

I have always thought of *We Gather Together* as a Thanksgiving Day hymn—symbolic of harvest time. However, when I learned its history, I quickly realized that I had misread it. Perhaps I was the only person who thought of it this way. So I Googled it and found that others associate it with Thanksgiving Day too. But its origins are hardly from a harvest festival. And while it is a hymn of praise to God for blessings received, the words “Thanks” and “Thanksgiving” appear nowhere in its verses.

The story begins in the 16th century with Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. He was born in the Netherlands (i.e. Holland), and his empire included the Netherlands. Charles and his son, King Philip II, considered it their duty to eradicate Protestantism, which had established a strong foothold in the Netherlands.

In 1556 (two years before his death), Charles gave Philip II rule over Spain and the Low Countries (Holland and Belgium). Ten years later Dutch Protestants staged a minor rebellion in which they stormed Catholic churches to destroy statues, which they considered to be idolatrous. Philip responded by sending the Duke of Alba (Don Fernando Alvarez de Toledo y Pimentel) to restore order.

The Duke proved both decisive and violent. He executed a large number of Dutch Protestants for fomenting rebellion, and even executed Catholics who had been guilty of tolerating Protestantism. This provoked further rebellion, to which the Duke responded by executing many more people.

Heavy taxation led to further rebellion. Philip replaced the Duke of Alba with Luis de Requesens, who took a more moderate approach.

However, Spain had overextended itself and was unable to pay its soldiers, which led to mutiny and chaos. In 1576, Spanish soldiers captured Antwerp and killed 8,000 citizens.

We Gather Together was written near the end of the 16th century to acknowledge that turbulent past and to look to a better future: “We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing” acknowledges their need—a need made apparent by the suffering they had undergone. “He chastens” alludes to the events just past. “The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing” alludes to the violence of the Spanish soldiers— a violence by then stilled. “He forgets not his own” is a tribute of praise to God for allowing them to emerge triumphant from their turbulent history. The closing stanzas of Psalm 44 speak of a similar turn of events in Israel’s history: *“We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.”*

The hymn was published in 1625. Edward Kremser discovered it in 1877, translated it into Latin, and published it in Vienna. The hymn tune usually associated with this hymn is named in his honor—Kremser. In 1894, Theodore Baker translated the hymn into English for his employer, G. Shirmer, a New York music publishing house.

Stories of such wanton violence and persecution can be difficult for us to imagine let alone relate to. However, almost all of us have at some time decided to break off a relationship, as with a young lady: Dear Abby, “I became engaged to a man and just found out he had a wooden leg. Do you think I should break it off?” No, seriously.

Maybe you have been on the other end where someone decided to stop being your friend. Because human relationships can be volatile, it’s easy to fear that God will do the same to us. But as long as we

are joined to God through faith in Jesus Christ, we need not fear separation from God in this life or in the life to come. Why? Because of his steadfast love which endures forever.

Romans 8 verse 36 quotes Psalm 44 verse 22: *"Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."* The gist of the psalm is this: God's people suffer inexplicably and must rely upon God's love (*hesed*) to endure. The idea of the Hebrew word *hesed* is God's love based on God's faithfulness to his Word. This psalm is perhaps the clearest example of a search for some other cause of national disaster rather than guilt and punishment. Suffering may be more of a battle-scar than a punishment.

In the NT Paul's assertion is this: *Nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Paul asks a rhetorical question (*"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"*) and then postulates suggested but inadequate answers (*"Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"*). If we handle the sufferings typical of humankind in a way that pleases God, we will be rewarded. Let's also remember that Paul writes to the church in Rome not from an easy chair, but as someone who also suffered much for Christ.

Paul quotes Psalm 44 to demonstrate that persecution and suffering are not a sign of God's displeasure with us, but a sign of our loyalty to Christ: *"For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."* The verses of Romans 8 are precious to us, but especially meaningful to believers suffering persecution in the world today. We don't just scrape by—Paul says, *"in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."*

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he writes about our resurrection hope in the midst of our weakness: *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body* (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). Apt words for 2020, don't you think?

Five years ago, 21 Egyptian Christians were martyred on a beach in Libya by Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists. These Coptic Christian hostages were executed for no other reason than their faith in Jesus Christ. As horrible as the episode was, it also offered inspiration and testimony to the power of faith. The 21 men executed that day were itinerant tradesmen working on a construction job. The executioners demanded that each hostage identify his religious allegiance. Given the opportunity to deny their faith, the Egyptians declared their faith in Jesus as their Lord. Steadfast in their belief, even in the face of evil and certain death, each one was beheaded. However, one man out of the 21 was not from Egypt, but from Ghana. According to some sources, he was not originally a Christian, but he saw the immense faith of the others, and when the terrorists asked him if he rejected Jesus Christ, he reportedly said, "Their God is my God", knowing that he would be killed. Coptic Bishop Demetrios writes, "In that moment before his death, he became a Christian!"

We are secure in the love of God **in Christ Jesus our Lord**. We are not wrong to wonder at times whether God has forgotten us, or unfriended us, for a time. But when those doubts arise, we must remind ourselves of the truth of God's Word. **Nothing, no, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ**. That is something to give thanks for as *We Gather Together* on this Thanksgiving Day. Amen.