

Ursula's Song: Ursula Hellrigel, 1538

Background: In 1538, Ursula Hellrigel was captured and imprisoned at the age of 17. While in prison, she wrote a hymn—unusual for a young woman at that time—that spoke to how she endured the hardships of prison. After repeated postponements, she was finally released five years later on the condition that she leave her home and never return.

Requirements: 7 persons

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Narrator 1: Ursula Hellrigel's [*Hel-reegel*] story took place in the district of Tirol, the beautiful, mountainous region of the Austrian Alps. For a number of years the authorities had been trying to clear the region of Anabaptists, but circles of Anabaptists persisted in the valleys among peasant farming families.

Narrator 2: Using both persuasive and bloody means, these efforts had mixed results. Ursula's own mother had died in prison, an unrepentant Anabaptist, although her brother Oswald recanted and returned home. In the mid-1530s persecution of Anabaptists peaked in the region of Tirol.

Narrator 1: Whole families as well as young individuals tried to flee their homes and escape along the rivers to safety in Moravia where the rulers were more tolerant. Ursula, a 17-year-old farm girl from one of the valleys, joined a group of ten Anabaptists attempting this perilous journey. They had just set off when, not far from their home, the authorities seized them.

Narrator 2: May 1538. Here is Ursula, now one of only eight Anabaptist prisoners, in the prison at Saint Petersburg castle.

Ursula: Oh, I get so *tired* listening to the prison guards' useless chatter!

Prison guard 1: Well, they've had success with one of them prisoners. That young fellow—he's already decided to give it up. Good thinking on his part. Nineteen years old. He's better off admitting his mistakes, doing his penance. His family will pay his fine, and he's going home to his farm—where he belongs.

Prison guard 2: Did you hear what they've done with that scoundrel priest they had with them? Sent him off to Brixen. Ha. They'll do a good job on him there. Serves him right, leading all those folks down the wrong path. Good riddance.

Prison guard 1: Now we're stuck with these stupid folks. Got to watch 'em till Dr. Müller gets here. They say he's pretty good at convincing them to change their minds. He's going to teach them the truth and make them recant.

Prison guard 2: I say, good luck to him. They're stubborn all right. But then, what else could you expect from folks from the Otz valley. They're an ignorant lot up there.

Narrator 1: Dr. Müller was not successful so the authorities put the prisoners on a meager diet for six and a half months, a full half year. What next? The local authorities saw that starving the Anabaptists made no difference to their beliefs. What should they do? They asked the King, and the King said,

King: Do whatever is necessary. You must persuade those stubborn Anabaptists. Make them recant. They must renounce their beliefs to save their souls.

Narrator 2: Sept 1539. Ursula languishes in the Petersburg castle prison. There have been repeated postponements of hearings of her case. By now the prison authorities are concerned that the costs of keeping her in prison were rising too high so they try to draw on her inheritance. But they find that the family had dispersed the property among her married brothers and sisters. The authorities order them to pay off the hefty amount—equivalent to eight months' pay for a working carpenter at that time.

Narrator 1: 1541. It's early in the year, and Ursula is still in prison, but she's now been transferred over high mountains to Sigmundskron Castle. The authorities hope that costs of her upkeep in prison will now be paid by the treasury of the district of Tirol. It's deep winter, and Ursula is given only minimal food and minimal clothing.

Ursula's Song

1. Eternal Father in heaven
 I call to you from deep within
 Do not let me turn from you
 Hold me in your eternal truth
 Until I reach my end

2. O God, keep my heart and mouth
 Watch over me, Lord, always
 Do not let me part from you
 Whether in anguish, fear or need
 Keep me pure in joy

3. My eternal Lord and father
 I am your poor unworthy child
 Teach me and make me know
 So that I can observe your ways
 That is my truest desire

4. To walk in your strength in death
 Through tribulation, fear and need
 Keep me in your strength
 That I may never again be separated
 From your love, O God

5. There are many who travel this path
On which stands the cup of suffering
And also much false doctrine
With which they try to turn us away
From Christ our Lord
6. I lift up my soul to you, Lord
I hope in you in times of danger
Let me not become a disgrace
So that my enemies have the victory
Over me on this earth
7. They have me here locked up
I wait, O God, from my heart
With great desire
If you would only stir
And save your ones in prison
8. O God Father, for your kingdom
Makes us like the five wise virgins
Who were alert
In waiting for the bridegroom to come
With his chosen band
9. Eternal king of heaven
Give us eternal food and drink
Feed us with your truth
Which never spoils
For it is of spiritual nature
10. If you hold back your food from us
Then all is lost and for nothing
We can accomplish nothing without you
We hope in you through your grace
That we have not been mistaken
11. I do not doubt the power of God
Truthful is his judgment
He will forsake no one
Who is firm in faith
And remains in truth
12. Be comforted, you Christians
And always be joyous through Jesus Christ
He gives us love and faith
God comforts through his holy word
And we must trust in it

13. I bid God and his church
That he be today my guardian
For his name's sake
My Father, let it be so
Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Narrator 2: December 1542. Ursula, transported again over the mountain passes, has now landed in the prison of the city of Innsbruck. They tell her she is to remain there “until further notice.” She is given no explanations.

Narrator 1: October 1543. Ursula has now been imprisoned for five years, no longer a young girl, but a 22-year-old Christian tested to the extreme for her faith. She is frail in health, and her family back home is concerned for her. Others have pleaded for her release.

Narrator 2: King Ferdinand’s government decides it is time to release Ursula but with strict conditions.

Judge: Ursula Hellrigel, you are to be pardoned and released on the following conditions: You will leave this territory immediately. You will swear never to return to this your homeland, on penalty of losing your life. Your relatives are to pay for all the expenses of your imprisonment these past five years.

Ursula: I cannot swear an oath. But I can promise to leave the territory as you ask.

Judge: I warn you. If you attempt to return to this country, we will treat you like anyone else.

Narrator 1: Ursula did in fact leave Tirol. She spent the rest of her life among the Hutterite Anabaptists in Moravia. The Hutterite Chronicle records that after she “obtained release, unharmed in her faith and conscience, she returned to the church and there fell asleep in the Lord.”

Sources: Snyder and Huebert Hecht, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, 196-201; Daniel Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 56-58. Ursula’s Song was copied by hand into Hutterite documents under her name, but it was published in the *Ausbund* as Song 36, mistakenly attributed to Annelein of Freiburg.

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