



My Soul, Now Bless Thy Maker

Text: Johann Gramann (1487-1541)

Tune: Hans Kugelmann (c. 1495-1542)

As Luther and others began to write the hymnody that shaped the Reformation and continues to teach the Church to this day, they often turned to the Psalms, God's first hymnal for the Church, for their textual inspiration. We know Luther's hymn on Psalm 46 by heart: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." "My Soul, Now Bless Thy Maker" is Johann Gramann's setting of Psalm 103. The beauty of these Reformation Psalm hymns is that they are not merely a metric version of the Psalms (as came about from the Reformed tradition), but a theological expansion, designed to teach what the text *means*, not just what it *says*. For this reason, the best hymns are always the ones that teach the faith.

Johann Gramann was born in Neustadt on July 5, 1487. Little is known of his childhood. He graduated from the University of Leipzig with his Masters (1516) and Bachelor of Divinity (1520) degrees. After he earned his divinity degree he was appointed Rector of Leipzig's St. Thomas School (where J.S. Bach would later spend the greatest part of his career as Kantor). The year before, in 1519, Gramann went to the Leipzig Debate, the disputation between Johann Eck, Martin Luther, and Andreas Karlstadt. The way he went to the dispute and left were far different. Gramann was appointed to be the amanuensis (one who writes the manuscript of debate dialogue) for Eck, the Roman Catholic debater. However, after hearing the debate and carefully analyzing the debate's manuscript, he became a supporter of the Reformation because only Luther was able to defend his positions with Scripture, while Eck simply tried to trick Luther and Karlstadt with clever wording. After his conversion, his relations were strained with Leipzig's duke, George of Saxony, so Gramann went to Wittenberg to help Luther

and Philipp Melanchthon with the Reformation. In 1523 he was appointed preacher in Würtzburg, but was moved to Nürnberg at the outbreak of the Peasants' War in 1525, and became the head of St. Clara's Convent there. Luther soon wrote to the Margrave (military governor of a German border province), Albrecht of Brandenburg, and encouraged him to call Gramann to assist with the Reformation there. He went, and was made pastor of the Altstadt Church in Königsberg in October 1525. While there, he spent much time in debate with the Anabaptists, a sect which baptized infants, but re-baptized them in adulthood, when they could rightly make their decision to be saved. He also fought the Schwenckfeldians (named after Caspar Schwenckfeld), who taught that the Holy Spirit was given apart from the Word of God and Holy Baptism. To help combat these heresies, Gramann was influential in establishing Lutheran schools for the youth of Königsberg. He died there on April 29, 1541.

When Gramann wrote "My Soul, Now Bless Thy Maker," he wrote it at the request of the Margrave of Brandenburg. At some point, a fifth stanza was added, but it was not written by Gramann, and has never been included in an English translation. This hymn was sung on October 25, 1648 at the close of the Thirty Years' War. W.G. Pollack, author of *A Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* says of this hymn, "It is without question one of our most majestic and fervent hymns of praise, one that should be in the repertory of every Lutheran congregation."

This is one of our best hymns of praise because it is not merely empty praise, praising God for being God. Rather, it gives Him praise and thanksgiving for His merciful actions towards us. In stanza one we sing of His forgiveness for all our sins and His restoration of our spiritual life. This shows itself in His forbearance, when He does not treat us as we merit, "but lays His anger by" (st. 2). All of this flows from His Fatherly love for us. He knows that we are frail and will pass from this earth, but showers us with His compassion (st. 3). This grace endures to all generations, and our children's children will prove this as they also receive the same love and care we have. Though He possesses all power in heaven on earth, He will never turn away from us. "My soul, oh, bless the Lord!"