

Favorite Hymn for August 30, 2020
“A Mighty Fortress is Our God” Tune: *Ein feste Burg*
A favorite of Jana Libby and Barbara Balseiro.

Often called the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation," Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" (written in 1527 or 1529) has been translated into almost every known language. During times when the Reformation seemed lost, Luther would say to his friend Melanchthon, "Let's sing the Forty-sixth Psalm." Based on Psalm 46, the hymn is a celebration of the sovereign power of God over all earthly and spiritual forces, and of the sure hope we have in God because of Christ. "A Mighty Fortress" so captured the spirit of the Protestant Reformation that when Protestant emigrants were forced into exile or martyrs went to their death, "A Mighty Fortress" always seemed to be the song they chose to sing.

Martin Luther said this about music: "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions...which control men or more often overwhelm them...Whether you wish to comfort the sad, to subdue frivolity, 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 could you find?"

Martin Luther was born November 10, 1483 to Hans and Margaretha Luder in Eisleben Germany. Hans, Martin's father, owned a copper mine in Mansfield. Having the finances to do so, and having come from a very modest peasantry himself, Martin's father Hans was determined that Martin would be raised with dignity and have a future in civil servitude. Martin attended schools in Mansfield, Magdeburg and Eisenach Germany. When Martin Luther was 17, he enrolled in the University of Erfurt in the year 1501. He received his Bachelor's degree in only one year and his Master's degree three years later. As soon as he completed his Master's degree, he enrolled in the law school of the University of Erfurt.

One day in the year 1505 while walking in the woods, Martin Luther got caught in a terrible thunderstorm and he began to run to seek shelter at the school but before he reached the safety of the school, lightning struck near where he was running. It was so close to him in fact that he cried out to St. Anne "Help, St. Anne! I'll become a monk!" (according to tradition St. Anne is the mother of the Virgin Mary.) Martin Luther survived the near-death experience and true to his word, he dropped out of law school and entered the monastery.

Young Martin Luther dedicated himself fully to the life of a monk. He put forth every effort to please God and to do good works. He devoted his life to religious fast and flagellations, long pilgrimages and many hours in prayer as well as constant confession. The closer he tried to get to God and the more he did to do to gain God's favor, the more aware he became of his sinfulness.

Martin Luther's superior, Johann Von Staupitz thought that he needed more work to distract him and occupy his mind. He ordered young Luther to pursue a career in academics. In 1507, at the age of 24, Martin Luther was ordained and in 1508 he began to teach theology at the University of Wittenberg. March 9, 1508 Martin Luther earned his Bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies and in 1509 he earned a Bachelor's degree in the Sentences (the main textbook of theology in the Middle Ages) The University of Wittenberg conferred upon him the Doctor of Theology on October 19, 1509.

Though he lived the life of a monk without reproach, Martin felt that he was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. After meditating on the "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" he began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith and Martin Luther was saved by the grace of God.

It was October 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg. In his Theses he accused the Roman Catholic church of many heresies, particularly the selling of indulgences. In 1520 Luther was been condemned for his Protestant views by Pope Leo X and commanded to renounce or reaffirm his 95 Theses. He was given 24 hours to consider his choice. He did apologize for his harsh tone, but reaffirmed his belief in his Theses. From his hiding in exile, the understanding of the words of the hymn are much clearer. He talks about in the latter part of the verse how "the ancient foe doth seek to us woe" and his power and hate, it is clear to see that he equates the Roman Papacy with the Devil. He writes about how that "on earth is not his equal" most likely referring to the fact this was the height of the power of the Roman Papacy and there was no power on earth that could equal them, but his confidence was not in any earthly protection, or fortress, he was looking to God.

Martin Luther was the first to translate and publish the Bible in the common language of the German people. He used Erasmus' 1516 critical Greek edition text, which later came to be known as the Textus Receptus from which the King James Bible was translated. Luther published his German New Testament translation in 1522 and completed the Old Testament resulting in an entire German language Bible in 1534.

Over 100 English-language versions of Luther's hymn exist. The first English translation was by Myles Coverdale in 1539 with the title, "Oure God is a defence and towre". A Unitarian minister from the United States, Frederick Henry Hedge (1805-1890), provided in 1853 the translation that appears in many hymnals today. Hymnologist Richard Watson notes that Hedge prepared, "a splendid translation, written with assurance and complete competence." After a detailed analysis comparing the English translation with Luther's original German, he concludes, "It has stood the test of time remarkably well." Another popular English translation is by Thomas Carlyle and begins "A safe stronghold our God is still".

The hymn has been used by numerous composers, including Johann Sebastian Bach, Felix Mendelssohn, Joachim Raff, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Richard Wagner, Max Reger, Claude Debussy, Alexander Glazunov, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Flor Peeters, John Zdechlik, Ray Steadman-Allen, Kari Tikka, Julius Eastman and Mauricio Kagel.

Tune: *Ein feste Burg* There is debate about where the tune came from. In times past, it was believed to have been borrowed by Luther, perhaps from an old Gregorian melody. More recently, however, scholars are inclined to believe that Luther wrote it himself. (The story that the tune came from a tavern song that was popular in Luther's day is the result of a misunderstanding of German musical terminology.) This hymn presents an exception in its tune in the fact that it is sung pretty much as Luther wrote it. There are some different variations as far as the rhythm is concerned.