

The Hymns We Sing
Sermons on the Great Hymns
A Mighty Fortress

With Study Questions

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Martin Luther

About the Author

Martin Luther was born November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony, Germany. He became an Augustinian monk and taught philosophy and theology at the University of Wittenberg. On October 31, 1517 he nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Cathedral of Wittenberg, Germany, condemning various practices and teachings of the Roman church. After years of disputes, Luther was finally excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1520. The Protestant Reformation was now in full swing.

Among the other blessings of the Reformation, Luther helped rediscover congregational singing and had strong convictions about the use and power of sacred music. He stated, "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. The one forgets all wrath, impurity and other devices...the devil, the originator of sorrowful anxieties and restless troubles, flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God."¹

The hymn which we will examine this morning is considered the single most powerful hymn of the Protestant Reformation. The rendition of the hymn with which we are most familiar is the one translated from German to English by Harvard Professor Frederic Henry Hedge in 1853. The biblical text which inspired this hymn is Psalm 46.

To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. A Song For Alamoth.

**¹ God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.**

**² Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;**

**³ Though its waters roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains shake with its swelling.**

Selah

**⁴ There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God,
The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.**

**⁵ God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.**

**⁶ The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;
He uttered His voice, the earth melted.**

¹ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Kregel Publications, 1982), p. 14.

⁷ The Lord of hosts *is* with us;
The God of Jacob *is* our refuge.

Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord,
Who has made desolations in the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariot in the fire.

¹⁰ Be still, and know that I *am* God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!

¹¹ The Lord of hosts *is* with us;
The God of Jacob *is* our refuge (Psalm 46:1-11).

The psalm speaks of God exerting His power on behalf of His city, the church. The church should, therefore, not fret but rather be still and know the power of her God. Now we move on to the hymn inspired by this wonderful Psalm.

Human Bulwarks

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing;*

I remember walking into the Los Angeles Forum for the first time as a child. The huge building was quite impressive from the outside but when I stepped inside and found myself surrounded by seventeen thousand people I had a physical, visceral response to the power of it. Of the various stadiums, museums, halls, and buildings I have visited over the years nothing comes close to how overwhelmed I was at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. I am speaking now as a twenty-first century man. Imagine the impact this would have upon fifteenth-century peasants.

A friend I had witnessed to for a number of years had come to me after attending a wedding at a very impressive cathedral. His comment was that he now believed in God...and if God did exist He must live in that chapel.

It was against the backdrop of huge, impressive and imposing cathedrals that Luther penned this hymn. The competition for the impressive buildings would be the incomprehensible power of God who could melt any man-made edifice with the mere sound of His voice. It was critical for the Protestants to know that regardless of outward appearance it is God who is our fortress. This is a lesson we should not think unimportant today.

Eternal Bulwark

A bulwark is a wall of defense or a parapet from which the defense of a castle can be efficiently mounted. All human bulwarks have their limits, but the power of God has no limits.

The Scriptures will often use floods as a symbol of an insurmountable enemy because water can put out fire, but nothing can stop a flood. And the flood which would surely overwhelm us is the flood of mortal ills. The mortal ills may be anything from the schemes of evil men to the slavery of our own nature to the inevitability of our own deaths. All this evil, of course, has an author... a father. Luther now describes this foe.

Father of Evil

*For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and pow'r are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not His equal.*

Sophisticates flatter themselves by denigrating those who believe that evil has an author. They may cosmologically acknowledge that all other things have a cause, but certainly not evil. Of course no other plausible explanation is given, for there is none.

Although our own natures are sufficient to lead us down any dark path, there is an evil one who has come to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10). In fact our sinful natures are a result of his craftiness. As Moses records, **“Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1)**. Crafty means subtle or shrewd.

The enemy of our souls is not to be thought of as dull of thought or short of power. We read of angels that they have power over the elements and Satan is the most powerful of angels (Isaiah 14). As Luther states, “On earth is not His equal.” We must keep in mind when we sing this, we are not singing of the power of God (at least not yet) but the power of the Devil. Some thought Luther had laid undue emphasis on the power of Lucifer; we shall soon see that such is not the case.

Cruel hate is a strong term. Often in books and movies the devil is given the personality of a mischievous, but somewhat kindly, old rogue or renegade. But when we consider the atrocities of evil throughout history and recognize these atrocities are a mere shadow of his wickedness, we realize cruel hate is a mild term.

The Right Man

*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.*

The Man from Heaven

The purpose of Luther mentioning the unequaled power of Satan is that we might not have confidence in our own strength. Our striving would certainly be losing. That men can do battle with Satan is pathetically laughable. People must come to the place where they recognize that the heavenly battle must be won by the Man from heaven. It is said that there are many men who would be god, but there is only one God who would be man. Without this Man, our striving would be losing.

The God-Man

God the Father prepared a body for God the Son (Hebrews 10:5). It was a man who sinned and incurred the wrath of God; therefore it would have to be a man to bear the punishment. But the punishment is eternal and the enemy is the most powerful of angelic creatures, so no mere man would do. It was the God-Man who could both bear the weight of eternal punishment and vanquish the enemy of God's people.

Lord Sabaoth

Of course we speak of Jesus. He is called here Lord Sabaoth or Lord Almighty or Lord of hosts. He is the Lord of the hosts, meaning sun, moon, stars, angels, and all of creation.

From age to age Jesus is the same (Hebrews 13:8); this is the immutability of Christ. There is no fear of His strength waning or His disposition growing cold. When we are weak and feeling our faith fade, He is still strong and faithful.

The Battle is the Lord's

And if there is anything that surfaces in the great reformer's understanding of the Christian faith, it is that Jesus must win the battle. Who can forget the wonderful words of young David as he confronted Goliath, the enemy of God's people?

Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶ This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. ⁴⁷ Then all this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands (1 Chronicles 17:45-47).

Subtle are the doctrines that slip into the church placing man's destiny in hands other than the Lord's. These must continually be exposed and fought against lest we load our weapons with human sophistry and ingenuity.

Defeated But Still an Enemy

*And tho' this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph thro' 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.*

One might ask if Jesus won the battle, why are we still fighting? It was not the position of Luther or the Scriptures that the devils are no longer. Their threat is present and real. We are called to resist the devil (James 4:8), the roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). But the devil is a defeated enemy. We see movies where the villain has been pushed off the building but still fires at his enemy on his way down. If you keep your head hanging over the head of the building you're in danger. You're in even greater danger if you jump off with him.

He still poses a threat – but only for a while. Those who trust in Christ will ultimately reign with Christ for He has willed His truth to triumph through us.

Therefore those who trust in Christ need not tremble. One little word provides us with the insurmountable bulwark for our souls. The hymn ends with Luther's explanation of how that word (Christ) is appropriated to the soul of man.

Abiding in Christ

*That word above all earthly pow'rs,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours Thro'
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.*

No thanks can be given to earthly powers for the appropriation (or abiding) of Christ in the life of men. Our understanding of, and taking refuge in, Christ is the result of the Spirit and gifts of God. It is by the Spirit-given gifts that the message is conveyed from men to men and it is by the Spirit of God that men will see, hear, and believe.

His Kingdom is Forever

By the grace of God we begin to understand the transitory nature of this life. It would be much clearer to the reformers than to us (so many of them having died for the faith) how quickly the body might be killed. Yet they also realized, by the grace of God, that the killing of the body has no affect upon truth. Truth, that is Christ, will have His way in history and eternity. His kingdom is forever.

Questions for Study

1. What was Luther's attitude about music (page 2)?
2. What is a bulwark (page 3)?
3. What are some human bulwarks (page 3)?
4. In what respect is God a bulwark (pages 3, 4)?
5. Who is the author of evil (page 4)?
6. What are some attributes of Satan (page 4)?
7. How is Jesus the "right man" (pages 4, 5)?
8. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be both God and man (page 5)?
9. Define Lord Sabaoth (page 5).
10. David says the battle is the Lord's. What does he mean by this (pages 5, 6)?
11. What should our disposition toward the enemy be today (page 6)?
12. How does one abide in Christ (pages 6, 7)?