

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” ~ Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony, Germany. He was educated at the University of Erfurt. On October 31, 1517, sometimes called the “4th of July of Protestantism,” Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Cathedral of Wittenberg, Germany. These theses condemned various practices and teachings of the Roman church. After several years of stormy disputes with the Pope and other church leaders, Martin Luther was finally excommunicated from the fellowship of the Roman Catholic church in 1520.

One of the important benefits of the Reformation Movement was the rediscovery of congregational singing. Luther had strong convictions about the use and power of sacred music. He expressed his convictions in this way,

If any man despises music, as all fanatics do, for him I have no liking; for music is a gift and grace of God, not an invention of men. Thus it drives out the devil and makes people cheerful. Then one forgets all wrath, impurity and other devices,”

Again, “The Devil, the originator of sorrow anxieties and restless troubles, flees before the sound of music almost as much as the Word of God.”

In another place, “I wish to compose sacred hymns so that the Word of God may dwell among the people also by means of songs.”

Finally, Luther wrote, “I would allow no man to preach or teach God’s people without a proper knowledge of the use and power of sacred song.”

The single most powerful hymn of the Protestant Reformation Movement was Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” based on Psalm 46. This hymn became the battle cry for the people, a great source of strength and inspiration even for those who were martyred for their convictions. The hymn was based on Psalm 46, a psalm written in response to God’s delivering His people from severe calamity and trial. Psalm 46 begins with,

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.

It then describes a event in which the city of Jerusalem was under siege by enemy armies, using pictures of the earth shaking and mountains falling and waters flooding to express how dire the situation was. Then the psalmist describes how, though the Israelites could do nothing in their own power, God was with His people and He could not be shaken nor moved and He

won the victory. The final stanza of the psalm looks ahead to the future when God shall defeat all armies and establish his eternal reign. It presents God as the conqueror who is the one and only victorious and sovereign God. Therefore He tells us: “*be still and know that I am God*”

Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” has often been called the “Battle Hymn of the Reformation” and has been translated into almost every known language. It was perhaps the single most powerful hymn of the Reformation, as it was a great source of strength and inspiration for those who were persecuted and even martyred for their convictions.

Martin Luther used Psalm 46 as the inspiration for “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Luther’s four stanzas interpret this psalm from his own experience during the troubled times of the Reformation. He interpreted the psalm to be not merely expressing God’s protection and strength for God’s people of Jerusalem, but for God’s people of all times. And he understood the battle described in the psalm to be more than an earthly battle but a spiritual battle. So Luther saw in Psalm 46 a great encouragement for him and the Reformers that God would be a strong refuge and strength for them in their current time of trouble—a battle against not merely fleshly armies but in the realm of spiritual warfare as they defended the Gospel itself.

James Montgomery Boice wrote:

“Almost everyone associates Martin Luther with the Book of Romans, particularly Romans 1:17, “The just shall live by faith”. We tend to forget that Luther was converted not only by his study of Romans, but also by his study of the psalms. Luther taught the psalms for years and loved them very much, even late in life. His favorite was Psalm 46.

It is said of Luther that there were times during the dark and dangerous periods of the Reformation when he was terribly discouraged and depressed. But at such times he would turn to his friend and coworker Philipp Melanchthon and say, “Come, Philipp, let’s sing the forty-sixth Psalm.” Then they would sing it in Luther’s own strong version.... We know it as “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

Luther said,

We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends his church and his word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh and sin.”

This hymn has been translated into practically every known language and is regarded as one of the noblest and most classic examples of Christian hymnody. It is said there are no less than sixty translations of this text in English alone. In England the version by Thomas Carlyle is

in general use, while in this country the translation by Frederick H. Hedge, a professor at Harvard University, is used most frequently. This translation was not made until 1852 and first appeared in a book entitled *Gems of German Verse* by W. H. Furness, published in 1853.

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.