

Hymn 92, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

We think of Martin Luther as the most well-known Reformer, a theologian, a fiery preacher, a Bible translator. Luther was also a musician!

Luther was born in 1483, in an area of Germany known for its music. In his little village, the boy Martin grew up listening to his mother sing in their home. His emotions were like a volcano, and that could be heard erupting in song. Martin joined a boys' choir that sang at weddings and funerals.

But whenever young Martin went to church, he heard what everyone else heard: no music. The priests chanted, and that only in Latin. Seventy years earlier, in 1415, John Hus had been burned at the stake. At that time, the Hus followers were warned not to sing hymns. In those 70 years, there had been only a few churches where church members would sing in Latin, and even fewer churches who sang in their own language.

It was Luther who got the church singing again. When the Reformation began, Luther determined to lead the German Church to sing to God in German. He himself wrote a number of hymns to get the ball rolling, but mostly Luther called on poets and skilled musicians to create new hymns. Luther wrote, "next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world..."

When Luther was 40 years old, something happened that stoked Luther's commitment to hymns. Two young pastors were burned at the stake, the first 2 martyrs of the Reformation. In response, Luther grieved and expressed his grief in writing a hymn to God. Within a year, Luther had two dozen hymns.

Luther's most famous hymn is "Ein' Feste Burg ist Unser Gott" – "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It is known as "battle hymn of the Reformation," because it has a heightened sense of spiritual conflict, the reality of living in danger even to the point of possible martyrdom, and a sense of confidence that comes from belonging to God's cause. A certain all-or-nothing vigor energizes the poem.

At times when the cause of the Reformation seemed lost, Luther would resort back to this hymn, saying to his partner Philip Melancthon, "Come, Philipp, let us sing..." This hymn shares the general qualities and themes of Psalm 46, but it is a hymn.

By the end of the Reformation, the people were able to listen to God through His Word, and respond back to God in their singing. During the first 100 years of the Reformation, scholars estimate that 25,000 hymns were written, just in Germany.

In the 1960s, you would never expect to find this hymn in a Roman Catholic hymnal. But now, the former Roman Catholic priest's hymn appears quite regularly in Catholic hymnals, usually with some alterations!

Let's celebrate God's victory and our safety in Christ by singing all four verses of 92, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.