

## PAUL GERHARDT, PRINCE OF LUTHERAN HYMNISTS

### *A Joyous Christmas Carol*

*All my heart this night rejoices,  
As I hear,  
Far and near,  
Sweetest angel voices:  
"Christ is born," their choirs are singing,  
Till the air  
Everywhere  
Now with joy is ringing.*

*Come and banish all your sadness,  
One and all,  
Great and small,  
Come with songs of gladness;  
Love Him who with love is yearning;  
Hail the star  
That from far  
Bright with hope is burning.*

*Hither come, ye heavy-hearted,  
Who for sin,  
Deep within,  
Long and sore have smarted;  
For the poisoned wounds you're feeling  
Help is near,  
One is here  
Mighty for their healing.*

*Faithfully Thee, Lord, I'll cherish,  
Live to Thee,  
And with Thee  
Dying, shall not perish,  
But shall dwell with Thee forever,  
Far on high,  
In the joy  
That can alter never.*

PAUL GERHARDT, 1656.

The greatest Lutheran hymnist of the seventeenth century, and perhaps of all time, was Paul Gerhardt.

Not even the hymns of Martin Luther are used so generally throughout the Christian world as those of Gerhardt. More of the beautiful lyrics of this sweet singer have found their way into the English language than the hymns of any other German writer, and with the passing of years their popularity increases rather than diminishes.

In the Lutheran church at Lubden, in Germany, there hangs a life-size painting of Gerhardt. Beneath it is this inscription: *Theologus in cribro Satanae versatus*, "A divine sifted in Satan's sieve." That inscription may be said to epitomize the sad life-story of Germany's great psalmist.

Gerhardt was born March 12, 1607, in Grafenhaynichen, a village near the celebrated Wittenberg. His father, who was mayor of the village, died before Paul reached maturity. When he was twenty-one years of age he began the study of theology at the University of Wittenberg. The Thirty Years' War was raging, and all Germany was desolate and suffering. Because of the difficulty of securing a parish, Gerhardt served for several years as a tutor in the home of Andreas Barthold, whose daughter Anna Maria became his bride in 1655.

It was during this period that Gerhardt's poetic gifts began to flourish. No doubt he was greatly stimulated by contact with the famous musician Johann Cruger, who was cantor and director of music in the Church of St. Nicholas in Berlin. In 1648 many of Gerhardt's hymns were published in Cruger's *Praxis Pietatis Melica*.

Through the recommendation of the Berlin clergy, he was appointed Lutheran provost at Mittenwalde, and was ordained to this post November 18, 1651. Six years later he accepted the position of third assistant pastor of the Church of St. Nicholas in Berlin. His hymns continued to grow in popularity, and his fame as a preacher drew large audiences to hear him.

The controversy between the Lutherans and Calvinists, which had continued from the days of the Reformation, flared up again at this time as the result of efforts on the part of Elector Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia to unite the two parties. Friedrich Wilhelm, who was a Calvinist, sought to compel the clergy to sign a document promising that they would abstain from any references in their sermons to doctrinal differences. Gerhardt was sick at the time, and, although he had always been moderate in his utterances, he felt that to sign such a document would be to compromise the faith. Summoning the other Lutheran clergymen of Berlin to his bedside, he urged them to stand firm and to refuse to surrender to the demands of the Elector.

Soon after this the courageous pastor was deposed from office. He was also prohibited from holding private services in his own home. Though he felt the blow very keenly, he met it with true Christian fortitude.

"This," he said, "is only a small Berlin affliction; but I am also willing and ready to seal with my blood the evangelical truth, and, like my namesake, St. Paul, to offer my neck to the sword."

To add to his sorrows, Gerhardt's wife and a son died in the midst of these troubles. Three other children had died previous to this, and now the sorely tried pastor was left with a single child, a boy of six years. In May, 1669, he was called to the church at Lubden, where he labored faith fully and with great success until his death, on June 7, 1676.

The glorious spirit that dwelt in him, and which neither trials nor persecutions could quench, is reflected in the lines of his famous hymn, "If God Himself be for me," based on the latter part of the eighth chapter of Romans

Though earth be rent asunder,  
Thou'rt mine eternally;  
Not fire, nor sword, nor thunder,  
Shall sever me from Thee;  
Not hunger, thirst, nor danger,  
Not pain nor poverty,  
Nor mighty princes' anger,  
Shall ever hinder me.

Catherine Winkworth, who has translated the same hymn in a different meter under the title, "Since Jesus is my Friend," has probably succeeded best in giving expression to the triumphant faith and the note of transcendent hope and joy in-the final stanza:

My heart for gladness springs;  
It cannot more be sad;  
For very joy it smiles and sings  
Sees naught but sunshine glad.  
The Sun that lights mine eyes  
Is Christ, the Lord I love;  
I sing for joy of that which lies  
Stored up for me above.

Because of his own warm, confiding, childlike faith in God, Gerhardt's hymns have become a source of special comfort to sorrowing and heavy-laden souls. They not only breathe a spirit of tender consolation but of a "joy unspeakable and full of glory." We have a beautiful example of this in his Advent hymn, "O how shall I receive Thee":

Rejoice then, ye sad-hearted,  
Who sit in deepest gloom,  
Who mourn o'er joys departed,  
And tremble at your doom;

He who alone can cheer you  
Is standing at the door;  
He brings His pity near you,  
And bids you weep no more.

In Gerhardt's hymns we find a transition to the modern subjective note in hymnody. Sixteen of his hymns begin with the pronoun, "I." They are not characterized, however, by the weak sentimentality so often found in the hymns of our own day, for Gerhardt never lost sight of the greatest objective truth revealed to men -- justification by faith alone. Nevertheless, because of his constant emphasis on the love of God and because his hymns are truly "songs of the heart," they possess a degree of emotional warmth that is lacking in the earlier Lutheran hymns.

His hymns on the glories of nature have never been surpassed. In contemplating the beauty of created things he is ever praising the Creator. His famous evening hymn, "Nun ruhen alle Walder," has been likened to the beauty and splendor of the evening star. In a marvelous manner the temporal and the eternal, the terrestrial and the celestial are contrasted in every stanza. It was a favorite hymn of the great German poet, Friedrich von Schiller, who first heard it sung by his mother as a cradle song. Probably no hymn is so generally used by the children of Germany as an evening prayer as this one. The most familiar English translation begins with the line, "Now rest beneath night's shadow." A more recent translation of rare beauty runs:

The restless day now closeth,  
Each flower and tree repositeth,  
Shade creeps o'er wild and wood:  
Let us, as night is falling,  
On God our Maker calling,  
Give thanks to Him, the Giver good.

The tune to which this hymn is sung is as famous as the hymn itself. It is ascribed to Heinrich Isaak, one of the first of the great German church musicians. It is believed to have been composed by him in 1490, when he was leaving his native town, Innsbruck, to establish himself at the court of Emperor Maximilian I. It was set to the plaintive words, "Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen." According to tradition, Isaak first heard the beautiful melody sung by a wandering minstrel. Bach and Mozart regarded it as one of the sublimest of all chorales, and each is said to have declared that he would rather have been the composer of this tune than any of his great masterpieces.

Gerhardt wrote 123 hymns in all. In addition to the hymns already mentioned, probably his most famous is "O sacred Head, now wounded," based on the Latin hymn of Bernard of Clairvaux. Other hymns in common use are "Immanuel, we sing Thy praise," "Holy Ghost, dispel our sadness," "O enter, Lord, Thy temple," "Shun, my heart, the thought forever," "Commit thou all thy griefs," "All my heart this night rejoices," "Beside Thy manger here I stand," "Awake, my heart, and marvel," "Go forth, my heart, and seek delight," "O Saviour

dear," and "A pilgrim and a stranger."

Only the briefest mention can be made of other German Lutheran hymn-writers of this period. One of these, Johan Rist, pastor in Wedel, was crowned poet laureate of Germany by Emperor Ferdinand III in 1644, and nine years later was raised to the nobility. Rist wrote some 680 hymns, but all are not of uniform excellence. Among those in common use to-day are "Arise, the kingdom is at hand," "Help us, O Lord, behold we enter," "Rise, O Salem, rise and shine," "O Living Bread from heaven," "O Jesus Christ, Thou Bread of Life," "Father, merciful and holy," which has also been translated "Soul of mine, to God awaking," "O darkest woe," and "Arise, arise ye Christians."

Georg Neumark, court poet and secretary of archives under Duke Wilhelm II of Saxe-Weimar, has left us the hymn of trust in God: "Let, O my soul, thy God direct thee," which is also known by the English translation, "If thou but suffer God to guide thee." The hymn was written in 1641, at Kiel, when, after being robbed of practically all he possessed except his prayer-book, Neumark succeeded in obtaining employment as tutor in a wealthy family. He was a destitute student at the time.

Michael Schirmer, an educator and poet who lived in Berlin during the Thirty Years' War and for two decades after its close, is the author of a number of beautiful hymns, among them the Pentecost hymn, "O Holy Spirit, enter in." Because of poverty and afflictions suffered during a period of war and pestilence, he has been called "the German Job."

Ahasuerus Fritsch, chancellor and president of the Consistory of Rudolstadt, is credited with the authorship of "Jesus is my joy, my All," a hymn that reflects the spirit of true evangelical piety. He died in 1701.

Caspar Neumann, another of Gerhardt's contemporaries, has bequeathed to the Church the sublime hymn, "God of Ages, all transcending," the last stanza of which is unusually striking in language:

Say Amen, O God our Father,  
To the praise we offer Thee;  
Now, to laud Thy name we gather;  
Let this to Thy glory be.  
Fill us with Thy love and grace,  
Till we see Thee face to face.

Neumann, who was a celebrated preacher and professor of theology at Breslau from 1678 to 1715, was the author of some thirty hymns, all of which became very popular in Silesia. He was also author of a famous devotional book, "Kern aller Gebete."