

HYMN INTERPRETATION

HERMAN G. STUEMPFLE

"The Night Will Soon Be Ending"

Jochen Klepper

Jochen Klepper, whose 100th birth anniversary will arrive in 2003, has been acclaimed as "the most important hymnwriter since Paul Gerhardt." High praise indeed for one whose name is scarcely known outside his native land! "The Night Will Soon Be Ending" is one of 29 texts published in 1933 under the title, *Kyrie: geistliche Lieder*. His work, fine in poetic quality and profound in theological substance, has only within the last decade begun to appear in any significant way in German hymnals.

The invitation to translate the present text came from Joseph Herl, a member of the editorial committee for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's *Hymnal Supplement 98*. I am indebted to his unpublished paper, "The Hymns of Jochen Klepper," for the information in the brief biographical sketch that follows.

Klepper was born into a Lutheran parsonage in what was then the German territory of Silesia. In 1922, he began theological studies at the University of Erlangen. To help support his family after his father's death, he left a doctoral program in church history and entered upon a career in journalism. He also wrote religious poetry and novels, the best know of which was entitled *Der Vater*.

Hitler's rise to power threw Klepper's life into turmoil. Already married to a Jewish widow who had brought with her two daughters, Klepper lived in constant fear for the safety of his family. Efforts to leave Germany were unsuccessful. Finally, in 1942, like the composer Hugo Distler, Klepper, his wife and one stepdaughter chose suicide as their means of escape from a homeland that had become an unbearable prison.

"The Night Will Soon Be Ending," written while darkness was descending over Germany, lies on the borderline between Advent and Christmas. The opening lines, with their echo of Romans 13:12: "... the night is far gone, the day is near," place us in the company of the generations who have waited for the coming of the Messiah. We are among those who, living "in a land of deep darkness" (Is. 9:2), cry out for the


light. The first stanza ends with the appearance in the eastern sky of "God's radiant Star," heralding the dawn.

Stanzas two and three draw us closer to that moment in history when "the Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us" (Jn. 1:14). The appearance of the Morning Star signals the birth of a child. But this child is like, yet unlike any other child—one who will bear on his shoulders the weight of the world's guilt and will bring to all humanity the reconciling power of God's grace. We are invited, therefore, to run with the shepherds to Bethlehem "where God's salvation glows in a stable's light."

Stanza three reminds us, if we need such a reminder, that God's light always shines in darkness. Klepper knew in his own tragic experience how "madness all around us may increase" and "rob our hearts of peace." Yet, the light that dawned upon the world in Christ's coming is a "Star that pierces the night" and which "no darkness can overcome" (Jn. 1:5).

Another Johannine theme is touched upon in stanza four, namely, that though "light has come into the world, [we love] darkness rather than light" (Jn. 3:19) and turn away from its exposure of our sins. But just as light can never be conquered by darkness, so grace is stronger than guilt. God seeks and claims us, wherever we flee. Klepper affirms with St. Augustine: "Nothing is far to God."

The question inevitably arises, "With such a powerful affirmation of faith, how could Klepper not find strength to endure even the terrible night of Nazi persecution?" It's finally a question no human can or should answer. One can only say that, though surrounding darkness can never conquer the Light, the circumstances of our lives can overwhelm our fragile faith, even as we proclaim God's faithfulness.

In *Hymnal Supplement 98*, "The Night Will Soon Be Ending" is set to LLANGLOFAN. The hymn was originally sung to a marvelous tune written especially for it by Johannes Petzold. Those interested will find it on page 61 of the "Handbook" of *Hymnal Supplement 98*. 

Herman G. Stuempfle lives in retirement in Gettysburg, PA, as President Emeritus of Lutheran Theological Seminary. His hymns have been published by The Hymn Society, G.I.A., Fortress Press, Chantry Press, and Stainer & Bell.

The Night Will Soon Be Ending

1 The night will soon be end - ing; The
 2 The One whom an - gels tend - ed Comes
 3 The earth in sure ro - tion Will
 4 Yet nights will bring their sad - ness And

dawn can - not be far. Let songs of praise as -
 near, a child, to serve; Thus God, the judge of -
 soon bring morn - ing bright; So run where God's sal -
 rob our hearts of peace; And sin in all its

end - ing Now greet the Morn - ing Star!
 fend - ed, Bears all our sins de - serve.
 va - tion Glows in a sta - ble's light.
 mad - ness A - round us may in - crease.

All you whom dark - ness fright - ens With
 The guilt - y need not cow - er, For
 As old as sin's per - ver - sion Is
 But now one Star is beam - ing Whose

guilt or grief or pain, God's ra - diant Star now
 God has rec - on - ciled Through His re - demp - tive
 mer - cy's vast de - sign: God brings a new cre -
 rays have pierced the night: God comes for our re -

bright - ens And bids you sing a - gain.
 pow - er All those who trust this child.
 a - tion— This child its seal and sign.
 deem - ing From sin's op - press - ive might.

5 God dwells with us in darkness
 And spreads His light abroad;
 But we resist the brightness
 And turn away from God.

Yet grace does not forsake us
 Though far from home we run.
 His children God has made us
 Through His beloved Son.

Text: Jochen Klepper, 1903-42; tr. Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr., b. 1923
 Tune: Welsh folk tune; setting: Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958

LANGLOFFAN
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Rom. 13:12a; Rev. 22:16-17; I Cor. 2:7; John 1:4-5; 3:19-21

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