



How Lovely Shines the Morning Star

Text: Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608)

Tune: Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608)

Philipp Nicolai is honored to be the author and composer of both the “King of Chorales” (“Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying”) and the “Queen of Chorales,” which is today’s hymn, “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star.” This is an excellent hymn which teaches the love of Christ, and especially of our salvation in Him.



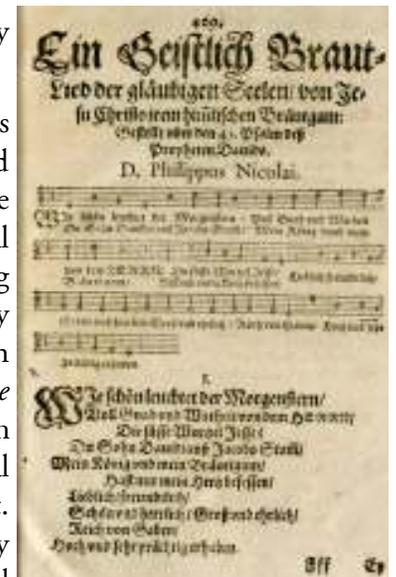
Philipp Nicolai

Philipp Nicolai was born to a Lutheran Pastor in 1556 in the town of Mengershausen. He studied at both the Universities of Erfurt and Wittenberg, receiving his Doctor of Divinity from Wittenberg in 1594. He was Ordained in 1583 and served initially in Herdecke. He later became the Court Preacher for Countess Margareta of Waldeck. While in Waldeck he took part in the Sacramentarian controversy, upholding the Scriptural teaching of the presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in the Sacrament, a topic which is a major focus of “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star.” By 1596 he had received a Call to Unna in Westphalia. During his time in Westphalia, the town was struck by two devastating events. The invasion of the Spaniards took many lives, and then the Black Death plague struck the town. In one of the worst years, Nicolai buried in excess of 500 members, several of whom were his own family members. In that year, it was not uncommon to have almost 30 burials a day.

In the midst of this great devastation, Nicolai wrote his *Freuden-Spiegel*, “Mirror of Joy.” This was his collection of spiritual songs and other compositions which spoke of Christ’s great love for us, which was a source of joy and inspiration in the midst of the death

and sadness which constantly surrounded him.

Nicolai wrote “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star” in 1597 and published it in 1599. When he wrote it, he entitled it: “A spiritual bridal song of the believing soul concerning Jesus Christ, her heavenly Bridegroom, founded on the 45th Psalm of the Prophet David.” *The Lutheran Hymnal* includes this hymn in the “Redeemer” section of the hymnal because of its great imagery of Christ. However, in this we see the difficulty of hymn translation. Nicolai used several descriptions of Christ that are very hard to translate adequately into English. While *The Lutheran*



“How Lovely Shines the Morning Star” in its first publication in 1599.

Hymnal’s translation is wonderful, it had to soften many of the German phrases that are so beautiful for English phrases that would fit the meter and rhyme scheme. One example is the word *wunderschön*, which is best translated as “wonderfully beautiful” (a very awkward phrase), which the translators translated as simply “lovely.”

The hymn’s tune has been used in countless compositions since its writing. J.S. Bach was obviously a tremendous admirer of the hymn and its tune, since it appears either wholly or in part in Cantatas 1, 36, 37, 61, and 172. All the great church composers, such as Bach and Buxtehude, to 20th century composers such as Hugo Distler and Ernst Pepping have written different settings of this hymn and its tune.

Nicolai has captured the faith splendidly in this hymn as he shows Christ’s love for His Bride, the Church. Constantly he makes obvious and hidden allusions to the Lord’s Supper, which is Christ’s way of feeding and preserving all of us. Ultimately our greatest joy is in Christ, the First and Last, who will transport us to His happy home where we will be in greatest joy eternally. Until that day, we, with deep yearning, look for His returning.