

NOW THANK WE ALL OUR GOD

The Story Behind the Hymn

In one of the messages that Chris posted recently on the new SBF YouTube Channel (“Some thoughts: Are we prepared or panicked”), he quoted Philippians 4:4-6 – “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*” We may not be thankful for our circumstances but we are encouraged to be thankful *in* our circumstances. A similar message is found in 1 Thes 5:18: “*give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*”

These verses reminded me of a hymn called “Now Thank We All Our God” which is often sung at Thanksgiving, but it is appropriate throughout the year. The lyrics are as follows:

*Now thank we all our God
With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom this world rejoices.
Who, from our mother’s arms,
Hath led us on our way,
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us,
to keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
of this world in the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son and Spirit blest,
who reign in highest heaven
the one eternal God,
whom heaven and earth adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.*

It is such a joyful, uplifting hymn and I sang the words at our previous church, probably dozens of times, in the context of our privileged life in modern day Canada. It was quite a revelation when I first heard about the writer, Martin Rinkart, and what led him to write these words:

Martin Rinkart was born to a poor coppersmith on April 23, 1586 in Eilenburg, Germany, and he was determined to be a minister. He managed to scrape up enough money to put himself through the University of Leipzig, where he studied theology. After years of hard work, Rinkart was asked to return to his hometown as a Lutheran clergyman, where he soon became an archdeacon. One year later, ignited by a religious conflict-turned-political feud, the Thirty Years’ War exploded across Europe. A walled city, Eilenburg quickly became a place of refuge for thousands of frightened and displaced Germans fleeing the devastating conflict. The sudden overcrowding caused widespread food shortages, and starving residents soon began fighting in the streets for dead cats and birds.

On top of the famine, densely-packed humanity and filth soon led to an outbreak of plague. Rinkart and the three other town pastors began officiating ten or more funerals a day -- each. One overwhelmed pastor eventually fled and two others died, leaving Rinkart the sole minister in the desperate and overpopulated city.

Alone, Rinkart was tasked with burying up to 50 people a day, including his own wife. By the end of the ordeal, he'd conducted nearly 4,500 funerals. The dead eventually became so numerous they had to be buried in mass trenches without services.

In the face of overwhelming pressure, constant risk and horrendous conditions, Rinkart never stopped ministering to the people of his city. He gave away nearly everything he owned to the poor and needy, though he could barely clothe and feed his own children. He mortgaged his own future income to provide for his family and his community.

At one point toward the end of the war, the Swedish army surrounded the city and demanded an enormous ransom from the impoverished and starving citizens. Knowing his people didn't have the money, Rinkart pleaded with the Swedes to lower the amount, only to be rejected. It's reported that Rinkart returned to the city, fell on his knees and said, "Come, my children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God." He then began to pray so fervently that the Swedish general was moved to lower his price to less than five percent of the original sum.

After nearly thirty years of ceaseless struggles, it began to look like peace was within grasp. Wanting to give his children a song to sing to God in thanks at the dinner table, Rinkart sat down and composed what would become one of the most well-known Thanksgiving hymns of all time -- "Now Thank We All Our God." In fact, it's been said that aside from Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," no other song is sung more often in Lutheran churches today than Rinkart's simple tune.

Tired and worn, Rinkart died in 1649, only a year after the war's end, leaving behind some of the simplest and sincere lyrics still being sung by choirs and congregations across the world. ¹

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound effect on countries around the world. People are facing unprecedented challenges – career, financial, health, social isolation, fear, and many others. We can take comfort in knowing that God sustained Martin Rinkart and his family through these unimaginable horrors in the 17th century and he will sustain us in 2020 and all the years to follow. We can rest in his unfailing goodness to us and find so many things to be thankful for.

I would like to close with this passage:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. (Habakkuk 3: 17-19)

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a sovereign and merciful God and you will never leave us or forsake us. While the world around us is gripped with fear and anxiety, we can place our absolute trust in you and experience the peace which passes all understanding. Help us to share that peace with those around us who don't know you. We commit ourselves to you and trust you for what each day may bring. Amen

Submitted by: Derek Rand

¹ Source: <https://www.mrctv.org/blog/amazing-story-behind-one-our-greatest-thanksgiving-hymns>