



“I Sing to You and Praise You” (Psalm 30): Paul Gerhardt and the Psalms

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What a surprise to discover, as I did when working on an essay on Ps 91, that Paul Gerhardt’s hymnic paraphrase of that psalm had never been translated into English. Working on that translation stimulated an interest in making other untranslated Gerhardt treasures available to an English-speaking audience.¹

As a teacher of Bible, I was especially interested to learn that, among Paul Gerhardt’s 139 German hymns and poems, about forty (depending on how one counts) were paraphrases of lengthier biblical texts; of these, twenty-six were psalms, and among those, fourteen (excluding now Ps 91) remain untranslated, at least as far as I have been able to determine.² As we noted in the last issue, *Word & World* will commemorate the 400th anniversary of Gerhardt’s birth (March 12, 1607) by publishing new translations of several Gerhardt hymns, most of them from among the biblical paraphrases.

¹See Paul Gerhardt, “Wer unterm Schirm des Höchsten sitzt” (“When Sheltered by Our God Most High”), trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, *Word & World* 25/2 (2005) 200–201.

²For a list of the psalm paraphrases, see the chart at the end of this article.

For a hymn writer like Paul Gerhardt, the biblical psalms provided an invaluable source of material, already bringing together God’s word, human response, and theological reflection in poetic form. Here Word & World offers a new translation of another Gerhardt hymn (based on Ps 30) to commemorate the 400th anniversary of his birth.

GERHARDT'S INTEREST IN THE PSALMS

What explains Gerhardt's considerable interest in the psalms (the full paraphrases comprise over 20 percent of his entire hymnic corpus)? At one level, this is not at all surprising, since, as Martin Luther had written a century earlier, the Psalter is a book in which all human pains and joys are brought into conversation with God; it is "the book of all the saints," so that "in whatever situation [they] may be, [they find] in that situation psalms and words that fit [their] case, that suit [them] as if they were put there just for [their] sake, so that [they] could not put it better [themselves], or find or wish for anything better."³ What better material, then, for a Christian poet and preacher like Gerhardt? Where else could he find God's word, human response, and theological reflection already set in the kind of poetry and hymnody that so appealed to him?

The psalms served further, no doubt, because of their candor regarding the trials and terrors of human existence and their wondering what God had to do with all this. Gerhardt's was a hard time: Thirty Years' War, plague and disease, marauding bands exploiting the chaotic conditions, the death of children—his own and so many others.⁴ Certainly no biblical material other than the psalms could mirror such terror—or give it words. It was just the resource for the poet/preacher seeking to give words to his own people in the midst of crisis.

"Gerhardt's poetry gave sound and sense, taste and touch, flavor and feeling to the confessional truths of the Reformation"

Gerhardt's poetry gave sound and sense, taste and touch, flavor and feeling to the confessional truths of the Reformation, a fact sometimes praised, sometimes lamented. Doctrine became personalized. Whereas Luther's hymns focused on "we," Gerhardt more often wrote "I." Was he on the road toward pietism, some wonder—and, if so, was that a good thing or a bad thing? Christian Möller, Heidelberg University professor emeritus, notes:

Martin Luther's chorales were more didactic. They put the teachings of the Reformation into people's mouths for singing, and thus into their hearts. The songs of the pietists remained inward, while Paul Gerhardt turned that inwardness toward the outside world. The songs of the enlightenment are marked by a concern for utility and morality. And the religious songs of today are all about people and feeling good....Paul Gerhardt was more realistic, recognizing that life can also be hard: "Sendeth he some cross to bear, / Cometh sorrow, need, or care, / Shall it all my peace destroy?"⁵

³Martin Luther, *Preface to the Psalter* (1545), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 256.

⁴Gerhardt wrote four poems specifically on the occasion of a child's death.

⁵Christian Möller, "Mischung aus Trost und Trotz," *zeitzeichen* 8/1 (2007) 37 (my translation). The Gerhardt quotation is from stanza 4 of "Warum sollt ich mich denn grämen" in the translation by Catherine Winkworth in *Lyra Germanica: Second Series: The Christian Life*, 4th ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861) 198.

Wherever else Gerhardt might have gotten the “mixture of comfort and defiance” or the ability to turn “inwardness toward the outside world” of which Möller speaks, both could only have been fed by his concentration on the Psalter. The whole human is there in the psalms, but always in the context of the whole creation; comfort from God and defiance of God intertwine in the biblical poems, and Gerhardt was able to put this all together similarly for his time.

The psalms, of course, bring together the “I” and the “we” as well. Like the “I” of the Psalter, Gerhardt’s “I,” though intensely personal, is never private. It invites others in, because it describes experience that is both particular and common: “I lay in fetters, groaning; / you came to set me free. / I stood, my shame bemoaning; / you came to honor me.”⁶

What’s more, the psalms mirror Gerhardt’s own theological perspective. On the one hand, God can be trusted to deliver God’s people from their distress: “Though sackcloth then I wore, / I now am clothed in glory / And freed to tell the story / Of torment mine no more.” On the other hand, God does have something to do also with the dark side of human existence, though this does not define God as does God’s mercy: “God’s hand is firm but gentle, / He disciplines in love; / His rancor incidental, / His mercy from above.”⁷

Gerhardt also shares the psalmists’ world in which enemies are real. Thus, he does not regularly purge the texts of the prayers against the enemies as do some Christian users. The enemies remain fierce, as they are in Gerhardt’s own world, and he longs for God’s intervention against their deadly threats. In the paraphrase of Ps 30, the “foes” of the psalm are made singular: “Yet, one has sought to kill me, / Rejoicing in my death; / And though his power is strong, / Your loving hand is stronger, / So his rage can no longer / Reach out and do me wrong.”⁸ Has the enemy, though remaining historically real, now become Satan? That would certainly match Luther’s own theological perspective.

GERHARDT’S USE OF THE PSALMS

Gerhardt’s work on the psalms and other Old Testament texts is instructive for the ongoing question of how Christians best interpret and use this material—whether in singing or in preaching. Are the texts appropriate as is, or must they be given a proper “Christian” turn, and, if so, what would that look like?⁹

The question has been chronic for Christian singers and pray-ers of the psalms. For centuries, Christians used the psalms (or parts of them) in worship while adding a trinitarian doxological ending (the Gloria Patri) as a confession that, for them, the psalms bore witness to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

⁶From stanza 2 of Paul Gerhardt, “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #241).

⁷The quotations are from my translation of Gerhardt’s paraphrase of Psalm 30, below.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹I began a consideration of this question in Frederick J. Gaiser, “Translating Paul Gerhardt’s Hymns,” *Word & World* 27/1 (2007) 74.

Though many hymnic psalm paraphrases follow this same pattern, Gerhardt's do not. He stays with the flow of the psalm—though not slavishly to its language. Different traditions have made different decisions at this point as well, and—as Hermann Petrich points out—for theological reasons:

While the Reformed principle of Scripture brought the biblical wording into poetic speech with as little change as possible (which often did violence to the language, as that tradition, early on, fundamentally rejected all artistic effort), the Lutheran confession cleared the way for free artistic movement, changing the emphasis from the words themselves to their thought and content.¹⁰

Gerhardt made different decisions for different songs. On the one hand, the longer paraphrases often stay remarkably close to the flow of the biblical texts (as in “I Sing to You and Praise You,” below). At other times, however, one verse might give rise to a lengthy poetic meditation that is no longer directly tied to the biblical language (for example, “Be Thou Content” [in Catherine Winkworth's translation], based on Ps 37:7).

“Gerhardt was most successful in his biblical paraphrases when he put on his other hat and became a preacher on the texts”

Even the more direct paraphrases, however, were never woodenly bound to the text of the psalm. Indeed, as Petrich notes, “The most successful of [Gerhardt's] pure paraphrases are those in which the poet, despite his strong feeling for the biblical foundation, was able, on the basis of his congenial artistic ability, to make the ancient psalm so new that the hearers, in their enjoyment, were no longer mindful of the adaptation.”¹¹

One might say, in other words, that Gerhardt was most successful in his biblical paraphrases when he put on his other hat and became a preacher on the texts—not simply handing down the tradition but proclaiming a new word. The creative preacher does more than repeat the biblical text in the language of the hearer; he or she expands it, illumines it, opens it to the hearers in a new way. That was the manner also of the hymn writer Paul Gerhardt.

Still, though Gerhardt was free in his rendition of the biblical texts in German, he normally let them retain their original character, rarely making explicit New Testament or Christian interpolations. His was not a modern historical scrupulosity that sought to avoid anachronism; it was rather an unquestioning certainty that, of course, the Old Testament bears witness to the Triune God, and one need add nothing to make that happen. At the same time, because it is so natural, Gerhardt can, when it seems appropriate, make a more direct New Testament reference. In his paraphrase of Hos 11:9, where God pledges not to execute the divine anger precisely because God is not a human, Gerhardt writes: “No mortal I, in this

¹⁰Hermann Petrich, *Paul Gerhardt: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1914) 201 (my translation).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 203–204 (my translation).

persist, / And mark it well, my servant; / The Holy One within your midst, / Who comes with love most fervent: / For you, my foes, I go to death, / A lamb, expending my last breath / In love that falters never.”¹² God’s own death as a lamb moves radically beyond Hosea; incautious even for much of Christian tradition, it becomes a shocking and powerful sermon on the biblical text.

Gerhardt frequently adds Christian references to the psalms in three ways. First, he will not hesitate to describe the troubles of the psalmist (in poetic paraphrase) as the psalmist’s “cross” (see stanza 10 in the Ps 30 paraphrase below).¹³ This is perhaps simply common Christian speech, which Gerhardt uses quite naturally. Still, it takes both the psalmist and the singer of the hymn to the cross of Christ in a way the psalm itself could not.¹⁴

Second, Gerhardt very often moves at or toward the close of the Old Testament texts to a promise of eternal life (see stanza 12 of Ps 30, below).¹⁵ Christian Möller speaks of the “yearning for heaven” awakened by Gerhardt’s songs—a yearning, however, that does not despise this world but makes us here “more serene” in the face of the world’s real troubles.¹⁶ Given his time, how could Paul Gerhardt not, like the apostle Paul, yearn for heaven (Phil 1:21-24)? Gerhardt passionately loved the world, as his many creation poems and images make clear, but like the African-American slaves, to “be done with the troubles of the world” would have been an understandable goal—and a firm promise proclaimed by the poet to the hearer.

Third, Gerhardt fairly often invokes God’s “word” as the agent of divine salvation in psalms that themselves do not make this connection. Yes, God’s sure and powerful word has rich Old Testament roots, but Gerhardt’s use may well reflect the incarnate Word of the New Testament found also in Luther’s hymnody. It is hard to read that God’s protective “shield is God’s own faithful word”¹⁷ without thinking of Luther’s “one little word” that “forever shall abide” in “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”¹⁸ The use is not without theological significance, as we note in Gerhardt’s Ps 91. That psalm can be read as promising full earthly security to those who believe well—a dangerous notion, indeed—but if God’s shield is God’s word, the protection becomes rooted in promise and cross rather than in reward and triumph.¹⁹

¹²From my translation of Gerhardt’s “How Can I Give You Up My Child,” *Word & World* 27/1 (2007) 78 (stanza 5).

¹³Other examples occur in the paraphrases of Pss 25; 73; 90; 111; 116; and 145.

¹⁴A similar natural usage that invites the present singer into the song is Gerhardt’s occasional identification of the pray-ers of the psalms as “Christians” (in the paraphrases of Pss 25; 73; and 85).

¹⁵This occurs also in the paraphrases of Pss 23; 34; 39; 49; 91; and 139.

¹⁶Möller, “Mischung,” 37. Another example is found in stanza 11 of the paraphrase of Ps 34 (“Ich will erhöhen immerfort”): “Zwar, wer Gott dient, muß leiden viel, / Doch hat sein Leiden Maß und Ziel...” (To be sure, those who serve God must suffer much, but their suffering is measured and has a goal).

¹⁷Stanza 2 of Gerhardt’s “When Sheltered by Our God Most High” (Ps 91). See note 1.

¹⁸This theme of God’s strong and true word occurs also in Gerhardt’s paraphrases of Pss 27; 71; 116; and 146.

¹⁹See Frederick J. Gaiser, “‘It shall not reach you’: Talisman or Vocation? Reading Psalm 91 in Time of War,” *Word & World* 25/2 (2005) 191–199.

A special case is the song based on Ps 143 (“Herr, höre, was mein Mund”). Although often counted among the psalm paraphrases (no doubt because “Psalm 143” is generally part of its title), it really is not. This hymn, unlike the paraphrases, does not follow the flow of the psalm, but works with a variety of biblical texts and images. Unlike Ps 143 itself, the song identifies the pray-er’s distress almost completely with sin and guilt and thus becomes a hymn about repentance and forgiveness that turns explicitly to the atoning death of Jesus (stanzas 3 and 8).

PAUL GERHARDT, “I SING TO YOU AND PRAISE YOU” (PSALM 30)

Just as it was the task of Paul Gerhardt to translate the biblical psalms into German hymns—remaining faithful to the text, but not so bound to it that the poetry suffers—the present translator must try to render Gerhardt’s German into English in the same spirit. Sometimes, in the Ps 30 paraphrase that follows, the German and the English fit hand in glove (“Ich preise dich und singe” easily becomes “I sing to you and praise you”). Sometimes, one perfectly good image (“Da ward dein Heil mein Anker”) gives way to another for the sake of rhyme and meter (“You sent my sickness reeling”). Sometimes, images have become problematic for some and themselves need paraphrasing (“Gott hat ja Vaterhände” becomes “God’s hand is firm but gentle”). Sometimes, where Gerhardt has drifted from the biblical wording for his own reasons, it might reappear in a translation by a Psalms teacher (“Ich werde nimmermehr; / Das weiß ich, niederliegen” becomes “I never shall be moved; / God made me a strong mountain”; see Ps 30:6–7). Finally, the point will be to make available what has been hidden—the words of Paul Gerhardt, a brilliant poet and preacher, proclaiming anew an ancient psalm for the love of both the biblical text and his hearers.

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PAUL GERHARDT'S PSALM PARAPHRASES

<i>Psalm</i>	<i>First Line</i>	<i>Translated?</i>	<i>Reference to translation(s)</i> ²⁰
1	Wohl dem Menschen, der nicht wandelt	Yes	Hewitt, 54
13	Ach Herr, wie lange willst du mein	No	
13	Wie lang, o Herr, wie lange soll	Yes	Hewitt, 62
23	Der Herr, der aller Enden	Yes	Hewitt, 54
25	Nach dir, o Herr, verlanget mich	Yes	Hewitt, 49
27	Gott ist mein Licht, der Herr mein Heil	No	
30	Ich preise dich und singe	Yes	<i>Word & World</i> 27/2 (2007) 202–205
34	Ich will erhöhen immerfort	No	
39	Mein Gott, ich habe mir	No	
42	Wie der Hirsch in großen Dürsten	No	
49	Hört an, ihr Völker, hört doch an	No	
52	Was trotzest du, stolzer Tyrann	No	
62	Meine Seel ist in der Stille	No	
71	Herr, dir trau ich all mein Tage	No	
73	Sei wohlgemut, o Christenseel	No	
85	Herr, der du vormals hast dein Land	No	
90	Herr Gott, du bist ja für und für	Yes	Hewitt, 80
91	Wer unterm Schirm des Höchsten sitzt	Yes	<i>Word & World</i> 25/2 (2005), 200–201
111	Ich will mit Danken kommen	Projected	<i>Word & World</i> 27/3 (2007)
112	Wohl dem, der den Herren scheuet	Yes	Hewitt, 55
116	Das ist mir lieb, daß Gott, mein Hort	No	
121	Ich erhebe, Herr, zu dir	Yes	Hewitt, 49
139	Herr, du erforschest meinen Sinn	Yes	Hewitt, 75
143 ²¹	Herr, höre, was mein Mund	Yes	Hewitt, 41
145	Ich, der ich oft in tiefes Land	Yes	Hewitt, 78
146	Du meine Seele, singe	Yes	Hewitt, 53

²⁰Most references here are to the page numbers in Theodore Brown Hewitt, *Paul Gerhardt as a Hymn Writer and His Influence on English Hymnody* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918), which lists the translations known at that time. Present investigation shows nothing new other than those translations now published or projected in *Word & World*.

²¹As noted above, this hymn, though based loosely on Ps 143, is not a true paraphrase.

PAUL GERHARDT, "I SING TO YOU AND PRAISE YOU" (PSALM 30)

Tune: AUS MEINES HERZENS GRUNDE (76 76 67 76)

(*Evangelisches Gesangbuch* #443; *Lutheran Worship* #25; *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* #14; the hymn may be sung also to VON GOTT WILL ICH NICHT LASSEN, *Lutheran Book of Worship* #468)

1

I sing to you and praise you,
Lord, source of wondrous grace;
You've been my help, my rescue,
Set gifts before my face.
So now each day I live,
For everything you proffer
My praise and thanks I offer;
I have no more to give.

1

Ich preise dich und singe,
Herr, deine Wundergnad,
Die mir so große Dinge
Bisher erweisen hat;
Denn das ist meine Pflicht,
In meinem ganzen Leben
Dir Lob und Dank zu geben,
Mehr hab und kann ich nicht.

2

You've drawn me up and saved me,
Renewed my life and breath.
Yet, one has sought to kill me,
Rejoicing in my death;
And though his power is strong,
Your loving hand is stronger,
So his rage can no longer
Reach out and do me wrong.

2

Du hast mein Herz erhöht
Aus mancher tiefen Not,
Den aber, der da gehet
Und suchet meinen Tod
Und tut mir Herzleid an,
Den hast du weggeschlagen,
Dass er sich meiner Plagen
Mit nicht erfreuen kann.

3

I cried to you for healing,
For help in my distress;
You sent my sickness reeling,
Relieved all my duress.
You saved me from the Pit,
My life from death and sadness,
Restored my joy and gladness;
You've made me strong and fit.

3

Herr, mein Gott, da ich Kranker
Vom Bette zu dir schrei,
Da ward dein Heil mein Anker
Und stund mir treulich bei;
Da andre führen hin
Zur finstern Todeshöhle,
Da hieltst du meine Seele
Und mich noch, wo ich bin.

4

You faithful ones, come praising,
Sing now with one accord,
Your grateful voices raising
Thanks to our holy Lord.
God chastens and sustains:
Praise him who holds and carries
Us, e'en when trouble tarries;
His anger ne'er remains.

4

Ihr Heiligen, lobsinet
Und danket euren Herrn,
Der, wenn die Not herdringet,
Bald hört und herzlich gern
Uns Gnad und Hilfe gibt;
Rühmt den, des Hand uns träget
Und, wenn er uns ja schläget,
Nicht allzusehr betrübt.

5

God's hand is firm but gentle
And disciplines in love,
With rancor incidental,
But mercy from above.
When we are rent and torn,
God comes with grace and favor;
Though woes of night we savor,
Our joy comes with the morn.

5

Gott hat ja Vaterhände
Und strafet mit Geduld,
Sein Zorn nimmt bald ein Ende,
Sein Herz ist voller Huld
Und gönnt uns lauter Guts.
Den Abend währt das Weinen,
Des Morgens macht das Scheinen
Der Sonn uns gutes Muts.

6

I said in my good fortune,
When all was fine and fair:
"I stand on firm foundation;
No cross have I to bear.
I never shall be moved—
God made me a strong mountain;
For me, God is a fountain
Of wealth, his love thus proved."

6

Ich sprach zur guten Stunde,
Da mirs noch wohl erging:
Ich steh auf festem Grunde,
Acht alles Kreuz gering;
Ich werde nimmermehr,
Das weiß ich, niederliegen;
Denn Gott, der nicht kann trügen,
Der liebt mich gar zu sehr.

7

But then your face, once beaming,
From me, O God, you turned;
My comfort merely dreaming,
My fortune lost and burned.
Now, everything gone wrong,
Of pain I now was bearer;
Dismayed, I cried in terror,
"O Lord, my God, how long?"

7

Als aber dein Gesichte,
Ach Gott, sich von mir wandt,
Da war mein Trost zunichte,
Da lag mein Heldenstand;
Es war mir angst und bang,
Ich führte schwere Klagen
Mit Zittern und mit Zagen:
Herr, mein Gott, wie so lang?

8

Are you now my opponent;
Have you become my foe?
Can death be your proponent;
What honor can it show?
What praise from dust and bones,
To which we waste and crumble
When in the grave we stumble,
What value death's dark groans?

9

As long as I am living,
My praise to you I sing.
The grave no glory giving,
There no song can I bring.
So, come, Lord, now I call,
Provide me life and power,
That I may, hour by hour,
Give you my self, my all.

10

At last to me you've hearkened,
My sighing now is stilled;
My life no more is darkened,
My cross to joy fulfilled.
My suffering has an end,
No more my heart shall sorrow,
No trouble shall I borrow,
From me all cares you fend.

11

You've made me strong and fearless,
You've righted ev'ry wrong;
My mourning cry, once cheerless,
You've turned to dance and song.
Though sackcloth then I wore,
I now am clothed in glory
And freed to tell the story
Of torment mine no more.

8

Hast du dir vorgenommen,
Mein ewger Feind zu sein?
Was werden dir denn frommen
Die ausgedorrten Bein
Und der elende Staub,
Zu welchem in der Erden
Wir werden, wenn wir werden
Des blassen Todes Raub?

9

So lang ichs Leben habe,
Lobsing ich deiner Ehr,
Dort aber, in dem Grabe,
Gedenk ich dein nicht mehr;
Drum eil und hilf mir auf
Und gib mir Kraft und Leben;
Dafür will ich dir geben
Meins ganzen Lebens Lauf.

10

Nun wohl, ich bin erhöret.
Mein Seufzen ist erfüllt,
Mein Kreuz ist umgekehret,
Mein Herzleid ist gestillt,
Mein Grämen hat ein End;
Es ist von meinem Herzen
Der bittern Sorgen Schmerzen
Durch dich, Herr, abgewendt.

11

Du hast mit mir gehandelt
Noch besser, als ich will:
Mein Klagen ist verwandelt
In eines Reigens Spiel,
Und für das Trauerkleid,
In dem ich vor gestöhnet,
Da hast du mich gekrönet
Mit süßer Lust und Freud.

12

My soul is still no longer,
I sing your vict'ry won.
My voice grows ever stronger
To tell all you have done.
My ev'ry word and phrase,
From now until forever,
My witness ceasing never,
Will be of thanks and praise.

12

Auf daß zu deiner Ehre
Mein Ehre sich erhüb
Und nimmer stille wäre,
Bis daß ich deine Lieb
Und ungezählte Zahl
Der großen Wunderdinge
Mit ewgen Freuden singe
Im güldnen Himmelssaal.

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Text from Paul Gerhardt, *Wach auf, mein Herz, und singe: Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Lieder und Gedichte*, ed. Eberhard von Cranach-Sichert (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2004) 303–306.