



## I Fall Asleep in Jesus' Wounds

Text: Paul Eber (1511-1569)

Tune: *Geistliche Lieder*, Leipzig, 1539

Death is something that surrounds us. We don't like to think about death because it is made up of so many uncertainties. But the Church teaches that "death is but a slumber," as Martin Luther said in his paraphrase of the *Nunc Dimittis*. For the Christian, death is the gate to paradise, and because of that, is nothing to fear. We "fall asleep in Jesus' wounds," knowing that His Blood covers us and we have nothing to fear in death.



Paul Eber

The hymn, "I Fall Asleep in Jesus' Wounds" was written by Paul Eber. Eber was born November 8, 1511, the son of a poor tailor. He was always a small, sickly child and because of his illnesses found books his constant companion. His father, made every sacrifice to be able to send Paul to a good grammar school, often saving money by only feeding his wife and son. Because of these sacrifices, Paul attended the grammar school in Nürnberg, and in 1523 left home to attend the Gymnasium in Ansbach. However, his illness forced him to return home. While on his return journey home he was thrown from the horse he was riding and was dragged for more than a mile. The injuries he sustained in this accident stayed with him the rest of his life.

By 1525 he was able to return to Nürnberg, this time attending the St. Lorenz school. In 1532, Paul was honored with a trip to Wittenberg to learn from Martin Luther. Luther was taken by Eber's thoughtfulness and kind manners, and he was invited by Luther to meet Philipp Melanchthon. Melanchthon was also taken by the young man, especially his fine handwriting. Melanchthon

was known for his poor penmanship and soon took in Eber to be his personal scribe.

After Eber graduated from Wittenberg in 1536, he became a tutor for the philosophy faculty at the University. He worked in that position until 1544 when he was appointed professor of Latin, a position later expanded to include physics and Old Testament. By 1557 his teaching load was again expanded when he began teaching Hebrew.

Eber was so engrossed in his work that he often neglected his personal life. To remedy this, Melanchthon chose a wife for Eber, whom he gladly married and lived happily with her for many years. Unfortunately in the same years, Eber was caught in the theological debates of the time, as Melanchthon began to adopt the doctrines of Calvinism (for example, the teaching that the Body and Blood of Christ are not present in the Lord's Supper). Eber, because of his closeness with Melanchthon, was accused of also espousing Melanchthon's theological errors. In 1569, because of his refusal to reject Melanchthon's teachings, he and many others were excommunicated. This gave Eber great sorrow, and as he returned home, was caught in cold weather and fell very ill. His wife unexpectedly died after his return home, and that sorrow eventually became too great to bear, and he died December 10, 1569.

During his lifetime, Eber wrote several hymns. His hymns are known for their tenderness and their evoking of emotion. This was in stark contrast to the hymns of Luther and others from that time. However, Eber's hymns and the more stoic hymns both grew in great popularity. By the time of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), his hymns were widely used across Europe, both in the Divine Service and in personal devotions.

Eber's hymn, "I Fall Asleep in Jesus' Wounds" points us solidly to the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Because of "Jesus' Blood and righteousness," "I shall reach the heavenly land" (st. 1). This is the Christian's confidence in life and in death. Baptized into Christ, His Blood covers us and forgives us fully. This is then our confidence as we depart in peace (st. 2). Death then leads us to our true life, where we receive that for which faith longs: eternal life with Our Lord Jesus Christ.