



A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Tune: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

One hymn almost all Lutherans know from heart is “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Though it is a hymn written by Luther and used by the Lutheran Church early on, it has been taken up by almost every Christian denomination. One would be hard-pressed to find a hymnal that does not include some version of this hymn. Luther has done more than paraphrase Psalm 46; he has truly captured its theology and its Gospel promise: Because Christ has conquered Satan, nothing can overthrow us. For that reason, this is a perfect hymn for all Christians to know and cherish.



Martin Luther

Most of Luther’s hymns can be accurately dated. “A Mighty Fortress” is one exception. We know that it was written some time between 1521 and 1529, and a case can be made for almost any year within that span. The oldest existing hymnal with “A Mighty Fortress” is Andrew Rauscher’s Erfurt hymnal of 1531. Rumor has it, however, that it was also included in two Wittenberg hymnals: Hans Weiss’s of 1528 and Joseph Klug’s of 1529. Sadly no full copies of these hymnals are in existence. The best

scholarly estimate for the writing of this hymn is 1529. It is believed that Luther wrote it for the Diet of Spire, April 20, 1529, when the German princes protested the revocation of their liberties for siding with Luther. This is also the first time that Lutherans are called “Protestants.”

Though “A Mighty Fortress” is counted as a hymn written on Psalm 46, it can hardly be called a “paraphrase.” It truly is an

original production on the theme of this Psalm, with some phrases reminiscent of the Biblical text. More than any of Luther’s other hymns this one epitomizes his thought and personal experience. That being said, it is not fair to say that he wrote it to express his feelings.



“A Mighty Fortress” in Luther’s own writing, complete with his signature.

This was never Luther’s intent with hymnody. Rather, he wrote it for the Church of his day to give her a source of comfort in the midst of her struggles. Luther wrote hymns not as a means of self-expression, but to serve his fellow believers.

Hymnologists cannot speak highly enough about “A Mighty Fortress.” One such commentator, Dr. Louis Benson, said: “Such a hymn with such a tune spreads quickly, as may well be believed; quickly, as if the angels had been the carriers. But they were men who spread Luther’s hymn of faith and courage from heart to heart and from lip to lip.” But perhaps our own W.G. Pollack, in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* says it best: “The good this hymn has done, the faith it has inspired, the hearts it has comforted, the influence it has exerted, cannot be measured and will first be revealed to us in eternity, where the saints of God will praise their Lord and Redeemer for many blessings, not the least of which will be the privilege of having known and sung this hymn here on earth.”

We know that this hymn certainly had the same effect of inspiration and comfort for Luther. It is often recorded that when Luther was in despair he would summon Philipp Melancthon, his coworker in the Reformation, and say, “Come, Philipp, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm!” May this hymn always have the same effect for us, that our faith is strengthened and we are filled with new courage to remain true to the faith once delivered to the saints!