

THEN SINGS MY SOUL 6 **“A Mighty Fortress is our God.”**

God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. Psalm 46: 1

On October 31, 1517, a lonely and often depressed Catholic monk pushed his way through the crowds milling around the streets of Wittenberg, a small university town in eastern Germany, and made his way towards the church. That being the Roman Catholic Church; which dominated most every German community at that time. Arriving at the oversized wooden church door, he nailed to it a list of ninety-five propositions, or theses; in a formal gesture inviting the townspeople to a public debate. At the time very few people took much notice of his actions, but within a few weeks people throughout Europe were discussing the contents of those theses and a chain of events had been set in motion, which would have profound effects for the whole of Western Europe, and the world beyond...for centuries to come. That monk was Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in Saxony, Germany. He was educated at the University of Erfurt, later becoming an Augustinian monk, teaching philosophy and theology at the University of Wittenberg. The date; October 31, 1517; (sometimes called the "4th of July of Protestantism,") Martin Luther's ninety-five theses condemned various practices and teaching of the Roman Church; and following many years of stormy disputes with the Pope and other church leaders; led to Martin being officially excommunicated from the fellowship of the Roman Catholic Church in 1520.

This act birthed the Reformation Movement, and the beginning of Protestantism. If John Wesley would rightly be considered the Father of Methodism; Martin Luther must even more rightly be revered as the Grand Father of all Protestant Churches.

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." "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." In another place he wrote, "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."

Music was rediscovered in the heart of Martin Luther, and implanted into the DNA of Protestant churches since. The single most powerful hymn of the Protestant Reformation Movement was Luther's masterpiece; "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," based on Psalm 46. This hymn became the battle cry of the people, a great source of strength and inspiration even for those who were martyred for their convictions. 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. This song has been called "the greatest hymn of the greatest man of the greatest period of German history" and the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation."

Behind the hymn's words lies a Bible story that Luther loved, and used to inspire this magnificent work. It is the story of the Judean King Jehoshaphat and is found in 2 Chronicles 20. Judah and her king are surrounded by the joint armies of three of her enemies. An attack is imminent, so Jehoshaphat calls on God...and the people to fast. As they worship and listen God speaks with unusual instructions:

Do not be afraid! Don't be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow, march out against them. But you will not even need to fight. Take your positions; then stand still and watch the Lord's victory. God is with you, do not be afraid or discouraged! 2 Chron. 20:15-17

Jehoshaphat and the people leave Jerusalem early in the morning; and as they approach the lookout point, Jehoshaphat stops them, and appoints the choir to lead the procession...singing as they go!

At the moment they began to sing and give praise, the Lord caused the armies of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir to start fighting among themselves...so when the army of Judah arrived at the lookout point in the wilderness, all they saw were dead bodies lying on the ground as far as they could see. Not a single one of their enemies had escaped. 2 Chron. 20: 22-28

It took Jehoshaphat and his army 3 days to gather the plunder. Needless to say their victory parade back into Jerusalem was led by the choir, accompanied by harps, lyres and trumpets! The point: no matter what obstacle, addiction, enemy, circumstance, condition or situation we face...our God is a Mighty Fortress, a bulwark never failing! In the 4 stanzas of this hymn are contained numerous truths that might help us as we face down our own enemies, with the same instructions:..."Stand still, and watch the Lord's victory!"

1. WE HAVE A STRONG ENEMY, BUT A MIGHTIER GOD

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.

Many, skeptical and self-righteous, doubt there is a personal devil; but all who have met "it", know of "its" reality. There is evil in this world, and in our hearts that has at its foundation this being Martin Luther wrestled all his life. This ancient foe seeking to work us woe, is crafty, and great, and unequalled in his power on this earth!

Jehoshaphat knew his enemy was more powerful than he, or his best army. What he did was not so much an act of desperation or instinct of survival, but an act of faith. He turned to God for help, fasted, prayed, worshiped, listened, and obeyed even the unusual requirement God offered.

How about us? What do we do, how do we respond when news from the Dr. kicks us in the pit of our stomach, or tragedy strikes way to close to home, when jobs are taken away, or relationships disappoint, or devastations in New York City or Bagdad make us wonder...do we simply throw up our hands, get defensive, fight with all our might...or do we humbly kneel and worship God? Yes, we do have an enemy, and "it" is strong...But God is a Mighty Fortress, a bulkhead against the ever-present and pounding flood waves of earthly and evil ills.

2. WE HAVE LITTLE HUMAN STRENGTH, BUT A GREAT VICTORIOUS SAVIOR

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 battles we face are ours...but the fighting of them belongs ultimately to God! We wrestle and struggle against sin, temptation, addictions, and human frailties...and we may lose more than we win. But let this truth be known, and proclaimed. God has won the victory, the devil has been defeated. He may win a battle here and there; the evils of this world may think they are winning...but the war has already been won my friends; the keys to the kingdom belong to Jesus the resurrected Savior!

Martin struggled with the Calling God placed in his life. He loved the church, but could not tolerate her abuses. He wrestled with feelings of inadequacy and insecurity in the face of what God laid before him. Listen to his defense before the leaders of his church: "Unless I am convinced by the evidence of Scripture or plain reason – for I do not accept the authority of the Pope or the councils alone, since it is established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves – I am bound by the scriptures I have cited and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, God help me. Amen"

Jehoshaphat readily knew his human and military strength were no match for his enemy. But we are not always so willing to admit our need, and the futility of fighting in our own strength. Too many so called 'Christians' have abandoned the faith because instead of relying whole-heartedly on God; they fought in their own strength, and lost. Too many sincere Christian's who have begun with Christ, are now frustrated trying to live God's life in the power of their flesh, or by their own will. We have a victorious Savior who doesn't need our help in overcoming the world, or our sin! We simply need to admit it...we are powerless to defeat it...were not the right Man on our side...Christ Jesus it is he, and He has already won the battle!

3. WE HAVE EVER-PRESENT THREATS, BUT A TRIUMPHANT TRUTH

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.

One little word...one little word shall fell him. Interesting, if all it takes is one little word to fell the mighty Satan, don't you want to know that word? I'm not sure what Martin had in mind, but I have a hunch, and it comes directly from this song, this verse and the next. It is the word TRUTH!

I am fully cognizant that God's truth so far exceeds my ability to understand or comprehend it; but I like Martin Luther; take my stand on the Truth of God's Word! I am fully aware that my limited understanding of God's Word pales in comparison to its great depths, but it is to God's Word I must cling. I know I don't know much, but this much I do know: God's Truth...AND IT ALONE...shall triumph over whatever real or perceived threats I now face or may one day.

Some of you are facing uncertain realities of disease and health. Those can be a threat, but when faced with the truth that "by His stripes...we are healed", they often cease to undo us.

Some of you are facing life without loved ones either through death, divorce, distance or disregard. Those realities might threaten to undo us until we embrace the truth that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever...Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life...Jesus Christ makes all things new. Truth, truth, Grace AND TRUTH!

4. WE HAVE THE SPIRIT AND GIFTS, BUT ITS GOD'S TRUTH THAT REIGNS

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.

I'm grateful for the Holy Spirit and his gifts; they are necessary for the accomplishment of our calling, and the fulfillment of our creation. We can't do all God wants us to do in this life in our own power, wisdom, ingenuity, or design. We must understand and utilize God's good gifts, given freely and generously to each of us, each of us!

But more than that, I'm grateful that we can detach, we can distance ourselves from all the "stuff" the "goods and kindreds" this world offers and promises to make us happy. We can even allow, or offer our bodies to be killed...knowing that God's TRUTH abides still! The stuff of this world is just that, and though we enjoy it (sometimes to much) it must not define us, it must not completely occupy us, it certainly must not consume us; it must not reign over us! God's truth reigns in God's Kingdom, nothing else, noting more.

My friends, this morning we have considered Martin Luther's great hymn of encouragement, written for like-minded believers who were facing overwhelming enemies. I know that some of you, maybe most of us, are likewise facing enemies and threats today. Maybe not being disenfranchised by our beloved church, or surrounded by 3 neighboring tribes, but real none-the-less are the issues and struggles all of us encounter at times in our lives. I don't know what each of you are facing today...but God does...and God is a mighty fortress where we can run to find shelter, comfort, hope and peace. Come running now. Let's sing the hymn!

THEN SINGS MY SOUL 6 “A Mighty Fortress is our God.”

God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. Psalm 46: 1

Do not be afraid! Don't be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow, march out against them. But you will not even need to fight. Take your positions; then stand still and watch the Lord's victory. God is with you, do not be afraid or discouraged! 2 Chron. 20:15-17

At the moment they began to sing and give praise, the Lord caused the armies of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir to start fighting among themselves...so when the army of Judah arrived at the lookout point in the wilderness, all they saw were dead bodies lying on the ground as far as they could see. Not a single one of their enemies had escaped. 2 Chron. 20: 22-28

1. WE HAVE A _____ ENEMY, BUT A _____ GOD

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.

2. WE HAVE _____ HUMAN STRENGTH, BUT A GREAT _____ SAVIOR

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.

3. WE HAVE EVER-PRESENT _____, BUT A TRIUMPHANT _____

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.

4. WE HAVE THE _____, BUT ITS GOD'S TRUTH THAT _____

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.