

# Take Refuge in Your Mighty Fortress

## Psalm 46 (Reformation)

Martin Luther is remembered for many reasons. At a time when people didn't know what Scripture said he took people back to the Scriptures to restore the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus. When pressured to take back all that he had written and said, Luther stood firm before erring church leaders and kings. "Here I stand, I can do no other," he said. He translated the Bible into German, the language of the people, so that they could read it too. Luther wrote resources like the Small Catechism to help teach the Scriptures which, incidentally, the Small Catechism was intended primarily for home use.

Yet one thing sometimes not thought too much about is Luther's hymn writing. He took Scriptural truths and tied them to melodies so that the common person could learn those truths and rejoice in them. When you page through a hymnal, you would find many hymns that Luther wrote, including the one we just sang (heard) - "A Mighty Fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon. He helps us free from every need that has us now o'ertaken."

Many people today think of "A Mighty Fortress" as the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation", a hymn that seems to be based on Psalm 46. It is one of the most translated hymns in the history of the church, having been translated into more than 200 languages. It is by far the most famous hymn of Martin Luther. Interestingly enough though, we know remarkably little about its context in history. We're not even sure exactly when he wrote it. The majority of scholars seem to settle on somewhere between 1527 and 1528. These years were some of the darkest in Luther's life. In August 1527, a man who followed Luther was martyred. That fall, a plague broke out where Luther lived in Wittenberg. In December, Luther's daughter was born sickly and in May she died. He was under the cross of suffering and heavy temptation. Yet, he took comfort in the Psalms and trusted in the promises of Jesus. When a broadsheet, something like "sheet music", of "A Mighty Fortress" was published in 1529, it read, "A Hymn of Comfort". Certainly it is a great hymn of comfort in the midst of trial, suffering, and temptation.

Just like Luther we need a mighty fortress living in a world filled with temptation, trials, and suffering from the forces of evil: Satan, the world around us, and even the enemy within - our sinful nature. Indeed we have a mighty fortress. The psalm writers, the Sons of Korah, tell us exactly who that fortress is. **"God is our refuge and strength, a helper who can always be found in times of trouble." (vs. 1)** God is our mighty fortress to take refuge and seek shelter in. Even though we cannot see him, we know he is present. He is right there with us to be that helper that can always be found in times of trouble. Just look at how his presence among us has helped us in the past. Jesus came into the world so that he could be our help in our greatest trouble. We could not and cannot save ourselves from our sins. So in his grace Jesus did that for us as he went to the cross for you and for me providing a fortress of salvation that can never be crumbled. Just as the psalm writers say, God our Savior is our refuge and strength, our helper in times of trouble.

That knowledge gave Martin Luther comfort in all of his trials, suffering, and temptations. God was not distant from him nor did he turn his back on him, but he remained present with him. Taking refuge in your mighty fortress who shields you with his saving grace, you and I can remain calm even in the midst of the greatest calamities of the world. **"That is why we will not fear when the earth dissolves and when the mountains tumble into the heart of the sea. Its waters roar and foam. The mountains quake when it rises." (vs. 2-3)** God is our strong fortress. There is no need to fear anything, not even our own enemies, those forces of evil - Satan, the world around us, and even our own sinful nature. Try as they might, nothing can crumble our mighty fortress. As long as we take refuge in God, they cannot harm us. We will not fear since God is the one who provides us with protection and spiritual peace.

**“There is a river - its streams bring joy to the city of God, to the holy dwelling of the Most High. God is in her. She will not fall. God will help her at daybreak. Nations are in turmoil. Kingdoms fall. God raises his voice. The earth melts. The LORD of Armies is with us. The God of Jacob is a fortress for us. Come, look at the works of the LORD. What a wasteland he has made of the earth! He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He shatters the bow. He cuts up the spear. He burns the carts with fire. ‘Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted on the earth.’ The LORD of Armies is with us. The God of Jacob is a fortress for us.” (Vs. 4-11)**

The words of this psalm make a sudden and dramatic shift in the scene. The shift is from the shores of the roaring, restless sea to the bank of a quiet river in the city of God. There all is calm. The heavens and the earth can be shaken, but God’s city cannot be disturbed. Not even a ripple of trouble disturbs the peace there. The waters of the sea are restless and dangerous, but the river is peaceful and life-giving. So what is the “City of God”? Sometimes Jerusalem is referred to as the “City of God”, but Jerusalem has no river flowing through it. So what we have is a reference to something spiritual - God’s Church, all believers of all time, those in heaven and those still on earth.

God remains present within his holy city to preserve and protect his Church even though the forces of evil rage all around us and even from within us until Jesus returns to gather all of us into his holy city of heaven, the New Jerusalem. Did you catch the words of the psalmist that tell us that. “God is in her. She will not fall. God will help her at daybreak...The Lord of Armies is with us. The God of Jacob is a fortress for us...Be still and know that I am God.” God will always be a refuge and a mighty fortress for his holy city.

He protects his Church physically as it faithfully confesses Christ to the world. Look in Scripture and you see that time and again where God stepped in to protect his people from destruction. You see it when you look in history and even in the events of the Reformation in Luther’s life. God worked the events of history to protect Luther and others so that the Reformation, a return to a complete reliance on Scripture, could take root and grow. As we have also seen in history, God may not always keep physical harm away from his Church, but in preserving and protecting them spiritually he is still keeping them safe in him as their refuge and mighty fortress.

God’s protection of his church with the spiritual peace which the Gospel brings is happening right now. Through the Word, we have found relief from the attacks of Satan against our souls and our conscience. Through that same Word God is sustaining our faith stilling our fearful hearts with the assurance that he, as the God of grace, has saved us through Jesus and he remains present with us every day. Seeking refuge in God and his Word, we have a mighty fortress that cannot be crumbled and we are safe in his holy city forever.

With the psalm writers we say, “God is our refuge and strength, a helper who can always be found in times of trouble.” We confessed that when we say Luther’s hymn. “A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon...”, but with all that has happened and all that we see have we been taking refuge in him? Look at all that is happening right now in our world - pandemics, political leaders ranting and people divided by politics, fights and violence erupt almost every day somewhere. Look at what is happening in your own life. Where have you been seeking comfort recently? Where have you sought refuge amidst all that you see or have been experiencing?

Living in this world that has so many other things we could take refuge in, we often tend to rely on other “fortresses”. When you take God’s Word for granted and gathering for worship around it is not valued, you aren’t really taking refuge in God. When his Word is disregarded as unimportant in your life, then you aren’t really seeking refuge in God. When you begin to prioritize taking refuge anywhere other than God who can be found in his Word, your heart is left fearing at the very thought of all that is happening around you. You feel insecure about the days

ahead. Then an enemy like Satan has you right where he wants you as you are left unprotected in a fortress that is as weak as a sand castle.

Only when we take refuge in God our Savior and are firmly rooted in his Word are we given confidence to stand tall in the presence of this pandemic, this political divide, this erupting violence, and whatever else presses against you. Amidst all that turmoil, we hear him say to us through his Word like that peaceful river which calms gives us joy. “Be still. Be calm. Quiet your souls. Know that I am God. I am in control. I am your mighty fortress who has saved you from your sins. I am with you. I will never leave you. Nothing can truly harm you. No matter what happens I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted on the earth.”

As Luther took comfort in this psalm, so we too take comfort from this psalm these last days through any day, even the final destruction of this world by fire, God remains our refuge and our strength, a helper who can always be found in times of trouble. He and his Word are our mighty fortress. Because we are taking refuge in him, we have nothing to fear because, as Luther said in his hymn, “he’s by our side upon the plain with his good gifts and Spirit. And do what they will - hate, steal, hurt, or kill - though all may gone, our victory is won. The kingdom’s ours forever.” Luther’s hymn based on this psalm and, more importantly, the psalm itself strengthens his Church, you and I, to confront all the dangers it faces today and every day with confidence until Jesus returns in all his glory. Amen



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