



History of Hymns: "By Gracious Powers"

An excerpt by Dr. Michael Hawn, professor of sacred music at Perkins School of Theology

Of all of the hymns written in the 20th century, “**By Gracious Powers**” Hymnal 1982, H-695, has one of the most poignant stories.

Australian hymnologist Wesley Milgate provides the setting for this text, written in the waning days of World War II by the imprisoned Lutheran minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945):

From his prison bunker, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this New Year message to his friends on the last New Year’s Eve of his life, 31 December 1944; it was smuggled out of his prison, and has become one of Bonhoeffer’s best known compositions.”

How does a smuggled letter from a Nazi prison become a hymn? The poem made its way to his mother in a letter dated Dec. 28, 1944. It was then printed in *Brief und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* by Eberhard Bethge and then translated into English for *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1953).

British hymnologist J. R. Watson notes: “Bonhoeffer’s exemplary life and martyrdom have given this text an authority which is unique among twentieth-century hymns. . . . But the hymn stands on its own, without the need of special circumstances to justify its inclusion.”

The singer is captured by the eloquence and depth in the first line: We are “sheltered” by the “gracious powers” of God, allowing us to “confidently wait . . . come what may.” The grace of God, pervading our existence, is “with us night and morning” and always “greet[s] us each new day.”

Knowing the context of the author’s circumstance clarifies the second stanza, as Bonhoeffer faced “evil days” with “burdens hard to bear.” But God’s “sure salvation” prepares our “frightened souls.”

The third stanza recalls the image of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane: “. . . when this cup you give is filled to brimming/with bitter sorrow. . . .” Following Christ’s example, “we take [this cup] thankfully and without trembling” from Christ’s “good and so beloved a hand.”

The final stanza places the difficulties of our lives within the broader context of a life belonging to our Creator. “The joy we had, the brightness of your sun” overshadows the burdens of life and “all the days we lived through,” and we rest assured that “our whole life shall then be [Christ’s] alone.”