



SING SONGS OF HOPE

The Life & Hymns
of Paul Gerhardt



Session 1

Introduction

After the past year and a half – filled with a global pandemic, social unrest, political polarization, and personal challenges – do people really feel like singing songs of hope? Brainstorm reasons or factors on both sides of this question.

Historical Background: Early Life & Education¹

Paul Gerhardt is widely known as the most gifted and popular Lutheran hymnwriter. In Catherine Winkworth's words, who translated scores of his hymns into English, "As a poet he undoubtedly holds the highest place among the hymn-writers of Germany." His poems and hymns have impacted German literary culture at large, even beyond the Christian church. He wrote about 125 hymns total, and our current *Christian Worship* hymnal includes seventeen of them – the most of any Lutheran writer with the exception of Luther himself. He was born on March 12, 1607, in Gräfenhainichen, a village of about a thousand inhabitants just south of Wittenberg, in a forested area of Germany. He probably was baptized the following day at St. Mary's church in town. His father Christian was mayor of the town and died when Paul was twelve years old. His mother Dorothea was a Lutheran pastor's daughter and also died when Paul was fourteen years old. Her father, Caspar Starke, was a superintendent responsible for Lutheran churches in his area and lost his position in religious persecution by the Elector of Saxony. Paul had three brothers and sisters, but we do not know much about them, other than his older brother Christian continued his father's farm and guesthouse. He spent the first fifteen years of his life in his hometown, where he received a basic education in Latin, music, and the Christian faith. He then attended the Elector of Saxony's school in Grimma (a German *Gymnasium*, a university preparatory school), a former monastery. This elite school was well-known for training future Lutheran pastors, and its goal was to instill in its students "the fear of God and good morals." (Katherine von Bora, Luther's wife, incidentally, lived as a nun in a cloister nearby.) Here Gerhardt received training in the classical languages, philosophy, theology, and music, and he was an average student. From 1628 – 1634 he studied at the University of Wittenberg, the center of the Lutheran Reformation and the place where Luther taught a century prior. There he was influenced by the major theologians and preachers of the time who were well known to be firm defenders of Lutheranism. His studies at Wittenberg equipped him to be a pastor later in life and to hold firmly to the Lutheran confessions in the Book of Concord. As we will see, his path to ministry was difficult, and the tragedies he experienced early in life will only worsen.

¹ Summarized from C.T. Aufdemberge, *Christian Worship: Handbook* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 716-717; Gaylin Schmeling, "Paul Gerhardt: Pastor and Theologian," 2007 Bethany Reformation Lectures, 2-6.

Hymn: “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You” (CW 18)

This Advent hymn was originally ten stanzas and was first published in 1653. Five stanzas are included in our hymnal.

*1 O Lord, how shall I meet you, How welcome you aright?
Your people long to greet you, My Hope, my heart's Delight.
O Jesus, let your Word be A lamp to light my way,
To show me how to please you, To guide me ev'ry day.*

*2 Love caused your incarnation; Love brought you down to me.
Your thirst for my salvation Procured my liberty.
Oh, love beyond all telling That led you to embrace
In love, all love excelling, Our lost and fallen race!*

*3 Rejoice, then, you sad-hearted, Who sit in deepest gloom,
Who mourn o'er joys departed And tremble at your doom.
Despair not; he is near you, He's standing at the door
Who best can help and cheer you And bids you weep no more.*

*4 Sin's debt, that fearful burden, Let not your souls distress;
Your guilt the Lord will pardon And cover by his grace.
He comes, for you procuring The peace of sin forgiv'n,
His children thus securing A heritage in heav'n.*

*5 He comes to judge the nations, A terror to his foes,
A light of consolations, And blessed hope to those
Who love the Lord's appearing. O glorious Sun, now come,
Send forth your beams most cheering, And guide us safely home.*

Advent is a time of the church year that focuses on Jesus' coming. List the various comings of Jesus Gerhardt highlights in his hymn.

In what ways is Gerhardt's early life reflected in this hymn?

Bible References

Luke 12:35-40, John 3:16-18, Titus 2:11-14

Stanzas 1 and 3 employ the biblical picture of welcoming Jesus knocking at the door. Compare and contrast ways we greet our friends and ways we greet Jesus – especially around the holidays.

Stanzas 2 and 4 describe the Father's love in sending Jesus to the world. Evaluate: "What makes God's love so big is that he sent his Son to save such a big world."

Stanza 5 notes how Jesus' final coming will be a coming of both judgment for unbelievers and salvation for believers. What are some reasons why it is appropriate to look forward to the former as well as the latter?

Conclusion: Listen to the Hymn

In what ways do you receive hope for your life from the words or music of this hymn by Paul Gerhardt?