



Now Let Us Come Before Him

Text: Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676)

Tune: Antonio Scandello (1517-1580)

This life is full of trials and crosses. The New Year is especially a time when we pray for God's protection. However, when New Year's hymns pray for God's protection in trials, they make fitting hymns for any time of the year. Paul Gerhardt's hymns are especially fitting for times when we seek God's help and blessing.



Paul Gerhardt

Paul Gerhardt was born March 12, 1607 near Wittenberg. In 1628 he began his studies at the University of Wittenberg, where he remained for 14 years. At the end of 1642 he went to Berlin where he served for many years as tutor in the house of Andreas Barthold. During this time, he was able to meet his wife, Anna Maria, one of Andreas's daughters. He also preached frequently during these years. In 1651 he was appointed chief pastor at Mittenwalde, near Berlin. However, he returned to Berlin in 1657 to serve as one of the pastors at St. Nicholas Church. He served there until February 1666 when he was removed from office by Elector Friedrich Wilhelm, who was strongly opposed to the Lutheran clergy. He spent three years there without a position. By June 1669 he was installed as archdeacon in Lübben. He served there until his death on June 7, 1676.

Tribulation is the best way to describe Gerhardt's life. Most of his life was spent in depression. His early life was spent in the horrors of the Thirty Year's War. Because of this, and the strong opposition which the Lutherans met in these years, Gerhardt did not have a settled and stable location to serve as pastor until he was 44 years old. He was not able to get married until age 48, and his wife died while they were in Berlin and had been removed from office.

The couple did have five children, but four of them died in early childhood. The only period of his life where there was any real happiness was when he was in Berlin (1657-1663). During these years he was respected and was able to serve well. Conversely, the darkest period of his life was the years leading to his death, while serving in Lübben. He was a widower with one child, a six year old son, but the people were not at all sympathetic and treated him and his son poorly. For the trials he endured, Gerhardt is remembered as *theologus in cribro Satanae versatus*, the theologian tested in Satan's sieve.

Next to Luther, Gerhardt is remembered as one of the greatest hymnwriters in the Lutheran Church. Gerhardt's hymns focus on the love of God, especially His loving protection in trials. Gerhardt's hymns come from a time of transition from the objective hymnody of Luther and his contemporaries (focused on what God has done for mankind) to a subjective hymnody (my thanksgiving to God for what He has done for me). Though this subjective type of hymn went quickly into an entirely man-centered hymnody, Gerhardt was careful to make sure God was still the primary actor. His hymns were instantly taken in by the Lutherans and other denominations. In Germany, his hymns are still some of the most popular today. However, his hymns were largely lost to English speakers because of their length (it was not uncommon for his hymns to be 10-15 stanzas). Thankfully many of his hymns are being translated again today to restore this treasure to the Church.

"Now Let Us Come Before Him" was a hymn Gerhardt wrote for New Years 1653. He originally wrote it in 15 stanzas, though *The Lutheran Hymnal* omitted three, which focused on God's help in times of war (the hymn was written in the shadow of the Thirty Years' War). In this hymn, we praise God for the strength and protection He has given us. Stanzas 7-11 focus on God's protection in afflictions. Stanzas 2-6 look more at the rolling years and the crosses they have brought and will bring in the years ahead. Despite all of these things, we ask for God's joy and gladness, the joy only He can give. This joy comes by His Holy Spirit who guides us to our heavenly inheritance. Thanks be to God for this lovingkindness this year and in the years to come!