

Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above

~Other Speakers G-L: Hymn Stories:

Author --Johann J. Sch  tz, 1640-1690

English Translation --Frances E. Cox, 1812-1897

Music --From the Bohemian Brethren's Hymnal Kirchenges  nge of 1566

Tune Name --"Mit Freuden Zart" ("With Great Personal Gladness")

"The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof.... The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see His glory." Psalm 97:1,6

This stately hymn is the product of several significant historical events occurring in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which greatly shaped the course of church history. The first was the Protestant Reformation Movement climaxed by Martin Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses at the Cathedral of Wittenberg in 1517. From this time Lutheranism was a dominant religious force in Germany and throughout Europe.

Another factor during this time was the role of the followers of John Huss, the Bohemian martyr burned at the stake in 1415 for his strong evangelical views. These zealous believers were known as the Bohemian-Moravian Brethren and were located in the area of what is now Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Following the Reformation Movement in Germany, many of these Brethren migrated to Germany in search of religious freedom. These people were known everywhere for their vibrant singing and Christian witness as well as for their strong missionary concern.

Another important influence in the course of church history was the Thirty-Years' War (1618-1648). Germany, the battleground of this conflict between warring Catholic and Protestant forces from various countries throughout Europe, was reduced to a state of misery that baffles description. The German population dwindled from sixteen million to six million. Out of this terrible epoch, however, were wrung some of the noblest expressions of praise in all hymnody. As is often the case, it took the great tragedies of the time to again focus men's attention upon God.

From the tragedies of this terrible war arose a movement in Germany within the Lutheran Church called Pietism. The leader of the movement was a Lutheran pastor in Frankfort, Germany, Philip J. Spener (1635-1705). Mainly through small cell prayer and Bible study groups, he sought to influence nominal church people who had become accustomed to the dead orthodoxy that had overtaken the church. Spener taught them the meaning of inner personal faith in Christ and the demands that such faith make upon the believer for holy Christian living.

From these important influences--the German Reformation; the dynamic beliefs and practices of the Bohemian-Moravian Brethren; the terrible tragedies of the Thirty-Years' War, causing many to realize as never before a personal dependence upon a sovereign God and not mere reliance upon a church; the rise of the Pietist Movement with its emphasis upon individual faith and holy living--there developed a great wealth of excellent German hymns. These influences produced hymns that had greater subjectivity and were more passionate in character than were the earlier Lutheran hymns.

One of the important characteristics of the seventeenth century Pietistic Movement was the involvement of laymen in the church. One finds that many of the hymn writers and important voices were the lay people from all walks of life. Such was the case with Johann J. Sch  tz, an authority in civil and canon law, living in Frankfort, Germany. He was closely allied with Philip Spener and the practices of the pietists in establishing small cell groups. These groups were known as collegia pietatis, which gave rise to the name Pietists. Sch  tz wrote a number of religious publications as well as five hymns. Of the hymns only this one, however, is still in use.

The Pietist Movement gave birth to a great revival in hymnody in Germany, both in Lutheran and Reformed circles. It took considerable time for the English-speaking world, however, to discover this great wealth of hymnody. Finally, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, English translations were made of many of these fine hymns. Among the important English translators of the nineteenth century was Frances E. Cox, a member of the Anglican Church and a native of Oxford, England. She was one of the first to rediscover and translate German hymns. Her collection of translations was first published in 1841.

The music for this fine hymn was taken from a Bohemian Brethren hymnal, Kirchenges  nge, published in

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Eibenschutz, Moravia, in 1566.