

# Now thank we all our God

For thus it was — is *now* — and shall be *evermore*

Martin Rinkart was a pastor during the Lutheran Reformation. His arrival as minister in the Saxon town of Eilenburg came as the *Thirty Years War* was ravaging Europe (1618-1648). The merciless war was no stranger to his town or to his church members. Indeed, the town walls of Eilenburg were seen as a refuge by many seeking protection from war as well as persecution.

Before long, Eilenburg was overrun with pilgrims and refugees. Something they brought with them was even worse than the deadly scourge of war.

They brought the Black Plague.

Historians believe the deadliest period of the plague in Eilenburg came in the years 1636 and 1637. Eventually, Martin Rinkart was the only pastor alive in the town. At one point, he was conducting fifty (50) funeral services per day. In the year 1637, he presided over at least 4,000 funerals. One of those funerals was for his own wife.

Few know the name of Martin Rinkart today, but his name appears in hundreds of hymn books. His most familiar hymn is known to us today as “**Now Thank We All Our God**,” written in 1636. The most striking point is that Martin Rinkart wrote that hymn as death and pestilence surrounded him, and as the ravages of war and plague killed people he knew by the day.

At the height of this misery, Rinkart was *thanking God*? He was writing a *hymn* of thankfulness and leading people *to sing of their thankfulness*?

Indeed he was. What can explain this thankfulness in the face of death, war, plague, suffering? Only the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only the grace and mercy of God can justify such brazen thankfulness. In the face of death and against the temptation of despair, Pastor Rinkart declared:

**“Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done, in whom His world rejoices.  
Who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”**

If we are honest, such words of thankfulness seem right and natural to Christians. We know that we are *called* to thankfulness and that a *lack of gratitude* lurks at the very heart of sin. We are warned by the Apostle Paul, who tells us that *the inception of sin is found in refusing to honor God or give Him thanks* (Romans 1:21).

“*Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving*,” the Psalmist commands [in 147:7]. But in a time of plague? In the face of 4,000 funerals?

A clue is found in the second verse of the hymn, where Rinkart makes a profound request of the Lord. As we sing the hymn, we ask God to “guide us when perplexed.”

***When perplexed?*** Martin Rinkart did not have easy answers to the suffering and death he saw around him. He did not seek a superficial *escape* in the face of such agony, and he did not *deny* the pain. He *felt* the pain.

**Instead, he admitted *perplexity*:** Why now? Why Eilenburg? Why death on such a scale? Rinkart did not know the answers to these questions, but he admitted to being perplexed.

And yet, this faithful pastor did not abandon himself to despair. Instead, **he asked God to *guide us when we are perplexed*.** Then he taught his congregation to sing, “and free us from all ills of *this world in the next*.”

By the power of Christ, in the world to come there will be no more pain, no more war, no more death. As Paul declares, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:56-57)

Yes! Thanks be to God — for He has given us victory over sin and death and plague and the curse through our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is good for Christians in the United States to look back to 1621 for the first Thanksgiving celebration of our national memory. It is good to think of the Pilgrims and their gratitude to God for seeing them across stormy seas and through an unimaginably hard winter, in which they had known their own share of death and sorrow. [Half of the *Mayflower's* passengers had died.]

It is good to look back, but we must look back further than the Pilgrims in 1621, or Pastor Martin Rinkart in 1636. We must look all the way back to the gratitude to which we are called from the opening of Genesis to the close of the Book of Revelation. Ultimately, we look back with gratitude to the saving work of God in the atonement purchased by our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Pilgrims knew that, and they gave thanks. Pastor Martin Rinkart knew that, and he taught his congregation to sing thankfulness to God in the face of death and plague.

The last word belongs to Martin Rinkart, from the final verse of his hymn:

**“All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,  
the Son and Spirit blest, who reign in highest heaven.  
The one eternal God, whom heaven and earth adore;  
for thus it *was* — is *now* — and shall be *evermore*.”**

~ by R. Albert Mohler Jr., for *World magazine* on November 25, 2021