

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom;
teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

-Colossians 3:16

The Hymns We Sing

A Mighty Fortress

Martin Luther, 1528

'A Mighty Fortress' is Luther's most famous hymn, often called the 'battle hymn of the Reformation.' It is Dr. Luther's poetic interpretation of Psalm 46.

In this wonderful hymn we see how Luther understood the conflict of the Reformation: it was a battle between Jesus and the devil. The imagery of warfare and battle are throughout the hymn.

The hymn begins by extolling the Lord and His protection of His people as Psalm 46 also begins, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." [Psalm 46:1] Notice, again, how Luther uses images from war to describe God: 'Fortress', 'Shield', and 'Weapon'.

Right away in the first stanza the enemy is introduced: the devil. Luther calls him the 'old evil foe', and reminds us first of the devil's purpose and intention; that the devil is out to destroy the Lord's church. The devil 'means deadly woe'. Next Luther reminds us that the devil is no joking matter, but is a great and mighty enemy, 'on earth is not his equal'.

Our archenemy the devil is so mighty and strong that we cannot with our own reason or strength resist or fight against him. We need another to fight for us and defend us.

This is the dramatic highpoint of the hymn, we are desperate, on the edge of destruction and loss, 'but for us fights the Valiant One!' We have a Champion, a Victor, a Mighty Warrior on our side. Who could this be, such a Warrior who defeats sin, death, the devil and hell? 'Ask ye Who is this? Jesus Christ it is'.

'Of Sabaoth Lord' continues this theme of war. 'Sabaoth' is a Hebrew word meaning 'hosts', as in hosts of armies, both of men and angels. We extol the Lord of

hosts in the liturgy: 'Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth.' This Lord Jesus is the one true God, there is none other. As Luther is fond of saying, 'I know of no God but the man Jesus.' The Lord Jesus 'holds the field forever'; He

continues to go forth conquering. This happens in the church, as the Gospel is preached and souls are converted to the truth.

With the Lord fighting for us, we need fear nothing at all. Listen to the Christian fearlessness in the third verse: 'though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill.' The devil has been defeated on the cross [see 1 John 3:8], and so He can do us no harm [1 Peter 5:8-9; James 4:7]. 'One little word can fell him' and cast the devil far away.

The devil and his kingdom deny the Gospel; they have 'no thanks' for the Word. Yet Jesus remains with us with His good gifts of life, salvation and the forgiveness of all of our sins. Because we have Jesus and His kingdom, we have all that we need. Even if the devil were to take all things from us, 'goods, fame, child and wife', they still have not taken our greatest treasure, the Gospel and the forgiveness of all of our sins. If we have these, we have all.

In this hymn Luther shows the boldness of faith that clings to the Lord in the midst of all sorts of trials, suffering and temptation. This faith stands firm because it knows that the devil has been defeated by the Lord on the cross. May the words of this great hymn embolden and strengthen our faith, that we would rejoice that Jesus

**A mighty Fortress is our God,
A trusty Shield and Weapon;
He helps us free from every need
That hath us now o'ertaken.
The old evil Foe
Now means deadly woe;
Deep guile and great might
Are his dread arms in fight;
On Earth is not his equal.**

**With might of ours can naught be done,
Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One,
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is.
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God;
He holds the field forever.**

**Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us.
We tremble not, we fear no ill,
They shall not overpower us.
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none,
He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.**

**The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom our remaineth.**

The Lutheran Hymnal, 262

fights for us. Amen.

For further study of Jesus' defeat of the devil:

St. Matthew 12:29; St. John 12:28-33; Colossians 2:13-15; Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 12:5-12; 20:2-3