

CFBC Hymns Class 13

Paul Gerhardt and His Songs of Confident Hope

In 1943, the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his lonely prison cell, "I've lately learnt for the first time to appreciate the hymn, 'Beside thy cradle here I stand.' Up to now I hadn't made much of it; I suppose one has to be alone for a long time, and meditate on it, to be able to take it in properly." [1]

1. Beside the cradle here I stand
O Thou that ever livest
Accept me, 'tis my mind and heart
My soul, my strength, my ev'ry part
That thou from me requirest.

2. And bring Thee with a willing hand
The very gifts Thou givest
Accept me, 'tis my mind and heart
My soul, my strength, my ev'ry part
That thou from me requirest.

Alternate...

Beside the cradle here I stand
O Thou that ever livest
And bring Thee with a willing hand
The very gifts Thou givest
Accept me, 'tis my mind and heart
My soul, my strength, my ev'ry part
That thou from me requirest.

source: <https://www.lyricsondemand.com/christmascarols/b/besidethycradlehereistandlyrics.html>

The hymn was just one of the many written by Paul Gerhardt, one of the most influential hymn writers in history. And Bonhoeffer was right. The depth of Gerhardt's words is often hidden in their apparent simplicity missed by those who read or sing them quickly and let the familiarity of their message get in the way.

Gerhardt's Life

Many of Gerhardt's songs sprung out of painful experiences. Born on March 12, 1607 in Gräfenhaim, near Wittenberg, Germany, he lost both of his parents before he turned 14. In spite of this, he was able to continue his studies, enrolling at the University of Wittenberg with the intention of becoming a pastor. His progress was hindered by the Thirty Years War that devastated most of Europe.

The war affected him directly, particularly when a Swedish army swept through this hometown, burning down 400 buildings, including his family home and church. But that was not all. A plague followed the raid, killing 300 of his townspeople, including his brother Christian. The city of Wittenberg, where Gerhardt lived at the time, was spared enemy attacks but suffered greatly from the plague.

He ended up staying in Wittenberg for about 14 years, working as tutor for the children of a local pastor. In 1642, he moved to Berlin, where he tutored the children of the city's Chancellor-Advocate, Andreas Barthold.

By that time, he had already written some hymns, but his talents flourished through his collaboration with Johann Crüger, another former student at Wittenberg, who served as cantor and organist at Berlin's St. Nicholas Church. The two produced some of the greatest Lutheran hymns.

Gerhardt's call to a pastorate came in 1651, from Mittenwalde, near Berlin. Two years later, he saw several of his hymns published in the Berlin Hymn Book. Soon they were published in other collections, and became quite popular.

Now that he had a more stable vocation, he was able to marry his long-time love, Barthold's daughter Anna Maria. Together, they had three sons and two daughters.

A Painful Choice

In 1657, Gerhardt was invited to the great church of St. Nicholas, in Berlin, as third pastor. The situation there was different than what he had experienced in Wittenberg. Both the local Elector, Johann Sigismund, and the Great Elector, Frederick William I, were Reformed, at a time when the differences between Reformed and Lutheran beliefs were particularly marked. Calling the Lutheran Gerhardt as pastor might have been part of the two rulers' attempt to blend their Lutheran and Reformed subjects into a united church.

Gerhardt was a good choice for this purpose, because he preached the simple gospel of Christ, minimizing theological differences, so much that he became a favorite preacher of Frederick William's wife, the Reformed Louise Henriette.

In 1665, however, the Elector announced his intention of requiring every Lutheran clergyman to subscribe to a document that contradicted some of the Lutheran doctrines (for example, its view on the nature of the Lord's Supper). When Gerhardt refused, he was removed from office and even forbidden from shepherding his congregation in private.

But Gerhardt's congregation, including Electress Louise Henriette, protested this decision until the Elector agreed to allow Gerhardt back in the pulpit. The pastor wouldn't have to sign the prescribed document – as long as he acted in conformity to it.

This last clause bothered Gerhardt's conscience. In reality, he could just do what he had always been doing. But this time he would do so under the implicit assumption that he was denying his convictions on matters he considered essential, such as the Lutheran view of the nature of the Lord's Supper. In spite of the insistence and cajoling of many of his congregants, he decided to decline to accept office on these terms.

"It was only the most urgent necessity," he wrote to the Elector, "which induced me to retire from my pastoral office, and should I now accept it again on these terms, I should do myself a great wrong; and, so to speak, with my own hands inflict on my soul that wound which I had formerly, with such deep anguish of heart, striven to avert. I fear that God, in whose presence I walk on earth, and before whose judgment-seat I must one day appear; and as my conscience hath spoken from my youth up, and yet speaks, I can see it no otherwise than that if I should accept my office I should draw on myself God's wrath and punishment." [2]

Gerhardt's Last Years and Legacy

Following this decision; Gerhardt accepted the post of Archdeacon of Lübben, Saxony, where he spent the last seven years of his life. They were difficult years. Before he even left Berlin, three of his five children died in infancy, with one more following a little later. Weighed down by anxiety, sorrow, and the burden of caring for the ill, Gerhardt's wife Anna Maria died shortly after, leaving him with a six-year-old son.

Through it all, he found comfort in Christ, and conveyed that comfort to others in song "under circumstances which," in the words of one of his contemporaries, "would have made most men cry rather than sing." [3]

He died on May 27, 1676, leaving behind 123 hymns – not a large number, according to the standards of his day. His last words were a couple of lines from one of his hymns, *Warum sollt ich mich denn grämen* (Translated as, "Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me?") – a hymn that speaks about the inability of death to deprive us of Christ and all He has earned for His children.

A Latin inscription under a life-sized painting of him (commissioned by his congregation) reads, "A theologian sifted in Satan's sieve" – a fit description of a man who, having been sifted through life's trials, enriched the world with the comfort he had himself received from God.

Some of Gerhardt's hymns were translated into English first by John Wesley (1703-1796) and largely by Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878), who also devoted a chapter to him in her book on German hymnwriters. "His hymns seem to be the spontaneous outpouring of a heart that overflows with love, trust, and praise," [4] she said.

Much of the depths of Gerhardt's songs stemmed from the fact that he remained faithful to the true message of the gospel, as expressed in orthodox Reformation doctrines and ecclesiology. "His tenderness and fervor never degenerate into the sentimentality and petty conceits which were already becoming fashionable in his days," [5] Winkworth wrote.

Bonhoeffer was only one of the many Christians who have drawn comfort from Gerhardt's hymns. Another hymn that caused Bonhoeffer much reflection was *Fröhlich soll mein Herze springen* (translated as "***All My Heart This Night Rejoiceth***"), especially the lines Gerhardt places in the infant Christ's mouth: "Let go, dear brothers, of what ails you. Everything you lack, I will restore." [6]

And this was Gerhardt's confidence through life. He suffered many losses, but knew that Christ will one day restore everything in a perfect way, unstained by sin and eased from any fear.

Dearest Lord, thee will I cherish.
Though my breath fail in death,
yet I shall not perish,
but with thee abide forever
there on high, in that joy
which can vanish never. [7]

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 8), Fortress Press, 2010, p. 247

[2] Catherine Winkworth, *Christian Singers of Germany*, MacMillian & Co., 1869, p. 208

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 209

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] A literal translation.

[7] Paul Gerhardt, “All My Heart This Night Rejoices,” transl. by Catherine Winkworth, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, <http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/lyrics/tlh077.htm>

<https://www.reformation21.org/blog/paul-gerhardt-and-his-songs-of-confident-hope>

“Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me”

One of Gerhardt’s most beloved hymns is “Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me” (LSB 756). In light of the war, plague, unemployment, and death that upended his life countless times, this hymn is a confession of the great faith Gerhardt maintained. It is also timely for the Church today, whose people experience many of the same trials Gerhardt endured.

Gerhardt’s response every time to the crosses and trials depicted in this hymn is the mercy, love, and grace of Christ. The hymn begins with the question “Why should cross and trial grieve me?” The answer: “Christ is near With His cheer; Never will He leave me.”

When war and plague shook Gerhardt’s foundation in Gräfenhainichen, Christ was near. When Gerhardt’s wife and children died, the cheerful voice of the Gospel was the comfort Gerhardt needed. And for that love and guidance, Gerhardt was thankful (stanza 3).

Though the weight of trouble in Gerhardt’s life was great (stanza 2), it could not defeat him. It took his wife and children in death, and it took his position in Berlin, but Gerhardt knew that Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection from the dead had conquered death and won eternal victory for him, his family, and his church (stanzas 4 and 5).

Gerhardt is a model for all people in the Church today: for students, for pastors, for parents, for laborers, and for anyone who knows the crosses and trials that mortal life brings. His numerous hymn texts are certainly a treasure for us today. We are privileged to sing the words of Gerhardt’s faith, even with a life full of cross and trial.

It is said that all the hymns of Paul Gerhardt end in heaven.

His life would have given any reasonable person a desire to fly away: war, poverty, sickness, and death dogged his footsteps from childhood to old age. But he writes over and over again about peace and joy. Sadness banished, leaving joy that rings in the air and foretells joy on high that will vanish never. Paul Gerhardt's poetry has a constant theme of joy in the midst of suffering. He knew well sin and woe, death and hell. But he called them broken and toothless, declaring them no match for the power of God's Son. . . .

Four separate times in their lives Paul and [his wife] Anna Maria anticipated and welcomed a child and then stood heartbroken by a tiny grave. No wonder every Gerhardt hymn ends in heaven. By the end of their lives, it must have been the only place they wanted to be: standing as a new creation in a Baptism made whole by death. Joining their children and all the Christian family, clothed in glorious robes of righteousness. . . .

Even if we live lives calmer than Paul Gerhardt's, dreaded ills, cares, and sorrows are a part of every Christian life. To follow Jesus is to share in a cross. On the 100th anniversary of Gerhardt's death, the last church he served in Lübben, Germany hung his portrait inscribed with these words; Theologus in cribro Satanae tentatus. The translation is, "A theologian tested in Satan's sieve."

This testing brought forth marvelous writing that blesses many Christians. The magnificence of grace, the comfort of Christ's presence in our sufferings, and the solid hope of heaven roar out of Gerhardt's lines like a battle cry against the workings of Satan. That foe may have the power to test us, but no power on earth can stand against the love of Christ.

"He is your treasure, He your joy, your life and light and Lord, your counselor when doubts annoy, your shield and great reward." —Paul Gerhardt

<https://blog.cph.org/read/2016/10/philipp-nicolai-johann-heermann-paul-gerhardt>

Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me (LSB 756)

1 Why should cross and trial grieve me?

Christ is near

With His cheer;

Never will He leave me.

Who can rob me of the heaven

That God's Son

For me won

When His life was given?

2 When life's troubles rise to meet me,
Though their weight
May be great,
They will not defeat me.
God, my loving Savior, sends them;
He who knows
All my woes
Knows how best to end them.

3 God gives me my days of gladness,
And I will
Trust Him still
When He send me sadness.
God is good;
His love attends me
Day by day,
Come what may,
Guides me and defends me.

4 From God's joy can nothing sever,
For I am
His dear lamb,
He, my Shepherd ever
I am His
Because he gave me
His own blood
For my good,
By His death to save me.

5 Now in Christ, death cannot slay me,
Though it might,
Day and night,
Trouble and dismay me.
Christ has made my death a portal
From the strife
Of this life
To His joy immortal!

This hymn by Paul Gerhardt, originally in twelve stanzas, is a treasure of comfort. These words even comforted the author on his deathbed, for he spoke the final stanza used in the Lutheran Service Book as his dying prayer.

Many of Gerhardt's hymns present the theology of the cross as sung poetry, though he is not the first to articulate this theology. Martin Luther spoke of the theology of the cross in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. The place of trials (tentatio) in teaching the student of theology becomes a common theme in the Reformer's writings from then on. We learn from him that the more we abide in God's Word, the more the devil will afflict us. We can count on it. But such afflictions are good in that they cause us to seek and to love God's Word all the more. Then, in 1539, Luther even gave thanks for the "pummeling, pressing, and terrifying" of the papists toward him, for he said that they helped to make him a decent theologian.

The background of Gerhardt's hymn writing is a trial (tentatio) of a different kind; namely the ravages of the Thirty Years' War, being surrounded by death for most of his life, and being removed from his call as pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Berlin for remaining faithful to his ordination vows. While Luther was able to see a blessed road in the persecution he suffered at the hands of papists, Gerhardt was able to confidently say, "**Why should cross and trial grieve me?** Christ is near with His cheer; never will He leave me." As a result of Gerhardt's crosses, the saints have hymns to sing about that unique, beautiful, and blessed road even as they suffer crosses of all types.

This is a sung sermon in which the singer learns the difficult lessons of how our Lord chastens, refines, and builds up the ones He loves. Here the believers are catechized in the ways of their Father's kingdom. Gerhardt does this teaching by asking and answering five questions in his original twelve-stanza text:

1. "Why should cross and trial grieve me?" Answer: Since Christ is near with the promise that He will never leave me, I therefore have all I need, and there is no reason for me to grieve.
2. "Who can rob me of the heaven that God's Son won for me when He gave His life?" Answer: The answer is revealed in the question. Since heaven was won for me by the death of God's Son, no one can rob me of heaven.
3. "Though a heavy cross I'm bearing and my heart feels the smart, shall I be despairing?" Answer: No, we are not to despair or be defeated, for our loving God has sent the cross for our good. He knows every single woe also knows how best to end them. We are not left alone in our crosses and trials.
4. "God oft gives me days of gladness; shall I grieve if He give seasons, too, of sadness?" Answer: God defends and guides us day by day, moment by moment, as His love attends us. What more could we want or need?

5. “What is all this life possesses?” Answer: A hand full of sand that only causes distress. Instead, the saints of Christ have a life filled with noble gifts that will sustain them safely through this pilgrimage on to the next life.

These questions and their answers are more or less preserved in the five stanzas in the Lutheran Service Book. But the answers are not easy ones to hear or live, for they reveal the often puzzling ways of God’s kingdom. Yet they have to be answered again and again for the faithful, because the world’s answers to these questions lead only to despair. Worldly answers can do no other, because they are outside of God’s beautiful plan for His children.

Richard Resch

<https://www.oslcpagosa.org/pastors-blog/why-should-cross-and-trial-grieve-me>

Classic Hymns From A 17th-Century Pastor To Sing Through Plagues (Edited)

In the months to come, there are no better songs to sing than hymns that teach eternal truths. Spend some time with Paul Gerhardt’s poetry, and you’ll sing some of the best.

As the United States enters a period of widespread “lockdowns” in an effort to keep the coronavirus from spreading here as it has in other places, we have an opportunity to slow down, reflect, and regroup. What really matters? What doesn’t so much? Where do we find our comfort, and how can we support one another at this time?

In the hymns he wrote for the Christian church, 17th-century German theologian, pastor, and hymn writer Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) provides some answers. Gerhardt lived through plague, war, the deaths of his parents during his youth, the deaths of his wife and four of his five children, strife in the church, and lengthy periods of unemployment. Yet his hymns never falter in testifying to the hope and comfort found in Christ.

There are no better songs to sing than time-tested Christian hymns that teach eternal truths. Spend some time with Gerhardt’s poetry, and you’ll sing some of the best. Here are several of Gerhardt’s hymns worth learning and singing any time and especially fitting during this season of uncertainty...

“Entrust Your Days and Burdens,” based in part on Philippians 4 (“do not be anxious about anything”), calls on the faithful to let go of worry, knowing that God cares for all their needs: “Take heart, have hope, my spirit, And do not be dismayed; God helps in ev’ry trial And makes you unafraid. Await His time with

patience Through darkest hours of night Until the sun you hoped for Delights
your eager sight." **LSB 754**

1. Entrust your days and burdens
 To God's most loving hand;
 He cares for you while ruling
 The sky, the sea, the land.
For He who guides the tempests
 Along their thund'rous ways
 Will find for you a pathway
 And guide you all your days.

2. Rely on God your Savior
 And find your life secure.
 Make His work your foundation
 That your work may endure.
No anxious thought, no worry,
 No self-tormenting care
 Can win your Father's favor;
 His heart is moved by prayer.

3. Take heart, have hope, my spirit,
 And do not be dismayed;
 God helps in ev'ry trial
 And makes you unafraid.
Await His time with patience
 Through darkest hours of night
 Until the sun you hoped for
 Delights your eager sight.

4. Leave all to His direction;
 His wisdom rules for you
 In ways to rouse your wonder
 At all His love can do.
Soon He, His promise keeping,
 With wonder-working pow'rs
 Will banish from your spirit
 What gave you troubled hours.

Continued...

5. O bless-ed heir of heaven,
You'll hear the song resound
Of endless jubilation
When you with life are crowned.
In your right hand your maker
Will place the victor's palm,
And you will thank Him gladly
With heaven's joyful psalm.
6. Our hands and feet, Lord, strengthen
With joy our spirits bless
Until we see the ending
Of all our life's distress.
And so throughout our lifetime
Keep us within Your care
And at our end then bring us
To heav'n to praise You there.

“If God Himself Be for Me” draws on Romans 8:31-39, defiantly daring Satan to try, just try, to harm anyone who has been claimed by Christ: “If God Himself be for me, I may a host defy; For when I pray, before me My foes, confounded, fly. If Christ, the head and master, Befriend me from above, What foe or what disaster Can drive me from His love?” ***LSB 724***

1 If God Himself be for me,
I may a host defy;
For when I pray, before me
My foes, confounded, fly.
If Christ, the head and master,
Befriend me from above,
What foe or what disaster
Can drive me from His love?

2 I build on this foundation,
That Jesus and his blood
Alone are my salvation,
My true, eternal good.
Without Him all that pleases
Is valueless on earth;
The gifts I have from Jesus
Alone have priceless worth.

3 Christ Jesus is my splendor,
My sun, my light, alone;
Were He not my defender
Before God's judgment throne,
I never should find favor
And mercy in His sight
But be destroyed forever
As darkness by the light.

4 He canceled my offenses,
Delivered me from death;
He is the Lord who cleanses
My soul from sin through faith.
In Him I can be cheerful,
Courageous on my way;
In Him I am not fearful
Of God's great Judgment Day.

5 For no one can condemn me
Or set my hope aside;
Now hell no more can claim me;
Its fury I deride.
No sentence now reproves me,
No guilt destroys my peace;
For Christ, my Savior, loves me
And shields me with His grace.

6 No danger, thirst, or hunger,
No pain or poverty,
No earthly tyrant's anger
Shall ever vanquish me.
Though earth should break asunder,
My fortress You shall be;
No fire or sword or thunder
Shall sever You from me.

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<https://thefederalist.com/2020/03/23/10-classic-hymns-from-a-17th-century-pastor-to-sing-through-plagues/>