

A Mighty Fortress is our God: The Song of Martin Luther

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Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
And the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.
Though its waters roar and foam
And the mountains quake with their surging. *Selah*

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
He lifts his voice, the earth melts. *Selah*

Come and see the works of the Lord,
The desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
He burns the shields with fire.
“Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.”
The Lord Almighty is with us;
The God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

1. A mighty fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon;
He helps us free from ev'ry need that has us now o'er taken,
The old evil foe now means deadly woe; Deep guile and great might
are his dread arms in fight; On earth is not his equal.
2. With might of ours can naught be done; Soon were our loss effected.
But for us fights the valiant one whom God himself elected.
You ask, “Who is this?” Jesus Christ it is, the almighty Lord.
And there's no other God; he holds the field forever.
3. Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not over pow'r us.
This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us none.
He's judged; the deed is done! One little word can fell him.
4. The Word they still shall let remain, nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain with his good gifts and Spirit.
And do what they will—hate, steal, hurt, or kill—though all may be gone,
Our victory is won; the kingdom's ours forever!

Who Has not Heard of this Famous Song?

Scores of believers during the course of their religious instruction have learned this song by heart. It is the song of Martin Luther. It is the song of the Reformation. Perhaps we have sung this song with other Christians in a centrally located place at a Reformation celebration. Together we joined in the singing of the “protection and comfort song of the Reformation.” As we sang we may have thought of the Wartburg in Eisenach, Germany where Martin Luther once found protection after he was placed under the ban of the church and also on the outlaw list by the Emperor of the day. Today the Wartburg still has the feel of security and safety. Its thick walls promise security; her towers beam forth majesty into the Thuringian forest and countryside. The comparison is there to see. Our God is our strong fortress and ever-present security. In the faith of our God we find sanctuary.

Luther Wrote Songs

In the year 1526 Luther rearranged the German church service. He formed what we know of today as the *German Messe*. His idea was that the congregation should take an active role in the church service. His intent was that they sing hymns in the German language. Thus Luther began to work at creating hymns for this purpose. He also took some psalms and reset them to music so that they might be used within the congregation. At times he also created melodies for these hymns or re-arranged existing spiritual melodies or secular tunes of the day for his purposes. Eventually he composed thirty-six songs. Songs which were sung on the streets and market places and not only in church services. Among all these songs, no doubt the most famous and important was “A Mighty Fortress”.

His songs quickly made a deep impression upon the people of God. Much more so than even his translation of the Bible. His foes and critics from the earliest point on realized the importance of his songs. They stated, “These people are singing themselves into the church of the heretic.” Dr. Eck the main opponent of Luther stated that the Reformation was brought into existence more through Luther’s songs than through Luther’s writings.

This remains true even to this day within the congregation: songs are a source of devotion. Especially in times of great need they express protection and power. Many have reported the power and the strength, which flow as together we sing great songs of Christendom.

Psalm 46

The basis of this great hymn is Psalm 46 which Luther adapted and composed into this song. The original psalm directs our attention to the city of Jerusalem with its massive walls and towers. Jerusalem with the temple of God served as the great place of refuge for protection and security in times of great need or disaster. Whoever lived in this city of God did not have to fear. Whoever lives in the “dwellings of the Most High” does not need to fear what is going to happen in this world—great catastrophes, political upheavals or the onslaught of the enemy—because God is within them. God gives the gift of his presence and protection. Just as we read in Psalm 31 verses 3 and 4, “Since you are my rock and my fortress for the sake of your name lead and guide me, free me from the trap that is set for me for you are my refuge.”

In Psalm 46 Luther saw the great certainty of faith of the Old Testament believers who sang this psalm. He saw their complete confidence in the strength of God. He also knew that God is our helper in the time of great need. The vision of the city of God as the psalmist has portrayed it projected Luther to the picture of a great castle or fort set on a hill. The city of Jerusalem would be conquered and eventually totally destroyed on the tenth of August in the year 70 A.D. by General Titus who would later become Caesar in Rome. In the place of these heathen kings and enemy countries, which the psalm singers saw marching toward them, Luther speaks of the old evil foe. In the third verse of the song he speaks of the devil “though devils all the world should fill.” Luther in his song takes up the security of the faith of the psalm singers in the fearless trust in God even in the most difficult situations. Luther uses the description of the city as almost approaching paradise with its waters

that roar and foam. To put it another way with its little well where joy and desire reign. In the place of the city of God Luther describes the kingdom of peace and the coming of the kingdom of God as a goal of all history and of our faith. He speaks of the power of the victory of God—“the kingdom ours forever.”

What is the Background of this Great Hymn of Christendom?

The background of this great hymn of Christendom cannot be ascertained with complete certainty. A number of different events could have led to its writing. When Luther was forty-four years old he suffered his first kidney stone attack in the same year that the plague of 1527 came to Wittenberg. As a result of this plague the university at Wittenberg temporarily moved to the city of Jena. Luther's first child, Hans, became so sick at this time that it was feared that he was going to die.

The opinion of a number of other Luther researchers is less convincing that Luther composed this hymn on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the 95 theses being nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. At that time Luther wrote to a friend: “Our one great comfort that we can stand against the rage of the devil is this that we have the word of God which saves souls even as our bodies are brought asunder. Pray for us that we might bravely bear the hand of God and conquer the power and cunning of the devil whether it be through death or through life.”

It could also certainly be the case that Luther composed this hymn as he remembered his time of protection at the Wartburg. This was indeed a tough time for the Augustinian monk and university professor. The church had placed him and his followers under the ban. The Emperor had promised Luther free passage. Professor Hus in the year 1415 had also been promised free passage by Emperor Sigismund. However, he had a bad experience with this promise. He was actually taken captive and eventually labeled a heretic and burned at the stake. Now the twenty-one year old Emperor Charles V invited the Wittenberg professor to the Diet of Worms on the 18th of April, 1521. This also could not be considered truly free passage because as Luther was traveling back home from Worms to Wittenberg, this free passage was rescinded so that Luther was on his own. Free passage was to be given for Luther and his followers to return by the 26th of May. However, while they were underway this date was changed back to the 8th of May.

Elector Frederick of Saxon or Frederick the Wise arranged for Luther to have protection at the Wartburg. At the moment, that was the only possibility to spare Luther from being taken captive and being put to death. With this in mind we can well see how Luther could have thought back to his time at the Wartburg as George the Knight as a great motivation to have written this song. God is like the Wartburg, a mighty fortress.

Other Luther researchers are of the opinion that this song had its beginning in the night of April 15, 1521, in the city of Oppenheim where Luther spent his last night before his appearance at the Diet of Worms. At this time the outcome of the Diet was completely unknown. The Diet of Worms appeared to Luther at this point to be “a den of lions.”

Other researchers hold 1527 as the time of the composition for this hymn. Already at this early date Reformation faith brothers in the city of Brussels had been executed. Leonhard Kayser had been put to death by fire in 1527 in Schaerding. There is from this time a letter of Luther at the occasion of this incident which expresses the great confidence that he had in his faith even as these things were coming to bear.

The year 1529 also saw a great fear for the Turks as they considered the conquest of those lands to the west of them. In such times the Emperor called on all Christendom for days of prayer and repentance. During such times Psalm 46 was commonly used as a psalm to plead to God thus it might also be the case that Luther used this psalm for such occasions of great need in the midst of the people.

Perhaps the best dating for the hymn might be the year 1521. On Maundy Thursday Pope Leo X placed the name of Martin Luther onto the catalog of heretics under the ban of the church and the faculty at the university in Paris declared itself in open opposition against Luther. Finally Prince George began to take great steps in that same year to oppose Luther. Thus Luther had many occasions to compose this song in order to express the confidence of his faith, his security in God, and his great trust for God.

The History of the Song

Songs at that time all took the same route into public recognition. They were first printed on a piece of paper and sold by merchants. One of those was the cobbler and poet, Hans Sachs, from Nuremberg. After his conversion to the Reformation movement, he printed Luther's song as a pamphlet and sold it for a farthing. He decorated this pamphlet with Albrecht Duerer's famous woodcut "Knight, Death and Devil" and then he added this inscription"

"Every valiant Christian who has put on his knightly armor (Ephesians 6) can be comforted and just as certain as this knight who travels through the thorny, unkempt wilderness of a life full of murderers and evil council, yet needs not fear for death or the devil. Rather he continually sets his gaze on the city of God which is placed on the holy mountain and soundly defeats both death and the devil. Just like this old knight he can indeed happily sing: 'though devils all the world should fill.'"

This wood carving of Duerer belongs with the history of the song of Luther. Hans Sachs and also Albrecht Duerer helped make known at the time of the Reformation through this work that death and the devil would not lead this knight astray nor fill him with fear because he has a sure goal—the mighty fortress, the strong God in which the Christian can find safety and security. In this connection we should not forget that the rapid distribution of this famous pamphlet took place because of the recent discovery of the printing press.

The song of Luther was eventually translated into about twenty languages—the common languages of the countries and places where evangelical Christians lived. It serves as a hymn of comfort. During the time of the Schmalkald war the singing of this Luther song in the Roman Catholic cities of the empire was forbidden to be sung with the threat of punishment. Typically, songs that were printed in this form, that is as a part of a pamphlet, suffered the same fate. They had no firm place of standing and eventually retreated into oblivion. However, this was not the case with this famous hymn.

The Peace of Westphalia created a limited and defined peace. This peace established in the year 1648 stated that each prince had the power to determine the faith of the lands which he controlled. A period of three years time was given to the subjects to consider how they would worship, and if necessary, to sell their goods and to establish a new beginning in another land.

In accordance with this dictum in the winter of the year 1685, the Archbishop of Salzburg deported one thousand evangelical believers. He cast them out of his territory without their children and property. They found reception in Frankenland. In the winter of 1731/32 Archbishop Firmian drove twenty thousand evangelicals out from the territory of Salzburg. Only the children who were older than twelve were allowed to depart with their parents. Children under the age of twelve had to remain in Salzburg and were sent to live with Catholic families who would raise them in the Catholic religion. The Prussian king Frederick Wilhelm I settled these evangelicals in East Prussia. As these evangelical believers that had been deported from their homeland passed through East Prussia they sang this song of Luther with its fourth stanza "and do what they will - hate, steal, hurt, or kill - though all may be gone, our victory is won; the kingdom's ours forever".

The Melody

Is Luther also the composer of the accompanying melody or did the organist, cantor and master in charge of the chapel at Torgau, namely Johann Walter, originally create this melody? The answer cannot be made with complete certainty. It is generally accepted that this song of Luther appeared printed on single sheets of paper in 1527/28 without corresponding melody. In the year 1529 the song first appears in a small book of hymns that was published by Joseph Klug. A new addition of this hymnbook which appeared in 1533 does include musical notes for the song. In 1540 multiple scores of notes were added for the singing of a choir.

Without a doubt Luther could certainly compose music. He played the flute and the lute. Hans Sachs called him the nightingale of Wittenberg. Already in his early childhood Luther had a lot to do with music. When Luther was a student at the Latin school in Mansfeld in the year 1488, he sang in the student choir for

funerals and church services. At the cathedral school in Magdeburg in 1497 he was an itinerant singer and traveled with his fellow students from house to house where they sang songs composed for multiple voices. In 1498 when he studied in the city of Eisenach he also belonged to the itinerant singers of which he relates later that he was received in such a warm and friendly way at the house of Frau Cotta. As a student of law at the University of Erfurt (1501) music belonged to his basic course of study along side of philosophy and the languages. We also know that Luther took his Christmas song "From Heaven Above" which at first was used with an unfamiliar melody and later composed his own melody. Luther's relationship to music can be seen very clearly in a letter which he sent to his fellow brother in the order and friend Spalatin at the end of the year 1521. "I am compelled after the example of the prophet and the old fathers of the church to make German psalms for the people. That is spiritual songs so that the word of God through song might remain among the people."

Already in the year 1524 the "Acht-Lieder" (eight-songs) songbook appeared in print. Luther wrote from the Veste Coburg in 1530 to the musician Ludwig Senfel in Munich, "I can say without timidity that there is next to theology no such fine art on earth that could push music off to the side ... to prepare a peaceful and joyful heart." With such thoughts in mind Luther transposed Psalms 12, 46, 67, 124 and 130 into songs. How important it was for him to use songs to drive into the common people the great truths of the Reformation is shown in the introduction to the *Pabstschen* which was printed in the year 1545, just one year prior to his death.

"Cantate Domino canticum nobum." This is translated: Sing to the Lord a new song. What does this mean? With that David the holy psalmist wanted to say: Promote you people a music that is pleasing to God. God has made our heart and being joyful through his dear Son whom he gave for us for the redemption from sin, death and the devil. Whoever earnestly believes this can never be separated from this great fact. He will be filled with joy and the great desire to sing and so that others will hear this message and come to it.

Luther's Song - Our Song

If one stands before the drawbridge to the Wartburg it is astounding to see the powerful walls and the great towers of the fort. One is overcome with the feeling that there within that place security and protection from all enemies will be found. From the windows of the Wartburg one can look out over the countryside for many miles in all directions. As danger approaches one will have plenty of time to make preparations and to pull the drawbridge up close to the castle to close the entranceway to any and all enemies.

In the same way all of us have the great need for protection and security. We need what has been termed the warmth and security of the nest. To be outside makes one uncomfortable and fills life with danger. We attempt in so many ways to search for this security in life. We look for an employer who will make promises to take care of us in our old age. We attempt to buy insurance against danger, accidents, bad weather, various diseases. However, how can such security be found against all such things in this world? Who can give to anyone of us a guarantee against such afflictions? In the forts and castles of the middle ages there was to be found no perfect guarantee against enemies, especially at the discovery of the cannon. All in this world seek to find the mighty fortress. For ancient Israel Jerusalem appeared to them as the mighty fortress because God was present at that place for them. However, even Jerusalem became an offering to destruction. Only God alone can give to us such security. That is the basis of Luther's faith and confession. God gives to us security and protection. God alone is the mighty fortress.

He Helps Us

God is not simply an observer of the history of the world and the history of the church. He is an active participant. We have every reason to put our trust in him. At the time of the Reformation help came in a totally different way than anyone would have ever expected. Suddenly the Turks were standing at the gates of Europe. The Emperor was convinced that the Reformation movement had to be wiped out. However, he needed the help of the German princes because of the great threat of the Turks, even those princes who had already made a

declaration of their evangelical beliefs. Thus the message of the Reformation was given time to disseminate to the great dismay of the Catholic Spaniard. It is to this day hard to imagine what Charles V as Emperor could have done but failed to do to the Reformation when he had such a free hand.

The Evil Foe ... On Earth is not his Equal

Luther here speaks of the devil and also of every other evil force into which we as Christians come into contact. Time has shown that the story of Luther throwing the inkwell at the wall in the Wartburg because he felt the presence of the devil cannot be verified. However, it is certainly true that Luther felt the forces of the devil which worked against the message of the gospel as he presented it throughout the time of the Reformation. Luther was aware of the message behind his words, "The old evil foe now means deadly woe, deep guile and great might are his dread arms in flight. On earth is not his equal". The opponents of the message of the Gospel, the opponents of the Reformation Luther clearly viewed as the organization of the present day church and the power of the church. He looked at these institutions as puppets of the evil one, instruments of the devil.

He was convinced of the great strife that would always be there. The battle between the righteous God and the evil ones who stand pitted against him. Between those who are Christians who have been changed by the blood of Jesus Christ which has washed them clean as opposed to the evil ones who seek to bring destruction to the Christian. The knight on Duerer's woodcut shows we should go our way and not be led astray by the devil and to keep our eyes always on the great goal that is ahead of us and never let it out of our sight, the mighty fortress.

With Might of Ours can Naught be Done

In the second stanza Luther confesses "with might of ours can naught be done; soon were our loss effected". He knew that people could not help him, even the Elector could not help him. He abandoned the security of the Wartburg against the will of his protector and wrote to the Electors, "I return to Wittenburg with a much greater protection than I had from the Electors. Indeed I wanted your princely graces to protect me more than you could even protect me. However, who believes the most he will be protected the most."

Behind the disputes for power between peoples is the greater power struggle between God and the devil. Luther knows who will come out of this great battle as the victor, namely Jesus Christ. Jesus' promise is valid. Even the gates of hell will not overcome the church. In the end the power politics of people will not be victorious. Victory will not be dependent on tactics and intelligence. Christ is fighting for God's will in the world. He holds the field. Luther writes, "Now Christ appears to be small in the eyes of the world: he allows the pope, emperor, kings, lords, princes, citizens and peasants to play and do with his gospel and with his Christians as they will. Just as if he were a puppet God which does not see, hear, know or understand. However, then he will be great and he will appear in majesty. Then they will see him, the one that they have attacked." So Luther teaches that we must through all adversaries and trouble, through every need and all threats keep our eyes ever fastened to the end goal. Whoever lives with this final goal in sight has hope in his heart and he has the power to overcome.

Though Devils all the World Should Fill

To live without fear is not something that we are born with. According to our nature we have fear for the unknown and fear of developments which transpire in life, which come on to us unannounced. At times we lack the courage to meet these developments as they come to us suddenly in life. Experience teaches us that we can only live without fear when we have a firm faith, that is when we cling to our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who gives the last word.

As we consider the history of Christianity, we are reminded of those believers who overcame fear. Albrecht Duerer understood this song of Luther and translated his understanding into the woodcut, "Knight,

Death and Devil”. The Knight in that woodcut knows the goal of his way - the mighty fortress. He knows the promises of Jesus even as the devil is swirling around him. No one will tear you out of my hands. He knows of the victory of Christ which John so clearly describes in the last book of holy scripture, the book of Revelation. With Christ he has patience and confidence, enough to overcome all the fear of death and the devil. The “Prince of this world” wants to teach us about fear. However, one little word of scripture can bring him down. Jesus, the one who cried out on the cross, “It is finished”. The might of the prince of this world has already been conquered by what Jesus has done for us on Golgatha. This will become apparent for all to see on the last day. The battle has already been decided. We are redeemed from death and the devil through Christ. Luther wrote about this in his Small Catechism regarding Jesus, “Who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sin, from death and from the power of the devil ... with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.”

The Kingdom’s ours Forever

In the last stanza of this song we find Luther’s confession for the word of God. The kingdom of God has broken into this world with Jesus. At the end of time when Jesus comes again in power and glory he will usher in his kingdom. Already now in the present we await this great day and confess “the kingdom’s ours forever.”

This kingdom is a kingdom of peace. A kingdom without guilt, death, tears, fear and dread. The promise of this kingdom is valid for all those who are ready to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Only those who believe in Christ are citizens of this kingdom. How hard this is for those to accept who would first seek to bury their father or who cannot be separated from the riches of this world. The promise of the kingdom is valid to those who remain faithful until death. These will receive the crown of life—all those who seek the kingdom of God first in their life. Whoever is ready to follow Christ will receive the promise of glory in the kingdom of God. In so many respects the words of this song bespeak another generation. Can we truly from the bottom of our heart sing forcefully the words, “And take they our life, goods, child and wife?” I have known people that have refrained from the singing of this fourth stanza of the song of Luther. They were aware of the ramification of what they were singing. It was not their intent to move into the arena of the hypocrite. In the least we should be conscious of the importance of this last stanza of Luther’s great hymn. Our inner being should shake as we remember the evangelicals who were driven out of their Salzburg homeland.

Only the Holy Spirit can bless one with the power of faith that must have filled these people who willingly left their homeland, rather than give up the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can only marvel at such people and consider this aspect of their faith.

The singers of Psalm 46 were hopeful of protection from the walls of Jerusalem and from God’s presence in the temple. Martin Luther transferred this hope and confidence on the word and on God who with his spirit and gifts is with us. With this song Luther would show where protection and security alone in all this world is to be found. May God with his word make us strong, help us to overcome all fear in our lives and to remain true to him.

Luther died on February 18, 1546 in Eisleben, the city of his birth. On the Sunday previous to his death he preached in St. Andrew’s Church and took part in the ordination service of two young men there at the church. On February 16 and 17, he helped to end the disputes of the princes of Mansfeld. On the evening of February 17, he left the celebration meal early because of pains in the area of his kidney. On the table in his death room was found a note with the last written expressions of Luther. After a number of small items written in Latin, he wrote in German, “We are beggars. This is true.” This was not the resignation of an old sick man but rather the resume of his faith. Alone from grace as we sing in this song, “With might of ours can naught be done soon were loss affected. But for us fights the valiant one whom God himself elected. You ask, ‘Who is this?’ Jesus Christ it is.” At his grave under the pulpit in the Castle Church of Wittenburg one of his friends made this statement, “Such a man should remain in one’s remembrance and praise be given to God for his life and for his teaching”.