



O God, Thou Faithful God

Text: Johann Heermann (1585-1647)

Tune: Johann Balthasar König (1691-1758)

In the second half of the Church Year, a common focus is that of the Christian life. In these times, we consider how we live together in this life. As we do so, we realize that we do not always live in the way God would have us live. In those times, prayer is especially beneficial. Our hymns can often serve as prayers, and “O God, Thou Faithful God,” is certainly a fine prayer we can pray for the grace to live as Christians in this life.



Johann Heermann

Johann Heermann was born to a furrier in Silesia on October 11, 1585. He was the fifth—but only surviving—child of his parents. However, early in his childhood he fell gravely ill. His mother vowed that if God healed her only son, she would educate him for the Pastoral Office. She kept her vow, but had to beg to collect the money for his education. He quickly passed through the levels in the educational system, but his ailments followed him. By 1610 his sight was so poor that he had to have full-time care. In 1611 he was made Deacon of Koben, a small town not far from his childhood home. He assumed the post on Ascension Day 1611. By St. Martin’s Day (November 11), he was promoted to the Pastorate there. However, by 1623 his health problems were mounting. By 1634 he could no longer preach because he no longer had a voice. He retired in October 1638, moving to Posen, where he died on February 17, 1647.

Much of Heermann’s life was spent in the distressing time of the Thirty Years’ War. That in addition to his own poor health and personal struggles caused him to write his greatest hymns of

comfort. In addition to his own struggles, his town was greatly afflicted as it was destroyed by fire in 1616 and most of its residents were killed by illnesses in 1623. In the midst of this, he published *House and Heart Music*, which contained some of his greatest hymns in the section entitled “Songs of Tears. In the time of the persecution and distress of pious Christians.” As a hymnwriter, he is second only to Paul Gerhardt, who was one of Heermann’s contemporaries. His hymns are marked by tenderness of feeling, firm faith and confidence in the face of trial, deep love of Christ, and humble submission to the will of God.

When Heermann wrote this hymn, he entitled it “A Daily Prayer.” One hymnology dictionary says of “O God, Thou Faithful God,” “It is one of the poet’s most widely used and signally blessed hymns and has not been unjustly called his ‘Master Song.’ If it is somewhat ‘home-baked,’ yet it is excellent, nourishing bread. It gives a training in practical Christianity and specially strikes three notes—godly living, patient suffering, and a happy dying.”

A better structure for this hymn could not be given. In stanza one, we ask for a healthy body and conscience. And these gifts of God help us to live out our Christian vocations, of which we sing in stanza two. These vocations, our calling in this life, are those things which God has given us, talents to do tasks which help our fellow Christians. As we live together, there are times when it is tempting to speak inappropriately of our neighbor. In stanza three we pray for the ability to only speak well of our neighbor, and to spare them from offense in the times when we must speak.

The fourth stanza marks the transition to the “patient suffering” portion of the hymn. Stanza four sings of enduring spiritual afflictions as we bear our crosses, while stanza five addresses the responsibility of living respectfully with others and using our treasures wisely. Finally, stanza six prays for good health as we live out our days.

The last two stanzas focus on the life everlasting. We ask for a blessed death in stanza seven as our bodies are committed to rest in a Christian grave. But that rest ends when God raises us and all the dead and gives us perfected bodies. Thus restored to the “very good” of Creation, we spend eternity “with those who love [God’s] Name.”