

Voices: Hymns of the faith: 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God'

November 2, 2021

Verse 1

*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
does seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.*

Martin Luther—a German theologian, priest, author, composer, Augustinian monk and a central figure in the Protestant Reformation—was born on Nov. 10, 1483.

Luther came to reject several teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. In particular, he disputed the use of indulgences. Indulgences basically were pardon for sin purchased from the church. Luther had a major problem with the concept of people being able to pardon sin through a donation to the church.

He desired to fix the problems with the Catholic Church's theology. When it became clear the church would not accept the truth of God's word, he broke with the Catholic Church.

On Oct. 31, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in

Wittenberg, Germany. Three years later, Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church.

In 1521, Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms. A diet simply was a general assembly of priests, bishops, cardinals and other church officials. Worms was a free city in Germany, meaning it was not ruled by Catholic authorities. Luther told them: “I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.”

Inspired by Psalm 46

[Psalm 46](#) inspired Luther to write the hymn “[A Mighty Fortress is Our God](#).”

Luther faced numerous dangers and threats on his life from the pope and his forces. At one point, he spent 11 months in hiding in Wartburg Castle. In the face of opposition, excommunication and pressure to back down from every side, Luther stood firmly for the truth of salvation by grace through faith alone.

When he had occasion to fear or grow discouraged, he would say to his friend and coworker Philip Melanchthon, “Come Philip, let us sing the 46th psalm,” and they would lift their voices.

God alone is our refuge

No matter what happens in life, followers of Jesus have the confidence of God’s protection, because God is our refuge and strength. Yahweh is a personal God we can turn to confidently in times of trouble. God, not any man-made structure, is our refuge and strength. All other sources are

weakness.

Who or what many believers tend to turn to in times of trouble is a problem. Instead of turning to God, they tend to rely on their own wisdom and strength. Some people turn to the advice of friends and family. Others will listen to popular psychology. Self-help books and worldly philosophy are popular.

Christians need to remember: God is our security. Not God plus anything else. God alone is our refuge and strength.

Shelter from trouble

The Hebrew word translated “refuge” is *măḥ·sěh*, which means “shelter from trouble.”

When David was hiding from King Saul, he spent some time at a place in Israel close to the springs of En Gedi that came to be known as Masada. Masada is about a 15 to 20-minute drive from En Gedi.

Between 37 and 31 B.C., Herod the Great built Masada—Hebrew for “fortress”—as a refuge. At the beginning of the Jews’ Great Revolt against Rome in A.D. 66, 75 years after Herod’s death, a group of Jewish rebels overcame the Roman garrison of Masada.

After the fall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70, they were joined by zealots and their families who had fled Jerusalem. This small band of 960 Jews held out against the mightiest army in the world for three years.

Masada was quite a fortress, but it is weak compared to God’s protection and strength.

God always is with us

Augustine said: “No Christian will be strong in himself or herself; but God, who has become our refuge, will supply the strength.”

God is sufficient to protect and defend us no matter what we face in life. When troubles come, God is sufficient to protect and fight for us. No problem is too much for God. Troubles will come, but God is stronger than any of them. God is our refuge and strength, and he always is ready to help us when we are in trouble.

God does not slumber or sleep. Nothing we go through catches the all-knowing God unaware. God is not surprised when we are in trouble and always is found in such times. He always is with us. He never will leave us or forsake us. When troubles come, we go to God and depend on him alone.

God’s presence removes all fear. Fear is irrational if God is our refuge. Even if the most solid things in our lives fail, God never will fail, even in times of uncertainty.

Even if God allows our entire world to be shaken, and we go through turmoil of every sort—political, societal, economic, cultural or relational—we need not fear, because God is with us. Even if the worst thing we can imagine happens, God is our security and is with us. No matter what happens, a believer is safe in God and has the confidence of God’s protection.

These truths led us to a place of *shalom*—God’s peace. God is our refuge, our place of peace. God is our strength, our source of peace. God always is ready to help us, bringing us peace (John 14:27, Philippians 4:7).

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