



## From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee

**Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546)**

**Tune: Martin Luther (1483-1546)**

When Martin Luther gave the Wittenberg churches his *Formula Missæ* (“An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,”) in 1523, his reforms of the liturgy of his day, he bemoaned the lack of German hymns available for the people to learn and sing. Shortly after writing the *Formula Missæ*, he wrote to his friend, George Spalatin, to ask for help in writing paraphrases of the Psalms so the people could learn their meaning. Included in this letter was a paraphrase of Psalm 130 which Luther had written. That paraphrase is known to us today as “From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee.” Though it seems that Spalatin never responded to the request, Luther and many others produced what became the foundation of Lutheran hymnody.



Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born November 10, 1483 at Eisleben to Hans and Maragete, née Ziegler. After receiving extensive training in law, he entered the Augustinian Convent at Erfurt after making a promise to do so if he were kept safe in a thunderstorm. He was ordained in 1507 and subsequently became a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg. In 1512 he received his Doctor of Theology degree. After further study and discussion with fellow monks he became disheartened by abuses he saw in the Church of his day.

On October 31, 1517 he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg to begin a discussion about the abuses. After the Theses and several other writings, Luther was

considered an outlaw and enemy of the Church, and his life was in danger. Wishing to protect him, several friends put him in hiding in Wartburg, where he began his translation of the Bible into German. In 1522 he returned to Wittenberg and began the work of settling the turmoil which had arisen. By 1523 he started writing hymns, one of the first being “From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee.” By 1524 Luther oversaw the publication of the first Lutheran hymnal, the *Achtliederbuch* (literally *eight song book*), containing four of Luther’s hymns, three by Paul Speratus, and one by an unknown author (likely Justas Jonas). Later that same year, the *Enchiridion* was published in Erfurt, containing twenty-five hymns, eighteen of which were written by Luther. Luther continued to write throughout his life, writing both hymns and theological works. He died February 18, 1546 in his hometown of Eisleben.

When Luther wrote “From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee” he originally wrote it as a four-stanza hymn and included it in the Erfurt *Enchiridion*. By the time of Johann Walther’s *Geistliche gesangk Buchlein*, also in 1524, Luther had taken stanza two of the original, and expanded it into two stanzas, what we have today as stanzas two and three. This hymn is considered to be one of the best Psalm paraphrases by *Julian’s Dictionary of Hymnology*. On May 9, 1525 it was sung at the funeral of Luther’s close friend and supporter, Frederick the Wise. It was a constant source of comfort when Luther was unable to attend the Diet of Augsburg (1530). He frequently gathered the servants of the castle where he was staying and said, “Come, let us, despite the devil, sing *Aus tiefer Not schrei’ ich zu dir* (From Depths of Woe I Cry to 5 ee”), and thereby praise and glorify God!” This hymn was also sung at Luther’s own funeral in 1546.

Though this hymn is considered a hymn of confession, the majority of the text focuses on the forgiveness which is given to us for Jesus’ sake. We sing of God’s “love and grace,” His faithfulness, “that He is merciful and just,” and that He is our “good and true” Shepherd. We do not look to our works for proof or promise of salvation, but to the love of God shown in Jesus Christ. Because of God’s grace and mercy, we, the true Israel, will at the end be freed “from all [our] sin and sorrow.”