

## Hymns of the Faith: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

Psalm 46:1

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi  
with  
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

**Dr. Wymond:** Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.” .....And now here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan with Derek Thomas on “Hymns of the Faith,” and we’re again joining to talk about some of the greatest devotional treasures of the ages that have been bequeathed to us in the Christian hymnals that we possess and sing. The Christian faith is a singing faith, and Christians live and die singing, and it behooves us all to pay attention to the great treasures that have been handed down over the last two thousand years from the sung faith of Christians; that is, the beliefs, the prayers, the hopes, the encouragements, the exhortations, the praises that Christians have sung in the hymns of the faith. And that’s what we do on “Hymns of the Faith” every Sunday morning.

Today—I’ve actually been looking forward to this day for some time, because we’ve worked through already some really outstanding hymns. One of the hymns that I’ve so wanted to do is *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. It’s still one of the best known hymns in the English language. It’s of course a translation of a German hymn which is itself based on Psalm 46.

It was written by Martin Luther himself—the Martin Luther, the great Lutheran Reformer who sparked the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. On October 31 of 1517, he went to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. He posted 95 theses, or points of disputation, that he wanted to debate with any leading figure or authority representing the Roman Catholic Church. And somehow an enterprising printer got hold of that document, published it, and spread it all over the city. Soon it was circulating around Germany. And some of the great historians of that era have called that the spark that lit the bonfire of the Reformation. It didn’t cause the Reformation. There were things that were

already happening all over Europe that brought about a tremendous desire for reform in the life and teaching and practice of the church. But Luther was God's man for God's purpose in God's time, and he had a mighty effect on that Protestant Reformation.

But he was also an outstanding musician. Maybe among the Magisterial Reformers — the greatest Reformers — the first or second best musicians mainly may have been the best musicians of those leading men in the early days — but Luther was a formidable musician. He wrote tunes. He's one of the few people in Christian hymnody that wrote both outstanding texts and outstanding tunes, and I can't wait to hear what Bill Wymond has to say about that.

I was looking in *Christian History and Biography* magazine, Issue 95, the Summer edition. It's all about Bach and about Luther and their contribution to church music, but they actually have an introduction to a hymnal that Martin Luther wrote. Let me just share you a snippet of this to give you an idea of what he thought about music. Luther said in this introduction:

Greetings in Christ. I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is, and to commend it to everyone; but I am so overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of its virtue and benefits that I can find neither beginning nor end nor method for my discourse. We can mention only one point, which experience confirms: namely, that next to the word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions, for whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, 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 can you find?

The Holy Ghost Himself honors her as an instrument for His proper work when in His Holy Scriptures He asserts that through her gifts were instilled in the prophets, namely, the inclination to all virtues, as can be seen in Elisha. On the other hand, she serves to cast out Satan, the instigator of all sins, as is shown in Saul, the king of Israel. Thus it was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the word of God as music. Therefore we have so many hymns and psalms where message and music join to move the listener's soul. After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music: namely, by proclaiming the word of God through music and by providing sweet melody with words. But when musical learning is added to all this, and artistic music which corrects and develops and refines natural music, then at last it is possible to taste and wonder, yet not to comprehend, God's absolute and perfect wisdom in His wondrous work of music.

It's really an amazing introduction. He goes on like this for a good bit of time, but he clearly had a tremendous regard for the function of music in worship. Bill?

**Dr. Wymond:** I was just thinking in a negative turn that music, sometimes in the church, especially in the early church, was used to teach unbiblical doctrine. It was used as a propaganda tool, I think, in the fourth century by the Arians in North Africa to propagate their teachings, and it's said that in many villages even the children were singing these things that were teaching a wrong view of certain aspects of the Trinity.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, this is one of the reasons why it's so important to guard what we sing, both in its substance and what we use to convey that substance in singing, because of the powerful emotive effect of music. But Luther was one who understood and appreciated that.

Derek, tell us a little bit about the background of this great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*...a little bit about Luther, a little bit about the context in which he wrote this hymn.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes. What can we say about Luther in a few minutes—the towering figure of the Reformation to whom we owe so much? I think we have to understand first of all something of the context. At least for probably eight or nine hundred years prior to Luther, women had been forbidden to sing in church. And for at least three hundred years, maybe around 1200 or so, any singing that was done was done professionally. It was done by a choir, and it would have been done in a language that the people would not have understood. So the function of music in the medieval church was one of inspiring maybe a sense of awe or majesty, or more likely mystery...but nothing that the people themselves could enter into. And it's interesting that at the time of the Reformation Luther, but especially Calvin, speaks about members of his congregation even during his worship time, muttering during the sermon. And they were brought before the Consistory. What they were doing was they were saying the Ave Maria or the Lord's Prayer, because that's what they would have done during the worship time. They didn't understand the Latin of the Roman mass, so they would just mutter the Ave Maria or the Pater Nostre. And they continued doing that for a while, until they were told to stop it!

And so Luther is the one who brings us what? The German Bible in their own language — a phenomenal achievement done roughly about the time of the composition of this hymn; he brought *The Catechism* into the church — a wonderful catechism; and, he is often said to be the one who brought in a hymn book. (You've just referred to it.)

You know Luther is born in 1483 and dies in 1546. He was 63 years old. And it's in 1517, of course, that we remember the 95 theses were nailed to the church door.

**Dr. Duncan:** Again, to put it in context, Columbus comes to the Western Hemisphere and discovers what's now Central America in 1492, just about ten years after Luther's birth. So the time frame is long before the colonies of America are established, he's leading this Protestant Reformation.

**Dr. Thomas:** Luther was an Augustinian monk, and it's well known of course that he endeavored to find peace with God through an elaborate system of self-flagellation and self-denial and good works. And it is to Luther I think that we owe the clear defining sense of the gospel and justification by faith alone in Christ alone, and not of our works. The papal bull, of course, condemned the 95 theses, and was famously burnt by Luther...and then a couple of years later the so-called Diet of Worms, when Charles V was the Holy Roman Emperor — neither holy, Roman, nor an emperor! — but it was then of course that Luther uttered those very famous words: “I can do no other, so help me God.” We sometimes associate this hymn with that event in 1521, though historians will now say that the hymn was probably written maybe seven or eight years after that event, in 1529 at the Diet of Spire, as it's called; and again it's one of these occasions when Protestant princes of various parts of Germany are protesting against attempts by the Holy Roman Emperor who enforced Catholic worship again.

**Dr. Duncan:** And that is exactly where the term “protest-ant” — Protestant — came from.

**Dr. Thomas:** So this is...it's often said, isn't it, that this hymn is the *Marseillaise* of the Reformation, and it's certainly the theme hymn of our own denomination. At any great event that we have, we sing this hymn.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, and for the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology — you and I have the privilege of serving on the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and Jim Boice and R.C. Sproul have sung this hymn from the very beginning of the PCRT. It's the theme hymn for the PCRT. And it picks up on the language — it's a very, very free Christianized paraphrase of the substance of Psalm 46, without attempting to do anything like a metrical rendition of that Psalm. It's not like the metrical renditions that you'd find, say, in a Scottish Psalter. The language of Psalm 46 is

“God is our refuge and our strength, our very present help in time of trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, and the mountains slip into the sea...”

And what Luther does is not try and word for word translate that, but to translate the substance of that in view of Christian theology.

**Dr. Thomas:** I often think that at least at one time in Britain it was Bunyan's

hymn, *He Who Would Valiant Be*, from the Second Part of *Pilgrim's Progress*—that was the hymn that I sang in school almost every day, and would have in a time gone by—you know, Britain has changed so much—but that would have been...almost had a nationalistic sense about it. And I think EIN FESTE BURG and this hymn defines a protest of the German Protestant people.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill Wymond, this is an incredible hymn tune. Tell us a little bit about the music. I was just looking last night...we don't actually sing it the way that Luther first wrote it. We've stuck in a few extra notes, I think probably because of the predominant English translation of it. And it goes a little bit differently as it was originally written. Tell us about the tune.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, the tune is just such a great, strong tune. And we had talked a little bit about this when we were talking about *Now Thank We All Our God*.

We're talking about the strength of the tune. It is such an assertive, confident beginning to this tune. It just starts out with the same three notes [demonstrates], so it starts high and goes low. It is my theory that a hymn that starts like that is either a hymn of confidence or joy, or something; it is not a quest (going up the scale), but there is an affirmation of something well established. And so the tune is simple. It doesn't have a wide range to it, as most of the tunes at this particular time were, but nevertheless it's a strong, wonderful tune. And it repeats itself, and as we sing it now it goes like this [plays tune]. That's the way the tune goes now, and it repeats itself.

But it really had a much more vigorous sound to it originally. It's gone through several different alterations, but back in Luther's time it sounded something like this [plays tune]. You know, that sounds like a dance tune to me, from that period of time; a very, very happy, very strong kind of sound to it. And the next part of it, what I would call the B section, the first part is repeated once, and then you come to the next section [plays]. That was not a wrong note in there! They used to sing that note differently. We go [plays]; they used to go [plays]. There is just something in their modes, in their scales of the time, that made that sound right to them.

And then for a while it goes on just in a steady way like ours [plays]. And then it goes back to that kind of dance rhythm. I think it has a lot more vitality and life that way. If we introduced that now to the congregation, they would stumble all over themselves and would not be happy with us at all! [Laughter] But I think it's a wonderful tune.

As far as we know the tune is original with Luther. It was common in those days to borrow musical fragments from the culture, from folk songs and so on like that, but this particular tune as far as we know is original to Luther. So he did the words and because of his musical gifts he added this wonderful, wonderful strong tune.

**Dr. Duncan:** In Germany, presumably, leading up to the Reformation the dominant sung music in the church...Derek, you've already talked about the congregation really not participating in the singing, that it's being done by choirs, by monks in abbeys, or by professionally hired choirs in the cathedral for the major worship services—presumably the music is going to be very much in the plainsong tradition, or maybe...I guess maybe in Germany you've already got some of the polyphonic stuff that's coming up from Italy and is being sung...very legato, very mysterious. Beautiful music, to be sure, but nothing this vigorous! I wouldn't think the people would have heard choirs singing anything with this kind of vigor.

**Dr. Wymond:** I think that's right. This tune definitely has those folk song/folk dance influences in it that are different from the very smooth and mystical kind of Gregorian chant that was common in the church of the day.

I think it's interesting to see what Luther did. In all interest of accuracy, when he first formed the worship of the church, he was trying to take out the elements that he thought were wrong, and so he actually developed what he called a German mass. Now, for him the mass was not a sacrifice of Christ again, and so we have to be careful in the use of that word because of those associations; but nevertheless, he left in some musical elements from the traditional worship of the church, like the *Kyrie Elyson*, which is “God have mercy upon us,” and the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), and so on like that. Those are songs that people would have understood because of their long association hearing them in the former mass. And so the hymns though, introduced into the worship, I think must have added a real fresh element for the people because they were both musically different and because it was innovative to use hymns with the people singing.

When you go into a church even today that has a choir loft that's configured with the choir looking at one another, you sort of get a taste of what was going on back before the Reformation, because the worship was observed. The people were standing and watching the clergy do the worship, and the choir faced one another because they were singing the Psalms antiphonally to one another — back and forth.

**Dr. Duncan:** And Derek, he writes the hymn...it's around 1529, we think? What's happening around this time? The Protestants are being persecuted, and the princes are protesting the oppression that's coming from the official Roman Catholic authority, and what's happening in this time?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, I think in the decade from 1517 to the time of the composition of this hymn the Protestant faith has very much become an entity in Europe, and the face of Germany and Europe is now about to change. One can't over-exaggerate the importance of Luther and others leading this Reformation, this enormous change that's taking place.

And it was a groundswell of the people, wasn't it? It wasn't just a groundswell of those who were in charge. And in a sense it sort of reflects what's been going on in the church, because the church in the medieval period was a church of clergy and priests and hierarchy, and what happens at the time of the Reformation is the people, the common people, now have a part to play in the worship of God on the Lord's Day. And it's a time of enormous revival and confidence in the gospel and the spread of missionary interests as the gospel spreads throughout Europe.

**Dr. Duncan:** One of the things that is characteristic of both Luther and Calvin in that first generation of the Reformation is the enormous confidence that they wanted the people of God to have in the promises of God. They were coming out of a period of medieval Christianity in which no one was expected to have assurance of God's love and of God's salvation, except for someone who had had some sort of ecstatic mystical encounter and special revelation from God. And yet with both Luther and Calvin there's this desire that every believer be assured of the saving love of God. And, boy, does that come across in this hymn!

"A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.  
Our helper He..."

It's a great Old Testament idea of God: God as our helper.

"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."

And again, immediately Luther is positioning us in this gigantic struggle between God and Satan; and, even with Satan himself opposing us, wanting us to have utter confidence in God who is our help in ages past.

So it's a very powerful rendering. It puts you in between this titanic struggle between good and evil, between the God who made everything and rules over everything, and Satan who has rebelled against Him and who wants to undo man. And the hero in this rendering of Psalm 46 is Jesus Christ.

In the third stanza, Luther has you say,

Though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God has willed His truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure;  
**One little word** shall fell him.

And he then says,

“That Word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;”

And so Jesus Christ and His gospel word will vanquish Satan. And it's a tremendously encouraging hymn. It's not only God-ward-ly directed, but again, like so many of these hymns that we have seen, there's an exhortational quality to it where we're exhorting one another to believe that God is our mighty fortress.

Bill, why don't you play the hymn for us?

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.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he,  
Lord Sabaoth His name, from age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure;  
One little word shall fell him.

That Word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth.  
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;  
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still;  
His kingdom is forever.”

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with*



*the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

#### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).