



When in the Hour of Utmost Need

Text: Paul Eber (1511-1569)

Tune: Louis Bourgeois (1510-1561)

Life in this world contains constant trials and uncertainties. In these trials, there are times when we feel that there is no place for us to turn. In those times, we know we have a Savior and an Advocate, Jesus Christ, to whom we can turn for pardon from sin, rest from trials, and the comfort of an eternity in the paradise He has created for us.



Paul Eber

The hymn, “When in the Hour of Utmost Need” was written by Paul Eber. Eber was born November 8, 1511, the son of a poor tailor. He was always a small, sickly child and because of his illnesses found books his constant companion. His father, made every sacrifice to be able to send Paul to a good grammar school, often saving money by only feeding his wife and son. Because of these sacrifices, Paul attended the grammar school in Nürnberg, and in 1523 left home to attend the Gymnasium in Ansbach. However, his illness forced him to return home. While on his return journey home he was thrown from the horse he was riding and was dragged for more than a mile. The injuries he sustained in this accident stayed with him the rest of his life.

By 1525 he was able to return to Nürnberg, this time attending the St. Lorenz school. In 1532, Paul was honored with a trip to Wittenberg to learn from Martin Luther. Luther was taken by Eber’s thoughtfulness and kind manners, and he was invited by Luther to meet Philipp Melanchthon. Melanchthon was also taken by the young man, especially his fine handwriting. Melanchthon was known for his poor penmanship and soon took in Eber to be his personal scribe.

After Eber graduated from Wittenberg in 1536, he became a tutor for the philosophy faculty at the University. He worked in that position until 1544 when he was appointed professor of Latin, a position later expanded to include physics and Old Testament. By 1557 his teaching load was again expanded when he began teaching Hebrew.

Eber was so engrossed in his work that he often neglected his personal life. To remedy this, Melanchthon chose a wife for Eber, whom he gladly married and lived happily with her for many years. However, one winter as he was journeying home from defending the Faith, he was caught in cold weather and fell very ill. His wife unexpectedly died after his return home, and that sorrow eventually became too great to bear, and he died December 10, 1569.

The writing of “When in the Hour of Utmost Need” is uncertain. Eduard Koch, in his writing on German hymnals, records, “On Ascension Day 1547, after the battle of Mühlberg, the Wittenbergers, having received a message from the captive Elector to deliver their city to the Emperor Charles V, assembled for prayer in church.” He then cites the prayer prayed by Johannes Bugenhagen, which greatly resembles Eber’s hymn. However, there is no proof that the hymn had yet been written. Another anecdotal citation of this hymn comes from Christian Heinrich Sixt, the biographer of Paul Eber. He records that on March 30, 1552, three musicians in Neustadt-Brandenburg fell from the church balcony, but did not sustain any injuries from their fall. The hymn they had just finished playing was “When in the Hour of Utmost Need.”

Eber based this hymn on the words of King Jehosaphat in 2 Chronicles 20:12, “O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You.” As the Moabites and the Ammonites advanced on Israel and all hope seemed lost, the people looked to God as their only defense. As all Israel sang together “Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever” (Ps. 106:1), the Lord defeated all of the opposing forces. Just as He did for Israel, He did for you when, at Jesus’ Crucifixion, sin, death, and the devil were defeated. For this tender mercy and loving-kindness, we “now and ever praise Thee, Lord!”