

Martin's Hymn – *“Ein feste Burg”* A Mighty Fortress

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*



Martin Luther
1483-1546

“...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

“I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

Wartburg Castle¹, Eisenach, Germany – *“A Mighty Fortress”*

Introduction – *“A good company of Lutherans”*

This writer first met this hymn *A Mighty Fortress* over forty years ago at a church service in Sydney. After the hymn had been sung, the pastor said, *“That was one of the great hymns of the Reformation and you sang it like a good company of Lutherans.”* The hymn has remained special ever since to this writer, who always thinks of it as *“Martin’s hymn.”* Who was Martin?

Miner’s Son

Martin Luther was a miner’s son from Saxony. He was brought up as a strict Catholic and entered Erfurt University in 1501 at the age of 19 because his dad wanted him to become a lawyer. Luther gained his Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees by 1505 but that year it is said that he was almost killed by a lightning bolt. Terrified of God’s judgement, Luther became an Augustinian monk.

Despairing Monk

In spite of his academic achievements and his dedication as a monk, Luther was miserable. While in the monastery, he endured long hours of fasting and ritual prayer, pilgrimages to saints’ shrines, repeated scourging i.e. self-harm and frequent confessions. He later said of that time, *“I lost touch with Christ the Saviour and Comforter, and made of him the jailor and hangman of my poor soul.”*

Saved Man

No doubt in despair about his soul, Luther turned to the scriptures. He had at the time the old Tepl Bible, named after Tepl in Bohemia. The Tepl Bible had been translated into German in 1389² from the Old Latin Bibles of the Waldenses, who were the faithful Bible believers of northern Italy.

Henry Halley in *Halley's Bible Handbook*, pp 787ff, says that "One day, in 1508, while reading Romans, [Luther's] enlightenment and peace came suddenly: [he read] "the just shall live by faith" [Romans 1:17]. He saw, at last, that salvation was to be gained by Trust in God through Christ, and not by rituals and sacraments and penances of the Church. It changed his whole life, and the **WHOLE COURSE OF HISTORY.**" Martin's conversion would make history as the Reformation.

World Shaker, "These that have turned the world upside down" Acts 17:6

In 1517, the pope wanted to build what is now St Peter's Basilica. He raised money for the project by selling what were called "indulgences," to have your sins forgiven. Luther was outraged. He wrote a list of 95 arguments, called the 95 Theses, against indulgences and nailed them to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral on October 31st 1517. That date became known as Reformation Day. It's now Halloween, so "**the god of this world**" 2 Corinthians 4:4 got a stroke in later on.

James 3:5 says "**Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!**" and from Luther's 95 theses, the Lord fanned the flames of revival into a revolution against Rome and the Reformation spread like wildfire. Large sections of the Catholic Church broke away to form their own national churches, such as the Lutheran Churches, and the Church in England became the Church of England. They sought to follow the scripture, instead of the pope, by means of the basic Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, by scripture alone³ as *Article VI* of the *Articles of Religion of the Church of England* specifies, *Of the sufficiency of the Holy Scripture for Salvation*. Amen.

Papal Enemy No. 1

Rome reacted typically against Luther. In April 1521, he was summoned before an imperial assembly or Diet by Emperor Charles V in the German town of Worms. The emperor tried to get Luther to recant. He refused. See figure. Again, Rome reacted typically, like Caiaphas' crew in John 11:53 "**Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.**"

Bible Translator and Hymn Writer⁴

However, just as "**the Lord hid**" Jeremiah and Baruch, Jeremiah 36:26, He hid Luther. Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, transported Luther to Wartburg Castle and Rome never did get him. Luther was in Wartburg from May 1521 to March 1522. In that time he translated the New Testament into German with the help of the Greek Text first published in 1516 by Erasmus of Rotterdam. Luther translated the whole Bible by 1534. It should be noted that Luther's Bible, Erasmus' Greek Text, the 1389 Tepl Bible and the pure Old Latin Waldensen Bibles from as far back as 157 A.D. closely match the 1611 Authorized Holy Bible and they were all used by the King James translators.

Wartburg Castle may in part have inspired the hymn *A Mighty Fortress*. Luther composed it from Psalm 46:1 "**God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.**" Psalm 46:1 is a great verse that is special to this writer and in turn therefore so is Martin's hymn composed from it.

Home Call, the Devil's Backlash and God's Providence

Luther died peacefully in 1546 aged 62. Henry Halley says that Martin was "*next to Jesus and Paul, the Greatest Man of all the ages.*" Satan, though, was determined to crush the Reformation and almost did so in Europe through Rome's 100-year religious wars of the Counter-Reformation.

God had nevertheless sustained "**the time of reformation**" Hebrews 9:10 in another nation that would take the fruits of the Reformation "**to the uttermost part of the earth**" Acts 1:8 because it was a seafaring nation. That nation was England. From England, a century after Luther, another hymn and hymn-writer emerge, that are special to this writer - but that's another story.

References

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther, www.luther.de/en/geburt.html

² *Did The Catholic Church Give Us The Bible?* by David W. Daniels, Chick Publications, 2005, pp 39ff, 66ff

³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola_scriptura, mb-soft.com/believe/txc/thirtyni.htm

⁴ www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/m/i/g/mightyfo.htm, *The Song of Martin Luther* by Richard Krause