

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

A HYMN OF GRATITUDE AND REFLECTION

The hymn “A Prayer of Thanksgiving,” also known as “We Gather Together” is a cherished song in the Thanksgiving tradition. Its lyrics, rich with expressions of divine favor and unity, have found a special place in Christian hearts. Yet, the song’s history and the contexts in which it has been sung reveal a narrative far more complex than its outwardly peaceful message suggests.

Origins and Transformation

The origins of “A Prayer of Thanksgiving” trace back to the late 16th century, a tumultuous period of religious conflict in Europe. Written by Adrianus Valerius in the wake of the 1597 Battle of Turnhout, where Dutch forces defeated Spanish occupiers in what is now Belgium, the hymn was a celebration of victory over Catholic oppression. The Dutch Protestant population, barred from worship by the Catholic King Philip II of Spain, found in the song a symbol of their newfound religious freedom.

Valerius’ original Dutch hymn, “Wilt Heden nu Treden,” was set to a traditional folk melody and reflected the intense religious strife of the era. This song accompanied the Dutch people’s return to worship and their triumph over their oppressors.

The hymn’s journey to America began with Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam, what is now the southern tip of Manhattan. After many generations of the song being passed down in Dutch, it was eventually translated into English by Theodore Baker in 1894. Baker, an American music scholar, encountered a German translation of the hymn during his studies at the University of Leipzig in the 1870s. His English version, titled “A Prayer of Thanksgiving,” adopted a new cultural significance.

The American adaptation of the hymn began to gain prominence in the early 20th century. By the time of World War I and World War II, the song’s themes of divine intervention and victory





thus became part of a broader story of national healing and thanksgiving amidst division and conflict.

A Hymn of Unity and its Complications

During the 1950s, amid the post-war boom, “A Prayer of Thanksgiving” reached the zenith of its cultural popularity. The song was a staple in church services, school assemblies, and community events, embodying a collective sense of gratitude and national pride. Yet, this period of seeming tranquility was also marked by profound social inequalities. The exclusion and segregation experienced by African Americans highlighted the contradictions within a national narrative that celebrated unity while often perpetuating division.

The hymn’s call to divine guidance and unity contrasts sharply with the historical reality of our social and racial stratification. While “We Gather Together” invokes a vision of divine favor and collective thanksgiving, its historical roots in conflict and exclusion remind us that the act of gathering together has often been fraught with complexities and contradictions.

And They Continued Gathering

A glimpse into the Scriptures teaches us what constitutes a gathering that inspires unity. Immediately following the ascension of Jesus Christ, we can read about a small community of disciples in Acts 1: *“Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem... When they arrived, they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying... [and] all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus”* (Acts 1:12-14 NLT). The characteristics of the followers’ communal life were devotion to prayer and unity. This is the first time *homothymadon*, translated as “united” or “in one accord”, appears in Acts, but it will recur regularly hereafter to mark the exemplary harmony of the first Christians. Although Jesus has just departed from them, they find union together and engage in communal prayer to God, assured of the coming of the Spirit and His

resonated deeply with an American public grappling with global conflict. The reference to “wicked oppressors” in the hymn, initially aimed at Spanish Catholics, was now interpreted as a call against the threat of an entirely different enemy. The refrain “O Lord, make us free” mirrored the wartime desire for liberation and triumph, while the end of the first verse offered an expression of gratitude and highlighted America’s exclusive belief in itself as a chosen nation: “Sing praises to His name, He forgets not His own.”

The day of Thanksgiving itself also has connections to war and division. While many are drawn to images of pilgrims and Native Americans, we often forget that it was during the Civil War that the holiday was instituted. With a country torn apart, President Abraham Lincoln declared the last Thursday of November in 1863 “as a day of thanksgiving and praise” to promote unity. The hymn, adopted into Thanksgiving observances,

continued presence. In the Gospel of Luke, prayer is a mark of Christian discipleship, and perhaps the key to their unity: **a community focused on gathering, praying, and seeking the will of God is the foundation for harmonious relationships.**

We know this was not a one-time event, as we read at the end of the next chapter of Acts, where *“all believers were together and had everything in common... every day they continued to meet together... they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people”* (Acts 2:42-47, excerpt). The Greek word for “fellowship” or a “communal form of life” found in Acts 2:42, *koinonia*, is the way the author of the Gospel names the congregation. Eventually other designations will be used to denote the gathering of the church, but one of the earliest was synonymous with *fellowship*. Their unity, rooted in prayer and mutual care, became a hallmark of their identity and mission, setting a powerful example for future generations of believers.

Reflections for Today

As we continue to sing “A Prayer of Thanksgiving,” (“We Gather Together”) it is essential to acknowledge both the hymn’s inspirational message and its historical context. The words “He chastens and hastens His will to make known” can serve as a reminder not only of divine intervention but also of the ongoing need for prayerful reflection and self-correction.

In this time of increasing polarization and social fragmentation, the hymn may be seen not merely as an expression of thanksgiving but also as a call to address the divides that persist. As Lincoln urged in his proclamation,

“I recommend [that all] fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation, and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.”

“A Prayer of Thanksgiving” invites us to celebrate and reflect, to be grateful for our blessings while also acknowledging and working to mend the fractures within our communities. In this way, the hymn remains both a cherished tradition and a profound call for introspection, fellowship, prayer, and unity.

We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing;
He chastens and hastens His will to make known;
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing.
Sing praises to His name, He forgets not His own.

Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
Ordaining, maintaining His kingdom divine;
So from the beginning the fight we were winning:
The Lord was at our side- the glory be Thine!

We all do extol Thee, Thou leader triumphant,
And pray that Thou still our defender wilt be.
Let Thy congregation escape tribulation;
Thy name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!



Dear family in Christ:

Imagine standing at the threshold of the Infinite, knocking on the door of eternity, and finding it swing wide open to you. That's the breathtaking reality of prayer. It's not just a ritual or a religious duty; it's an intimate conversation with the very essence of existence, with the high and holy God, who transcends time and space.

Picture yourself pouring out your heart, every sorrow, every joy, every difficulty, into the receptive ear of Divine sympathy. Think about consulting with Divine wisdom on every perplexity, drawing from Divine resources to meet every need. This isn't some distant, abstract concept reserved for special occasions or select individuals. It's a living, dynamic connection that's available to you at any moment, in any place, regardless of your status or achievements.

Consider the sheer wonder of this privilege. You don't need to be a saint, a scholar, or a celebrity to access our Father. There's no price tag attached, no prerequisite of personal merit. It's a gift freely given; a doorway flung open to all who seek it.

So, as you navigate the highs and lows of life, remember that every moment is an opportunity to reach out, to connect, to commune with the Divine. Embrace this astonishing access to God, and let it infuse every aspect of your relationship with Him.

Moving from eloquent thought to simple practice: *"Ere you left your room this morning, did you think to pray?"*



JOHN S. SCHNABEL

From our *Reflections on Prayer*
Small Group series -
Available now!



ADVENT RESOURCES Coming Soon!

Names of Jesus



Starting on December 1st, through Christmas Day, check our Instagram and Facebook pages for a daily exploration of the **Names of Jesus**. Each post will include a Bible reading and devotional thought to inspire contemplation during the season of Advent.

Resources for families and children, as well as a *Christmas Carol Sing-Along*, will also be made available as of December 1st at **www.nac-usa.org/advent**

Two additions to our **"Songs of Christmas"** Small Group series will be added this year as well: *"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"* and *"The First Noel."*

