language, "Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates."

Olearius, who wrote a commentary on the Bible and compiled one of the most important hymn-books of the 17th century, has also bequeathed to the Church a splendid Advent hymn, "Comfort, comfort ye My people."

Stegmann, a theological professor at Rinteln who suffered much persecution at the hands of Benedictine monks during the Thirty Years' War, was the author of the beautiful evening hymn, "Abide with us, our Saviour."

Wilhelm II, Duke of Saxe-Weimar, who wrote the inspiring hymn, "O Christ, Thy grace unto us lend," was not only a poet and musician, but also a man of war. He was twice wounded in battle with the Imperial forces, and was once left for dead. He was taken prisoner by Tilly, but was released by the emperor. When Gustavus Adolphus came to Germany to save the Protestant cause, Wilhelm after some hesitation joined him. However, when the Duke in 1635 made a separate peace with the emperor, the Swedish army ravaged his territory.

Johann Meyfart also belongs to this period. He was a theological professor at the University of Erfurt, and died at that place in 1642. One of his hymns, "Jerusalem, thou city fair and high," has found its way into English hymn books.

The beautiful hymn, "O how blest are ye," which was translated into English by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, comes to us from the pen of Simon Dach, another Lutheran theologian who lived during these stirring days. Dach, who was professor of poetry and dean of the philosophical faculty of the University of Königsberg, wrote some 165 hymns. They are marked by fulness of faith and a quiet confidence in God in the midst of a world of turmoil and uncertainty. Dach died in 1659 after a lingering illness. The first stanza of his funeral hymn reads

O how blest are ye, whose toils are ended!
Who through death have unto God ascended!
Ye have arisen
From the cares which keep us still in prison.

Tobias Clausnitzer, who has bequeathed to the Church the hymn, "Blessed Jesus, at Thy Word," was the chaplain of a Swedish regiment during the Thirty Years' War. He preached the thanksgiving sermon at the field service held by command of General Wrangel at Weiden, in the Upper Palatinate, on January 1, 1649, after the conclusion of the Peace of Westphalia. He afterwards became pastor at Weiden, where he remained until his death in 1684.

Johann Quirsfeld, archdeacon in Pirna, has given us a very impressive Good Friday hymn, "Sinful world, behold the anguish." Quirsfeld died in 1686.

Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, a noted Orientalist, scientist and statesman of the seventeenth century, in addition to duties of state edited several Rabbinical writings and works on Oriental

mysticism. He also wrote hymns, among them "Dayspring of eternity," which has been referred to by one writer as "one of the freshest, most original, and spirited of morning hymns, as if born from the dew of the sunrise." He died at Sulzbach, Bavaria, May 8, 1689, at the very hour, it is said, which he himself had predicted.

The extent to which Lutheran laymen of this period devoted themselves to spiritual exercises is revealed in the life of Johann Franck, a lawyer who became mayor of his native town of Guben, Brandenburg, in 1661. To him we are indebted for the finest communion hymn in the German language, "Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness." He also was the author of such gems as "Light of the Gentile nations," "Lord, to Thee I make confession," "Lord God, we worship Thee," "Jesus, priceless Treasure," and the glorious song of praise:

Praise the Lord, each tribe and nation,
Praise Him with a joyful heart;
Ye who know His full salvation,
Gather now from every part;
Let your voices glorify
In His temple God on high.

It was Franck who began the long series of so-called "Jesus hymns," which reached their fullest development in the later Pietistic school of hymnists. Franck held that poetry should be "the nurse of piety, the herald of immortality, the promoter of cheerfulness, the conqueror of sadness, and a foretaste of heavenly glory." His hymns reflect his beautiful spirit of Christian cheerfulness and hope.

The last name that we would mention is Heinrich Theobald Schenk, a pastor at Giessen. Not much is known of this man except that he was the writer of a single hymn, but it is a hymn that has gained for him the thanks of posterity. There is scarcely a hymn-book of any communion today that does not contain, "Who are these, like stars appearing?" Schenk died in 1727, at the age of 71 years.