



In the Midst of Earthly Life

Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Tune: Johann Walther (1496-1570)

Death was a common topic for Reformation-era Germans. It was not at all uncommon for the average person to have their own death on their mind, fearing when it may come and if they were worthy to enter heaven. For that reason, a medieval verse, *media vita in morte sumus*—in the midst of life we are in death, was a common phrase and became a well-known hymn. As was the case with many of his hymns, Martin Luther took what was a depressing hymn and altered it to turn it into more confident hymn and expanded it to confess the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Though it is true that “In the midst of earthly life snares of death surround us,” Our Lord Jesus Christ will help us in it and will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death to His eternal life He has won and prepared for us.

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



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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. 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 Justus Jonas). Later that same year, the *Enchiridion* was published in Erfurt, containing twenty-five hymns, eighteen of which were written by Luther (a total which included “In Peace and Joy I Now Depart”). Luther continued to write throughout his life, writing both hymns and theological works. He died February 18, 1546 in his hometown of Eisleben.

We are not sure what prompted Luther to write “In the Midst of Earthly Life.” Some historians think that Luther was moved to write this hymn after Wilhelm Nesen, a close friend of Luther's coworker Philipp Melancthon, drowned on July 5, 1524. But as was mentioned above, Luther and everyone else of his era was so aware of the brevity of human life that it is not out of the realm of possibility that death was simply on Luther's mind and he wrote a hymn about it.

The medieval verse which serves as this hymn's foundation, *in the midst of life we are in death*, was immensely popular. Not only was it used in memory of the departed, but it was also a prayer and a battle song. It was adapted into several other versions in the German, many of which Luther likely knew. However, while the pre-Reformation hymn was more of a frantic cry for help in mortal danger, Luther made one tremendous change that improved the tenor of the hymn. In the original fifth line there was a plea for God to rescue us from evil, but Luther changed it to a declaration, that the only source for help in death is Jesus Christ. While this hymn does have a somber side, being quite frank about the nearness of death and our sin, it is simultaneously a bold confession with the repeated answer, “To Thee, Lord Jesus, only” when we ask where we will find refuge. The third stanza summarizes it all: “In the midst of utter woe all our sins oppress us, where shall we for refuge go, where for grace to bless us? To Thee, Lord Jesus, only. Thy precious blood was shed to win full atonement for our sin.” Thanks to God for this holy and all-merciful Savior!