

“A mighty fortress is our God, a sword and shield victorious; He breaks the cruel oppressor’s rod and wins salvation glorious.” With those words, Martin Luther gave us a hymn that is both a confession of faith and a sermon in song.

It was originally written as a paraphrase of Psalm 46: *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”* But it became much more than that. A Mighty Fortress is a sort of battle hymn. A song for going to war. Not with flesh and blood, but with the devil and his demons. With the sin that clings to us. With death itself.

“The old satanic foe has sworn to work us woe.” Luther doesn’t picture the devil as a cartoonish villain with horns and a pitchfork. No, he is “the old foe.” An ancient and cunning enemy who works “with craft and dreadful might.”

He comes armed, not with visible weapons, but with lies. The same lies that he told to Adam and Eve. The lie that God can’t be trusted. The lie that we can stand on our own. The lie that sin is harmless and grace is unnecessary.

And Luther adds a line that is, at first glance, deeply disturbing: “On earth he has no equal.” There is no human being – not the strongest, not the wisest, not the most moral or devout – who can match the devil’s strength. Our battle against the evil one is utterly hopeless if we enter it alone.

You are simply outmatched. You are a rank amateur fighting against a professional who has been honing his craft for thousands of years. Who has abilities you couldn’t even dream of. And is working with an advantage. Because you are born sinful. You come into this life already wanting to believe his lies. As Jesus said, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

And that’s what drove Luther to despair as a monk. He tried fasting. Praying. Confessing. Punishing himself. Anything to silence the accuser. But the more he tried, the louder the accusations became. The devil knows how to twist even good works into despair. He whispers, “Have you done enough? Are you sure you’re forgiven?” And when we look inside ourselves, the answer is always “no.”

We live in a world filled with false fortresses: wealth, power, medicine, reputation, comfort, pleasure. We imagine these can shield us from fear or death. But they always crumble. No strength of ours can match the enemy’s might. Our walls collapse. And without God’s refuge, we would be lost, rejected.

“But now a champion comes to fight, whom God Himself elected. You ask who this may be? The Lord of hosts is He! Christ Jesus, mighty Lord, God’s only Son, adored. He holds the field victorious.”

Where we are weak, Christ is strong. Where we fail, He conquers. Where we are condemned, He is righteous. God Himself has entered the battlefield for us. The Almighty Lord of hosts, who commands the armies of heaven, became man. Not to give orders from afar, but to stand in the front line and to meet the enemy head-on.

And what weapons does He bring? Not sword or spear. Not armies or power. He fights by surrendering. He conquers by dying. On the cross, it looked in every way as though the devil had triumphed. You would have thought the same thing. There is Jesus, dead on the cross. Rejected, mocked, bleeding, and lifeless.

But in that death, the serpent’s head was crushed. And in His resurrection on the third day, the Champion raised His banner over the battlefield. “He holds the field victorious.”

This is the Gospel that Luther rediscovered. And yes, that’s the correct term for it. He didn’t discover the Gospel. He rediscovered the Gospel. It had been there all along, staring him and everyone else in the face.

It wasn’t some new teaching, some new doctrine. It was simply the eternal truth of Scripture: that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. God Himself provides what we could never achieve. He elects the Champion, sends His own Son, and wins salvation glorious.

“Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.” It sounds almost arrogant or boastful at first glance. And maybe it is. We boast in nothing except Christ crucified. By faith, we boast in the Lord. And that faith clings to the Word of God, even when the world rages.

Luther wrote this hymn roughly ten years after the posting of the 95 Theses. The Reformation was moving full speed ahead and it was a time of immense danger. The Pope had condemned and excommunicated him, the emperor was threatening to have him arrested and burned at the stake. And yet, in the midst of this, Luther sang this song. Why? Because he believed what the Psalm 46 declares: *“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”*

“Let this world’s tyrant rage; in battle we’ll engage! His might is doomed to fail; God’s judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him.”

What is that little word? He doesn't actually say what that one little word is, does he? That's because there's more than one. That's Luther's point. Any little word – if it comes from God's Word – can subdue him.

It is the Word of God that says, “It is finished.” It is the Word of God that declares sinners forgiven. It is the Word of God that proclaims the Lamb victorious. The devil cannot stand against any word if it comes from the Word of God. All his accusations fall silent when that Word is spoken.

The Church stands or falls by that Word. That was the battle of the Reformation. It wasn't simply about politics or reforming institutions, although those certainly got tangled up in it. No, the real battle of the Reformation was about truth. Whether the Word of God would remain our one sure fortress, or whether human tradition, human reason, and human authority would take its place.

“God’s Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes who fear it; for God Himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit.” The weapons of the Spirit are not swords or threats, but the Gospel and the Sacraments. The Word preached and the Word given in bread and wine, water and absolution. These are the weapons by which God defends and sustains His people.

And yet the hymn doesn't promise it will be ease. “Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day.” Luther knew what that meant personally. He lost friends to the sword. He faced exile in a castle tower. He struggled with illness, and he knew grief. But the Word held. The Gospel remained.

And so he sings with hope and joy, “The Kingdom’s ours forever.” The world’s kingdoms rise and fall, yet the Kingdom of Christ endures. Because it's not built by human strength or maintained by worldly power. It endures wherever the Word is preached. Wherever sinners are forgiven. Wherever the baptized are fed with Christ’s body and blood.

That’s what we celebrate on Reformation Day. This festival isn't about Martin Luther’s personal courage. It's not about human reform. It's about divine preservation. God preserves His Word. God preserves His Church. The Reformation wasn't the creation of something new, but the uncovering of what was already true: that God is our refuge and strength, our mighty fortress, through His Son Jesus Christ.

We still need that fortress, now as much as ever. The old foe still rages. He tempts the Church to trust in numbers, popularity, programs, and politics. To build our own walls instead of resting in God’s. He tempts believers to trade the solid Word for something more exciting, more modern, more diverse, more inclusive. But every age of the Church must rediscover what Luther found: that while other walls fail, only the Word of the Lord endures forever.

And so today, we take up this hymn again. Not as nostalgia, not as tradition, but as a confession of faith and a battle hymn for our generation. For we confess the same faith, fight the same enemy, cling to the same Christ, and rest in the same promise as Martin Luther did 508 years ago. And we say with him that same truth that was true then: “The Kingdom’s ours forever.” Amen.

