



Giving Thanks in Difficult Times

One of the most famous Thanksgiving hymns includes these words:

*Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices;
Who, from our mothers' arms
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.*

As you sing these words, you might imagine the author sitting in his favorite recliner after a delicious Thanksgiving dinner. As the turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pie settle, he begins to rejoice in God's "countless gifts of love." That would be nice, but "Now Thank We All Our God" was not composed in a Norman Rockwell setting.

Instead of a bountiful Thanksgiving dinner, think of a famine that has caused such widespread starvation that city residents fight over the carcasses of dead cats. Instead of a family gathered around the dinner table, think of a pastor weeping after burying his wife, the victim of a plague.

Martin Rinkart was a pastor in the city of Eilenberg, Germany during the Thirty Years' War in the early 17th century. Because this walled city attracted so many refugees from the war, it was soon terribly overcrowded. Cramped conditions, coupled with famine, led to widespread starvation and disease. Of the four pastors in the city, two had died, and the third had fled the city. Martin Rinkart, the only pastor left in the town, held as many as fifty funerals in one day.

One evening after conducting funerals all day, Rinkart felt he could go no further. Through his tears, he wrote the words of this hymn that teaches us to praise God even when life seems hopeless.

*O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace,
And guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills,
In this world and the next!*

It is one thing to thank God when we are enjoying good health, a joyful family, and a great job. But Martin Rinkart reminds us that God is good – even when we are perplexed and surrounded by trouble. It is difficult to thank God through tears, but Joseph, Job, Paul and Silas, and a host of others in Scripture show us that even in the most difficult days, we can trust the good heart of a God who loves us more than we can imagine.

Rinkart's hymn doesn't teach a glib, "Everything will be fine; it isn't as bad as it looks." No! He gives a much more profound truth: "Even when everything is *not* fine, we can trust the heart of our loving heavenly Father." During this Thanksgiving season, let us thank Him with heart and hands and voices.