



SING SONGS OF HOPE

The Life & Hymns
of Paul Gerhardt



Session 2

Introduction

If you had no family and friends to celebrate the holidays with, what would your Christmas be like?

Historical Background: Tutor in Berlin & Partnership with Johann Crüger¹

After Paul Gerhardt studied theology at the University of Wittenberg from 1628-1634, he apparently remained in Wittenberg until 1642. We do not know the exact reason, but it appears that he was simply waiting for an assignment into the ministry. None came. In 1642, he left Wittenberg, traveled to Berlin, and worked as a tutor in the house of Andreas Barthold, an attorney. He supplemented his income by writing occasional hymns or poems, and he also occasionally filled in as a substitute pastor. A tutor was a rather common – though not necessarily ideal – occupation for those trained in ministry when they were unable to serve in a congregation or university. The system stemmed from the medieval period. A tutor would live with rather affluent families and be responsible for assisting in the education of the family's children in a role somewhat like a teacher/chaplain. Paul eventually did marry Barthold's daughter, Ann Maria, in 1655, at the age of 48. Here in Berlin Paul Gerhardt first met Johann Crüger. This began a long musical partnership and friendship, and eventually they would become coworkers. Johann Crüger lived from 1598-1662 and was educated at a number of schools in Brandenburg-Prussia and then at a school of poetry in Regensburg, where he studied under Paulus Homberger, who studied under Giovanni Gabrieli, a famous organist and composer from St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Italy. After a period of travels around Europe, he became a tutor in Berlin in the family of Colonel Christoph von Blumenthal, who was the captain of the guard of the Elector of Brandenburg. He then studied theology and music at the University of Wittenberg. Beginning in 1622, he started a forty-year career as cantor and organist at the St. Nikolaus Church in Berlin. In his day, Crüger was known as a respected cantor, composer, and author on the theory and practice of music. He was responsible for at least 122 chorale tunes, 21 of which were set to texts by Paul Gerhardt. He was thus the most significant composer for Lutheran church music in the 17th century. One of his most famous collections of hymns was known as *Praxis Pietatis Melica* ("The Exercise of Musical Piety"), which was first published around 1640 but in the next century appeared in 45 editions in Berlin alone. This brought Gerhardt's hymns into wide usage. Without Crüger, Gerhardt would not be as famous as he is.

¹ Summarized from C.T. Aufdemberge, *Christian Worship: Handbook* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 677, 716-717; Gaylin Schmeling, "Paul Gerhardt: Pastor and Theologian," 2007 Bethany Reformation Lectures, 8.

Hymn: “O Jesus Christ, Your Manger Is” (CW 40)

This Christmas hymn was originally fifteen stanzas and was first published in 1653 with the title “At the Manger in Bethlehem.” Five stanzas are included in our hymnal.

*1 O Jesus Christ, Your manger is
My paradise where my soul is reclining.
For there, O Lord, We find the Word
Made flesh for us—your grace is brightly shining.*

*2 He whom the sea And wind obey
Comes down to serve the sinner in great meekness.
Now God’s own Son With us is one
And joins us and our children in our weakness.*

*3 Dear Christian friend, On him depend;
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move you.
For God’s own child In mercy mild
Joins you to him—how greatly God must love you!*

*4 Ponder again What glory then
The Lord will give you for your earthly sadness.
The angel host Can never boast
Of greater glory, greater bliss or gladness.*

*5 The world may hold Her wealth and gold;
But you, my heart, keep Christ as your true treasure.
To him hold fast Until at last
A crown is yours and honor in full measure.*

Christmas celebrates the incarnation of Jesus Christ. From Gerhardt’s words, define and explain what the incarnation is.

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

Bible References

John 1:1-5, 14; Mark 4:35-41 / Hebrews 4:15; Hebrews 1:5-9

Historians debate exactly the setting of Jesus’ birth – a cave, a stable, or essentially a “garage” or “courtyard” – but a manger was obviously fit for animals, not humans. Given that stark reality, how can Gerhardt call it “my paradise where my soul is reclining?”

Gerhardt alludes to what seem to be a contradiction in stanza 2: one who can calm the storm, and one who is joined to human weakness. Resolve that seeming contradiction within the doctrine of the person of Christ.

Gerhardt is Luther-esque in stanza 4. In Luther's sermons, he would often say that we have higher honor than all the angels, because Christ took on a human – not angelic – nature. Read Luther's quote below. Agree/disagree: "My life is better than the life of the angels in heaven."

"In this manner Christ takes to himself our birth and absorbs it in his birth; he presents us with his birth so that we become pure and new in it, as if it were our own, so that every Christian might rejoice in this birth of Christ and glory in it no less than if he, too, like Christ, had been born bodily of Mary. ... This is the great joy, of which the angel speaks, this is the consolation and the superabundant goodness of God, that man (if he has this faith) may boast of such treasure as that Mary is his real mother, Christ his brother, and God his father." (LW 52:15, "The Gospel for Christmas Eve, Luke 2)

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?