

“Lord God, Help in this Trouble”

A CHRISTIAN SONG WRITTEN BY HULDREICH ZWINGLI
WHEN HE WAS ATTACKED BY THE PESTILENCE

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was the newly appointed People’s Priest, or *Leutpriestertum*, at Zurich’s Groosmünster church. While visiting the Swiss town of Bad Pfäfers in September 1519 he learned of a new wave of plague devastating Zurich and immediately returned home. Zwingli ministered to the city’s afflicted and himself fell ill. His brother, Andreas, would perish from the disease, along with an estimated quarter to half of all Zurich’s citizens.

Zwingli’s song shows him falling sick, battling the disease, and convalescing. The words speak to his acceptance of divine providence (“Do what Thou wilt; me nothing lacks. Thy vessel am I; to make or break altogether”) and promise a future of faithful acts (“my lips must thy praise and teaching bespeak more than ever before, however it may go”). As a Reformation leader Zwingli went on to oppose longstanding church practices that contradicted his understanding of the Bible, including the veneration of saints and statues, priestly celibacy, and the sale of indulgences.

Although he didn’t write the Plague Song to be performed during worship services, the text can be found in many sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant hymnals. Zwingli’s words remind us 500 years later that a commitment to others and even personal tribulation can lead to a renewed state of grace.



General Assembly 224 set aside this year’s Reformation Sunday as a day for the “whole church to commit to continuous discernment of how to meet the social justice, economic, and spiritual challenges of the pandemic.” The Presbyterian Historical Society joins this effort by sharing Zwingli’s Plague Song in English on page 2 of this insert or at www.history.pcusa.org/rs

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(End of 1519)

[Ein christenlich gsang, gestelt durch H. Z., als er mit pestilentz angriffen ward. In Schuler and Schultbess ed., ii., 2, 270-2. In modern literary German, translated, pp. 272-4. In Egli and Finsler ed., i., 67-9. Translation reprinted from my life of Zwingli, pp. 132-4.

This is the most successful of Zwingli's preserved poetry. It was the memorial of his serious illness from the plague which in 1519 carried off nearly half of the population of Zurich. Though unadapted to singing it has been given a tune and is found in many hymn-books of the 15th and 16th centuries, published in Zurich.]

I.—*At the Beginning of the Illness.*

Help, Lord God, help
In this trouble!
I think Death is at the door.
Stand before¹ me, Christ;
For Thou hast overcome him!
To Thee I cry:
If it is Thy will,
Take out the dart,
Which wounds me
Nor lets me have an hour's
Rest or repose!
Will'st Thou however
That Death take me
In the midst of my days,

¹ In the sense of "protect."

² The words may also mean equally well, "nothing shall be too much for me."

³ "It," *i.e.*, my spirit.

So let it be!

Do what Thou wilt;

Me nothing lacks.²

Thy vessel am I;

To make or break altogether.

For, if Thou takest away

My spirit

From this earth,

Thou dost it, that it³ may not

grow worse,

Nor spot

The pious lives and ways of

others.

Song Written when Attacked with Pestilence 57

II.—*In the Midst of his Illness.*

Console me, Lord God, console
me!
The illness increases,
Pain and fear seize
My soul and body.
Come to me then,
With Thy grace, O my only
consolation!
It¹ will surely save
Everyone, who
His heart's desire
And hopes sets
On Thee, and who besides
Despises all gain and loss.
Now all is up.

My tongue is dumb,
It cannot speak a word.
My senses are all blighted.
Therefore is it time
That Thou my fight
Conductest hereafter;
Since I am not

So strong, that I
Can bravely

Make resistance

To the Devil's wiles and treach-

erous hand.

Still will my spirit

Constantly abide by Thee, how-

ever he rages.

III.—*During Convalescence.*

Sound, Lord God, sound!
I think I am
Already coming back.²
Yes, if it please Thee,
That no spark of sin
Rule me longer on earth.
Then my lips must
Thy praise and teaching
Bespeak more
Than ever before,
However it may go,
In simplicity and with no
danger.
Although I must
The punishment of death

¹ "It," *i.e.*, Thy grace.

¹ *L.e.*, if I had died this time.

² *L.e.*, to health, to myself.

⁴ *L.e.*, to death's door.

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