

Scripture and History

Isaiah 66:23 From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD.

In many American hymnals, "**We Gather Together**" appears as a Thanksgiving hymn. Perhaps this is because of the opening line and the general idea that God is with us regardless of our circumstances. However, the hymn speaks more about God's providence throughout the trials of life. The story behind this hymn clarifies its text.

This hymn is a late sixteenth-century expression of celebration of freedom by The Netherlands from Spanish oppression. The Dutch, long a stronghold for the Reformed theology of John Calvin, were in a struggle against Spain for their political independence and against the Catholic Church for religious freedom.

Like many older hymns, it finds its way to us through a circuitous route. Although listed as an anonymous hymn, some sources indicate that Adrianus Valerius (c. 1575-1625), known for his poems on the Dutch War of Independence from the perspective of a peasant, authored the original text in Dutch.



Austrian Edward Kremser (1838-1914) included the hymn in *Sechs Altniederländische Volkslieder (Six Old Netherlands Folksongs)* in 1877 for his men's chorus, all six anonymous songs taken from the Valerius collection 250 years earlier.

The story extends to the United States through Theodore Baker (1851-1934), a New York-born musicologist who studied in Leipzig and authored the famous *Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Baker translated the hymn from German for an anthem entitled "Prayer for Thanksgiving" published in 1894. Baker is the source of the hymn's traditional Thanksgiving connection in the United States.

Some of the political overtones in this hymn faithfully translated by Baker are apparent. Hymnologist Albert Bailey suggests that the phrase, "The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing," is an allusion to the persecution of the Catholic Church under the policies of Spain. Thousands had been massacred and hundreds of homes burned by the Spanish in 1576 during the Siege of Antwerp. Other such references are apparent.

In stanza two, the writer states, "so from the beginning the fight we were winning," This is an eschatological stanza. The ultimate battle has not been won and will not be won until all battles cease. The hymn's popularity increased during World War II when singers connected "the wicked oppressing" to Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. More recently, the "We Gather Together" was featured at the Funeral Mass for Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1994.

by C. Michael Hawn; see the entire article at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-we-gather-together>

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