

# HYMN INTERPRETATION

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## “With Grateful Heart I Thank You, Lord”

We live in a world of entitlement where saying “Thank you!” is becoming less and less a part of our culture. We send gifts and never hear that they were received. We do small kindnesses for others and they go unacknowledged. Instead of being a thankful people it seems that we are more often than not a disgruntled people, a dissatisfied people, a greedy people who feel that no matter how much we have we deserve to have more.

When I yearn for a quiet “Thank You” from someone, I find myself imagining that maybe God yearns too. Every day we receive countless good gifts from a generous God and often we are just too busy or too inattentive to notice or to give thanks. The Bible, however, encourages us to practice a different way of being, to live as thankful people and to be mindful of and grateful for our blessings.

Enter into his gates with thanksgiving  
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.<sup>1</sup>

Does our worship today truly reflect an attitude of thanksgiving? Do our prayers, liturgies and hymns provide adequate opportunity for us to express our thanks in a variety of ways? And finally, are we fully present when we worship so that our words of gratitude are truly from the heart?

The hymnal our congregation uses, *Worship and Rejoice*, includes 749 hymns and songs and forty-four of those titles fall under the topical heading of “Thanksgiving and Gratitude.” The titles in that topical listing run the gamut from ancient hymns of thankfulness, i.e., “Now Thank We All Our God,” to contemporary praise songs like “Sanctuary” and everything in between. Some of the texts employ broad terms such as “blessing” or “mercies” which can easily encompass all the good things for which we might be thankful. Other texts in this group of hymns are more specific such as Brian Wren’s “Thank You, God, for Water, Soil and Air,” which centers on the properties of earth and in which each verse

includes a prayer for forgiveness for our careless use and abuse of these gifts. Ruth Duck’s lovely hymn, “Colorful Creator,” is another text that offers specific thanks to God for the gifts of artists, composers and writers. My new hymn, “With Grateful Heart I Thank You, Lord” is in the list of hymns of “Thanksgiving and Gratitude” found in *Worship and Rejoice*. I am hopeful that in the future it might find its way into other hymnals as well.

### With Grateful Heart I Thank You, Lord

I thank you, Lord, for each new day,  
for meadows white with dew,  
for the sun’s warm hand upon the earth,  
for skies of endless blue,  
for fruit and flower, for lamb and leaf,  
for every bird that sings.  
With grateful heart I thank you, Lord,  
for all these simple things.

I thank you, Lord, for wind and rain  
and for the silver moon,  
for every daisy’s lifted face,  
for every lovely tune,  
for winter’s white, for autumn’s gold,  
for harvest and for home.  
With grateful heart I thank you, Lord,  
for each good gift I own.

I thank you, Lord, for hand and heart  
to offer up your praise.  
I thank you, Lord, for tongue to speak  
of all your loving ways,  
for health and strength, for work and play  
for loved ones far and near.  
With grateful heart I thank you, Lord,  
for all that I hold dear.<sup>2</sup>

MKB 1991

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This hymn was born in 1990 as the text for a Thanksgiving anthem of the same title. When the text was completed, I wrote an original tune and piano accompaniment and the completed work was published by Hope Publishing Company in 1991. I had not thought of the anthem as a hymn but when I was approached with the idea, I was happy to give my creation a secondary kind of life. While it is a much more common practice for a hymn to find new life as an anthem rather than the other way around, I know

there are other anthems that have found their way into hymnals such as Natalie Sleeth's popular songs, "Were You There on That Christmas Night?" and "Joy in the Morning." Both of those hymns began as anthems.

The rhyme pattern of "With Grateful Heart, I Thank You, Lord," lent itself easily to the structure of a hymn and, with one minor exception in line 3, the metrical pattern is CMD, making it possible for the words to be sung to a more familiar tune in that meter. Because of my firm belief in the intrinsic power of hymnody that is stored in the memory bank of Christians, I decided to undergird the anthem with some of my favorite traditional hymns of thanksgiving. So in the accompaniment for the original piece the listener hears phrases from "Come, Ye Thankful People Come," "'Tis a Gift to Be Simple," and "This Is My Father's World."<sup>3</sup> By weaving these well-loved themes into the accompaniment, I hoped to add subliminal layers to the lyric that would enrich my text with the theological messages of hymnwriters from the past.

The simple tune and text of this hymn might easily lead the listener or the singer to think of this as a children's hymn but that is not the case. As a poet, I have generally heeded the advice of writers who suggest that, given the choice, simple language and images are preferable to complex language and high-flown imagery. So in the first two stanzas of "With Grateful Heart . . ." I focused on the familiar blessings of life that are part of creation . . . the dawn of a new day, the dew on the meadow, the healing warmth of the sun, the endless blue of a summer sky, fruit and flowers, a lamb, a leaf, a singing bird, wind, rain, the silver moon, a daisy's face turned toward the sun, the beauty of music, the white of winter, the gold of autumn, the bounty of harvest and the comfort of home. In the third stanza I moved from images of nature to the more personal blessings of physical health and strength . . . hands that enable me to work and praise, a heart that is attuned to God, hungry for God and glad to be beating, the ability to speak of God's goodness and love, the strength to work and to play, and the people whose presence in my life make it joyful and worth living.

As I consider what it means to experience thankfulness, I think it may be too easy to be thankful in a general kind of way for the big things. For example, it is easy to say, "I thank you, God, for the goodness of life, for my family and friends, and all that I hold dear." And that may be a very sincere prayer of thanksgiving. But it takes considerable thought, intentional thought, to sort out and name the specific things in life that make it good, to sort out and name particular family members and friends and to clearly define what they mean to you, to sort out and name the specific things or places that you hold dear. It will take longer to pray that kind of thankful prayer but it is the mindfulness, the specificity of the prayer that is important. Certain-

ly when we thank God for our blessings and all that we value most, I believe that God knows the particular things and people that we count as blessings but I sense that we may ourselves be more thankful if we take the time to carefully name what we hold dear.

Sometimes, it is the smallest creatures and the most mundane things that provide a true model for thankfulness. In Jaroslav Vajda's compelling hymn, "God of the Sparrow" he asks, "How does the creature say Thanks?"<sup>4</sup> *Prayers from the Ark*, translated by Rumer Godden, provides an answer to that provocative question. The book is a small collection of poem/prayers prayed by simple creatures of the earth. The writer Carmen Bernos de Gasztold ultimately became a nun but these touching poems were written in an earlier time in her life when she found herself trapped in . . .

uncongenial work in the laboratory of a silk factory near Paris—a time of enemy occupation, hunger, cold, frustration; yet it was then that she was able to find, in each of these workdady, infinitesimal, or unfavoured creatures, not only its intrinsic being but an unexpected grain of incense that wafts it up, consecrates it, and this in the most matter-of-fact way.<sup>5</sup> In this collection, the lowly cricket prays a prayer of thankfulness:

O God,  
I am little and very black  
but I thank You  
for having shed  
Your warm sun  
and the quivering of Your golden corn  
on my humble life.  
Then take—but be forbearing, Lord—  
this little impulse of my love;  
this note of music  
You have set thrilling in my heart.<sup>6</sup>

And as we take note that this collection of touching poems was written in a time when there seemed to be little in the poet's life for which she herself could be thankful, we remember that the Bible in I Thessalonians 5:18 clearly reminds us to give thanks in all circumstances, to give thanks even when life seems most bleak. One of the most memorable of thanksgiving hymns is "Now Thank We All Our God," written by Martin Rinkart during the Thirty-Years War. Rinkart was a pastor in Saxony Germany as the war raged and for a time he was the only pastor available to serve his town. In the year 1637 he presided at nearly 4,500 burials and it was in this bleak context that Rinkart somehow managed to write a glorious hymn of thanks:

Now thank we all our God  
with heart and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things has done,  
in whom this world rejoices.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, we Christians would do well to learn, as Martin Rinkart learned, to have the grace of a grateful heart in all the circumstances of life. However, theologian Richard Foster offers a cautionary note regarding the familiar spiritual instruction to give thanks in all things. While he agrees that this practice does affirm "in our hearts the joyful assurance that God takes all things and works them for the good of those who love him," Foster warns "In its worst form this teaching denies the vileness of evil and baptizes the most horrible tragedies as the will of God." He says, "Scripture commands us to live in a spirit of thanksgiving in the midst of all situations; it does not command us to celebrate the presence of evil."<sup>8</sup> To put it simply then, we should be thankful that God can assuredly bring good out of the tragedies of life but we should never give thanks for the advent of tragedy itself nor should we allow ourselves to believe that God brings tragedy upon us to somehow encourage us to be thankful.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes is recognized as one of the greatest preachers and influential thinkers in America today. He has served for many years as the spiritual head of the Harvard community. In his book, *Sermons (Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living)*, he maintains that the true context for giving thanks originates in God's gift of forgiveness to humankind and subsequently extends outward in the forgiveness we grant one another.<sup>9</sup> If Gomes is correct, it seems that the impulse toward gratitude is rooted in a fundamental sense of the "other." If we as a society are primarily focused on "self," perhaps that explains why the individual's sense of gratitude is losing ground. When people are inner-directed and believe their lives to be self-determined, success can only be the result of one's own wise decisions or good fortune. In this context, gratitude is unwarranted. The good things of life may easily be attributed to "the luck of the draw".

Author Anne Lamott, however, remarks, "the two most common prayers are 'Help me, help me' and 'Thank you, thank you,'"<sup>10</sup> I imagine most of us have prayed these words at one time or another. The truth is that even unbelievers tend to offer up these simple prayers. Still, it is my sincere hope that when Christians gather to worship, we would remember that our prayers might be sung as well as spoken. A hymn of thanksgiving can readily serve as a prayer of thanks if

we are truly engaged with the text as we sing. As I think further about the problem of ingratitude in today's culture, I wonder if the hectic pace of our lives may be a contributing factor. Multi-tasking seems to be the order of the day and while it may be an efficient way in which to accomplish several things at once, it does mean that we are not ever fully focused on any one task. To be thankful people requires that we be mindful people, people who pay attention to the details in our day and, if we truly pay attention, we might be moved to a greater sense of appreciation of the blessings we enjoy. "With Grateful Heart I Thank You, Lord" is my way of reminding myself and others to be thankful, mindful, focused followers of Christ. Writer George Herbert prayed a prayer that would make a perfect introduction to my hymn. He said, "Thou hast given me so much . . . Give me one thing more . . . a grateful heart!"<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible (New Revised Standard Version)* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 1990), *Psalm 100: 4-5*.

<sup>2</sup> *Worship and Rejoice* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 2001), #720.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Kay Beall, "With Grateful Heart, I Thank You, Lord," (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1991), 2-7.

<sup>4</sup> Yaroslav Vajda, "God of the Sparrow," *Worship & Rejoice* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 2001), #29.

<sup>5</sup> Rumer Godden, trans. in foreword to *Prayers from the Ark* by Carmen Bernos De Gasztold, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Carmen Bernos De Gasztold, *Prayers from the Ark*, trans. Rumer Godden (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976), 41.

<sup>7</sup> John Roy, "Thankfulness" from the Internet@sermoncentral.com., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline (The Path to Spiritual Growth)*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, Rev. Ed, 1988), 194.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Gomes, "Redeeming the Familiar" in *Sermons (Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living)*, (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998), 233.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity (Rediscovering a Life of Faith)*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 197.

<sup>11</sup> George Herbert, "Thankfulness," from the Internet @ quote-lady.com., 3.

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