

## CFBC Hymns Class 4

### Martin Luther and his hymns

#### Introduction

Martin Luther was a brilliant Augustinian monk, and a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Studying the book of Romans, he became concerned that some traditional teachings of the Church of Rome were contrary to the Scriptures. On October 31, 1517, he posted his 95 Theses (propositions to be debated), on the door of the Wittenberg Church—which was used as a kind of bulletin board.

When asked what he would replace all the rituals and images and relics of the church with, his answer was, “Christ.” Luther’s fundamental position was summarized by five “*solas*,” the Latin word for *alone*: Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), Sola fidè (faith alone), Sola gratia (by grace alone), Sola Christus (through Christ alone), Sola Deo gloria (glory to God alone).

Excerpt from Wordwise Hymns

#### Excerpts from “Here He Stood”

By John Piper

One of the great rediscoveries of the Reformation — especially of Martin Luther — was that the word of God comes to us in the form of a book, the Bible. Luther grasped this powerful fact: God preserves the experience of salvation and holiness from generation to generation by means of a book of revelation, not a bishop in Rome.



The life-giving and life-threatening risk of the Reformation was the rejection of the pope and councils as the infallible, final authority of the church. Luther’s adversary, Sylvester Prierias, wrote, “He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the

Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic”. It followed that Luther would be excluded from the Roman Catholic Church. “What is new in Luther,” Heiko Oberman says, “is the notion of absolute obedience to the Scriptures against any authorities; be they popes or councils”.

This rediscovery of the word of God above all earthly powers shaped Luther and the entire Reformation. But Luther’s path to that rediscovery was a tortuous one, beginning with a lightning storm at age 21.

### **Fearful Monk**

On July 2, 1505, on the way home from law school, Luther was caught in a thunderstorm and was hurled to the ground by lightning. He cried out, “Help me, St. Anne! I will become a monk.” Fifteen days later, to his father’s dismay, Luther left his legal studies and kept his vow. He knocked at the gate of the Augustinian hermits in Erfurt and asked the prior to accept him into the order. At 21, he became an Augustinian monk. At his first Mass two years later, Luther was so overwhelmed at the thought of God’s majesty that he almost ran away. The prior persuaded him to continue.

But this incident of fear and trembling would not be an isolated one in Luther’s life. Luther himself would later remember of these years, “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction”.

His all-consuming longing was to know the happiness of God’s favor. “If I could believe that God was not angry with me,” he said, “I would stand on my head for joy.”

### **Good News: God’s Righteousness**

In 1509, Luther’s beloved superior and counselor and friend, Johannes von Staupitz, allowed Luther to begin teaching the Bible. Three years later, on October 19, 1512, at the age of 28, Luther received his doctor’s degree in theology, and von Staupitz turned over to him the chair in biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg, which Luther held the rest of his life.

As Luther set to work reading, studying, and teaching Scripture from the original languages, his troubled conscience seethed beneath the surface — especially as he confronted the phrase “the righteousness of God” in Romans 1:16–17. To Luther, “the righteousness of God” could only mean one thing: God’s righteous punishment of sinners. The phrase was not “gospel” to him; it was a death sentence.

But then, in the work of a moment, all Luther's hatred for the righteousness of God turned to love. He remembers,

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" . . . And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

He concludes, "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."

### **Standing on the Book**

Luther was not the pastor of the town church in Wittenberg, but he did share the preaching with his pastor friend, Johannes Bugenhagen. The record bears witness to how utterly devoted he was to the preaching of Scripture. For example, in 1522 he preached 117 sermons, the next year 137 sermons. In 1528, he preached almost 200 times, and from 1529 we have 121 sermons. So the average in those four years was one sermon every two-and-a-half days.

Over the next 28 years, Luther would preach thousands of sermons, publish hundreds of pamphlets and books, endure scores of controversies, and counsel innumerable German citizens — all to spread the good news of God's righteousness to a people trapped in a system of their own merit. Through it all, Luther had one weapon with which to rescue this gospel from being sold in the markets of Wittenberg — Scripture. He drove out the moneychangers — the indulgence sellers — with the whip of the word of God, the Bible.

Luther said with resounding forcefulness in 1545, the year before he died, "Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scripture." Here alone, in the pages of the Bible, God speaks with final authority. Here alone, decisive authority rests. From here alone, the gift of God's righteousness comes to hell-bound sinners.

He lived what he urged. He wrote in 1533, "For a number of years I have now annually read through the Bible twice. If the Bible were a large, mighty tree and all its words were little branches, I have tapped at all the branches, eager to know what was there and what it had to offer". Oberman says Luther kept to that practice for at least ten years. The Bible had come to mean more to Luther than all the fathers and commentators.

Here Luther stood, and here we stand. Not on the pronouncements of popes, or the decisions of councils, or the winds of popular opinion, but on “that word above all earthly powers” — the living and abiding word of God.

## **Martin Luther on Hymnody...from the Preface to Luther's Hymnal**

“Greetings in Christ. I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is, and to commend it to everyone; but I am so overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of its virtue and benefits that I can find neither beginning nor end nor method for my discourse. We can mention only one point, which experience confirms: namely, that next to the word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions, for whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate, what more effective means than music can you find?

The Holy Ghost Himself honors her as an instrument for His proper work when in His Holy Scriptures He asserts that through her gifts were instilled in the prophets, namely, the inclination to all virtues, as can be seen in Elisha. On the other hand, she serves to cast out Satan, the instigator of all sins, as is shown in Saul, the king of Israel. Thus it was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the word of God as music. Therefore we have so many hymns and psalms where message and music join to move the listener's soul. After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music: namely, by proclaiming the word of God through music and by providing sweet melody with words. But when musical learning is added to all this, and artistic music which corrects and develops and refines natural music, then at last it is possible to taste and wonder, yet not to comprehend, God's absolute and perfect wisdom in His wondrous work of music.”

## **Martin Luther on the Gift of Music...**

"I, Doctor Martin Luther, wish all lovers of the unshackled art of music grace and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ!

I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy, and costly treasure given to mankind by God.

The riches of music are so excellent and so precious that words fail me whenever I attempt to discuss and describe them....

In summary, next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits...Our dear fathers and prophets did not desire without reason that music be always used in the churches. Hence, we have so many songs and psalms.

This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself that God has created man for the express purpose of praising and extolling God.

However, when man's natural musical ability is whetted and polished to the extent that it becomes an art, then do we note with great surprise the great and perfect wisdom of God in music, which is, after all, His product and His gift; we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace.

A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs."

Martin Luther's Foreword to Georg Rhau's Collection, "Symphoniae iucundae"

<http://www.eldrbarry.net/mous/saint/luthmusic.htm>

## **A Mighty Fortress is Our God**

**Words:** Martin Luther (b. Nov. 10, 1483; d. Feb. 18, 1546)

**Music:** *Ein feste Burg*, by Martin Luther

Excerpts from Wordwise Hymns

Martin Luther is credited with returning congregational participation to the worship of the church. Including this, his most famous hymn, he wrote nearly three dozen of them, providing his own tunes for many of them.

Luther's views were rejected by the church, and in a time of harassment and persecution, he very much depended on the Lord for protection.

Before the Battle of Waterloo, one of Napoleon's generals reminded him that, "Man proposes, but God disposes." But Napoleon, arrogantly retorted, "I want you to understand sir, that Napoleon proposes, and *Napoleon* disposes." Later, his forces were beaten, and he was taken captive.

The Bible tells us: "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes" (Ps. 118:8-9).

Numbering of chapters and verses is slightly different in some Bible versions, but Psalm 118:8 is often considered the middle verse of the entire Bible. It fits well as a central theme.

Self rule and self confidence brought the fall of man, and have been our problem ever since. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding," warns Proverbs 3:5. We need to trust in God Himself as our Protector and Defender...and our Mighty Fortress.

Several times in Psalms, God is referred to as our divine Fortress. For example:

"The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust" (Ps. 18:2).

"You are my rock and my fortress; therefore, for Your name's sake, lead me and guide me" (Ps. 31:3).

"Blessed be the Lord my Rock...my lovingkindness and my fortress, my high tower and my deliverer, my shield and the One in whom I take refuge" (Ps. 144:1-2).

The opening words of Psalm 46 call God our "Refuge"—which translates the same Hebrew word rendered "fortress" in the above verses. And it is this psalm that became the basis for Martin Luther's powerful hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. He also composed the tune. And it's not only Luther's greatest hymn, but the greatest of the Protestant Reformation. It is still being sung more than four centuries after he wrote it.

Luther's song drew its inspiration from Psalm 46, which begins, "God is our refuge [safe shelter] and strength."

But it can hardly be called a paraphrase of the entire psalm. The main thing the two have in common is their description of God's protection of His own.

In addition, many other passages of Scripture allude to the Lord's strong defense of those who belong to Him. "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27). "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer" (II Sam. 22:2).

The question then comes: What is it we need protection *from*? In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was most concerned with assaults by the heathen nations around them. And individuals (such as David) had human enemies that opposed, and friends that betrayed them. But in spiritual terms today, Christians are in danger from the godless world, the flesh (their own sin nature), and the devil. It is the last of these that is Luther's particular focus. He is "our ancient foe" Stanza 1, and "the Prince of Darkness grim" Stanza 3.

What Luther says about Satan is biblically accurate, and important to know. In Stanza 1 "His craft and power are great." In fact, in terms of his strength, "on earth is not his equal." He is "armed with cruel hate," and "doth seek to work us woe." The Bible calls him "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). He is the ruler and administrator of demon powers all around the earth (possibly the meaning of "the air"), and dominates those who are by nature prone to rebel against God ("sons of disobedience").

At the very beginning of human history, Satan, in the guise of a serpent, raised doubts about the Word of God (Gen. 3:1), and even denied it outright (Gen. 3:4). He hasn't changed! The Lord Jesus calls the devil both a liar and a murderer (Jn. 8:44). We are told of his "devices" (his evil plans, II Cor. 2:11), his "wiles" (his cunning tricks, Eph. 6:11), and "snares" (or traps, II Tim. 2:26). How in the world can we be safe from an enemy like that? That is what Martin Luther explains to us. "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing" Stanza 2.

But God Himself is our strong and never failing fortress, and the One who helps us Stanza 1. Furthermore, Christians have "the right Man" on our side—the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is "Lord Sabaoth" Stanza 2, meaning the Lord of Hosts, Captain of the armies of heaven (cf. Jas. 5:4). His nature and character are unchanging, and because of who He is, and because of His sovereign omnipotence, "He *must* win the battle."

Christ demonstrated His power over Satan and his host over and over. He successfully defended Himself personally against the devil's temptations by using the Word of God—as we should too (Matt. 4:1-11; cf. Eph. 6:11, 17).

Then, during His three years of public ministry, Christ repeatedly delivered individuals from demonic oppression (e.g. Matt. 12:22; Mk. 1:23-26). And, at the cross, our Saviour conquered Satan and made it possible for us to be delivered from his kingdom of darkness (Col. 2:14-15; Heb. 2:14-15; cf. Acts 26:17-18; Col. 1:12-14).

“The Lord God omnipotent reigneth” (Rev. 19:6). And “He who is in you [the Holy Spirit who indwells each believer] is greater than he who is in the world [Satan]” (I Jn. 4:4). We need have no fear of the devil—even if we had a whole world *full* of devils (Stanza 3).

Our victory is founded on the unfailing Word of God that pronounces His doom (cf. Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10).

The connection, in Luther’s hymn, between the last line of Stanza 3 and Stanza 4 is perhaps somewhat clearer in Thomas Carlyle’s version of the latter stanza.

God’s word, for all their craft and force,  
One moment will not linger,  
But, spite of hell, shall have its course;  
‘Tis written by His finger.

## **The Setting for A Mighty Fortress is Our God**

### ***Excerpts from a Commentary on “A Mighty Fortress”***

*by Dr. Albert B. Collver, LCMS Pastor*

### **Seeking comfort in distress**

Many people today think of “A Mighty Fortress” as the “Battle Hymn of the Reformation.” It is one of the most translated hymns in the history of the Church, having been translated into more than 200 languages. What many of us might not realize is that the Festival of the Reformation was not celebrated during Luther’s lifetime.

Therefore, the hymn was not written to celebrate the Reformation, which is the commemoration of the publication of the Ninety-five Theses on Oct. 31, 1517. Only later, after the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), when the Reformation was celebrated as a regular part of the church year in Saxony, Luther’s home region, did the hymn become associated with the festival.

Considering that “A Mighty Fortress” is Luther’s most famous hymn, we know remarkably little about it. Nor are we even sure when Luther wrote it.



The earliest existing hymnal in which it appears is from 1533. (From the records of 19th-century hymnologists we know that there were a few hymnals that contained “A Mighty Fortress” before 1533, but these hymnals were destroyed in the bombing of Dresden during World War II.) Most scholars think Luther wrote the hymn between 1521 and 1529, with the majority of scholars settling on 1527–28.

These years were some of the darkest in Luther’s life. A heading from a broadsheet (something akin to modern “sheet music”) of “A Mighty Fortress” published in Augsburg in 1529 reads “A Hymn of Comfort.” Rather than a battle hymn, Luther intended this hymn, based on Psalm 46, to be one of comfort. While we are not certain what prompted Luther to write the hymn, scholars have suggested a number of events during these dark years.

In August 1527, a man who followed Luther’s teaching was martyred. In the fall of 1527, a plague broke out in Wittenberg. In December 1527, Luther wrote to a colleague: “We are all in good health except for Luther himself, who is physically well, but outwardly the whole world and inwardly the devil and all his angels are making him suffer.” A few days later, in January 1528, Luther wrote that he was undergoing a period of temptation that was the worst he had experienced in his life.

When Luther speaks of “temptation,” he uses a striking German word. While *Anfechtung* is translated “temptation” or “trial,” it refers to anything that causes anxiety, doubt, fear, suffering, or terror in a person’s life. For instance, in December 1527, Luther’s daughter, Elizabeth, was born sickly. In May 1528, she died. The six months of wrestling with the Lord in prayer to save his sick daughter was a period of temptation (*Anfechtung*) for Luther. He was mentally and spiritually fatigued. He was under the cross of suffering. Yet, he took comfort in the Psalms and trusted in the promises of Jesus.

## **Struggles in the Church**

Besides the challenges brought on by the plague and tragedy in his personal life, struggles abounded in the Church. From 1517 to 1525, most of Luther’s focus was on abuses within the Roman church. From 1525 onward, the struggles came from multiple fronts. Luther felt that his family, reputation, and work for the Reformation—that his entire existence—was at stake....

In stanza 3, the hymn says, “Though devils all the world should fill.” Luther truly believed he was living in the Last Days because the preaching of the Gospel—that we are justified by grace through faith—and the Scriptures were clearly taught, and controversy after controversy arose. The world seemed full of

“devils” perverting the Lord’s teaching. The stanza concludes, “One little word can fell him.”

The hymn concludes by confessing that the Word of the Lord will remain in the world even if people are not thankful for it. In Luther’s day, there was the very real danger that he could lose his life, all his possessions, his reputation, and his family. Nevertheless, he sings confidently that “our victory has been won; the Kingdom ours remaineth.” Luther’s hymn is one of comfort and hope in the midst of trial and temptation, and strife within the Church.

<https://lutheranreformation.org/history/a-mighty-fortress/>

### **A Mighty Fortress is Our God**

1 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  
does seek to work us woe;  
his craft and power are great,  
and armed with cruel hate,  
on earth is not his equal.

2 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.  
You 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.

3 And though this world, with devils filled,  
should threaten to undo us,  
we will not fear, for God has 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.

4 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!