**Now Thank We**

**History of Hymn**

The beloved and widely known hymn of praise entitled “Now Thank We” was written in 1636 by Martin Rinkart during one of the most difficult human events: the Thirty Year's War in Central Europe. This terrible war, lasting from 1618-1648, “began as a spiritual conflict between Protestant and Roman Catholic princes in [present day] Germany but degenerated into a political war for the conquest of territory.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Its large scale and prolonged horrors decreased Germany's population “from 16 million to 6 million during these years.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Martin Rinkart (1586-1649) loved music. As a boy he sang as “in the famous St. Thomas Church of Leipzig, Germany, where J. S. Bach was later musical director.”[[3]](#footnote-3) His appointment, at 31 years of age, as Lutheran pastor in the town of Eilenberg coincided with the beginning of the Thirty Years' War. Eilenberg, a walled town, quickly became an overcrowded refuge for many suffering from the war. Famine, plagues, and armies repeatedly marching through the countryside all left in their wake incredible destruction. Rinkart cared for many refugees in his own home, even when he hardly had enough to feed his own family. Since all the other officials and clergy of the city either died or fled, Rinkart often conducted as many as 40-50 funeral services a day. In one year alone (1637), Rinkart buried “4480 persons who had died of an epidemic sweeping through his city. One of those persons was his dear wife. When he writes, 'guide us when perplexed,' he is not talking about minor inconveniences.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Although many sources claim Rinkart wrote this hymn to celebrate the Peace of Westphalia (end of the Thirty Years' War), no one has been able to verify that—and the date refutes the claim. Apparently Rinkart penned the words, “Now Thank we all our God” in the midst of ongoing suffering and destruction.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 1858, Catherine Winkworth translated this beloved German hymn to English. Her excellent work has granted it wide usage in many English-speaking countries.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although stanza two refers briefly to the dreadful war, the hymn as a whole is so triumphant that it has frequently been used “on occasions of national rejoicing in Germany, England and America: as, for example, . . . the ending of the Boer War (1902).”[[7]](#footnote-7)

For nearly four centuries now this triumphant hymn focusing on “God's countless gifts of love” and the certainty of His eternal reign has expressed the gratitude and hope of humanity. “[T]he impulse to thank and praise . . . is instinctive and universal.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In perhaps more intangible ways, its historical setting and godly life of the author also add to its enduring quality.

**Literary Structure**

* Meter: 67.67.66.66
* Poetic Feet: Iambic
* Rhyme scheme: abcbdefe 173.
* Poetic devices and figures of speech:
  + Alliteration—Who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices.
  + Climax
    - “With heart and hands and voices” (stanza 1)
    - “Who, from our mother's arms . . . and still is ours today” (stanza 1)
    - “In this world and the next.” (stanza 2)
    - “Thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.” (stanza 3)
* Organization: The predominant thought pattern is one of past faithfulness continuing today and ongoing hope for the future.

**Thought Content**

Rinkart paraphrased the Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus 50:22-24 for the first two stanzas of this hymn and then paraphrased the well-known Gloria Patri for the final stanza. The Gloria Patri, first written in Greek—part c. 95 A.D. and completed by the late 200s—was “translated into Latin, then following the Reformation, into the vernaculars of all Protestant sects . . . ”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The mood of the hymn is one of deep gratitude, of hope and petition. In it, man with his physical capacities, recounts God's good gifts and extols the Triune Eternal God from whom all blessings flow.

**Musical Characteristics**

* Melodic Movement: Mostly step by step; not many nor big jumps
* Meter: 4/4
* Form: AABC

**Evaluative Questions**

The mood of the singer is swept up into hope as the song focuses on the eternal God. The great truths expressed in this poetry possess both simplicity and beauty. While few adults would have difficulty understanding the meaning of the words and phrases, the profundity of the thoughts invite repeated singing and meditation, each time with fresh meaning. Although young children could understand most of the words, and, with limited guidance, understand the phrases, further explanation of the following words/phrases would be helpful:

* Bounteous: plenty, lots of, abundant; to explain this the adult could bring a bag of sunflower seeds giving only one seed to each child. After eating that one they could then be given a whole spoonful to help them feel/understand the difference between receiving one blessing and many, in abundance.
* “Keep us in his grace”: to explain this idea, the class could form a circle to demonstrate the boundaries of God's grace (His blessings and enabling power). The largeness of the circle symbolizes the freedom God gives us in life to laugh, play, and make many choices all within His smile of approval, then refer to things that take us outside of that circle of grace—deliberate, ongoing disobedience, etc. Be cautious with this idea; sensitive young children easily misinterpret. The hymn writer is asking God to keep us inside His circle of blessing.
* Perplexed—puzzled, confused; adult could talk about the confusion we feel when a loved one (maybe especially a young child) dies of cancer or we encounter other unexplainable suffering. It is in such perplexities that the author asks the Lord's guidance.

The music of this hymn heightens the joyful hope expressed in the words. While the notes are easy for most adults to sing, the song may need to be pitched lower for young voices. Although this hymn's original title—“short Grace before meals”indicates the author's intended plan, we know it has been used for many other occasions, often in celebration of God's goodness as evidenced according to man's natural thoughts.[[10]](#footnote-10) Rinkart however exemplifies the need to thank the Lord in the midst of darkness and suffering; that is the walk of faith.

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1. Guye Johnson, Treasury of Great Hymns (Grenville: Bob Jones University Press 1986). 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Schaefer. “Hymn History,” The Schaefer Family, September 2006, <<http://schaefer-family.com/hymns.htm>> (1 March 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Osbeck, Kenneth W. 101 Hymn Stories. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982.) 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Schaefer](http://schaefer-family.com/hymns.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bailey, Albert Edward. The Gospel in Hymns. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.) 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Osbeck, 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bailey, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bailey, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bailey, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bailey, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)