



A BIBLE STUDY ON "KNIGHT GEORGE"

MARTIN LUTHER'S IMPRISONMENT IN THE WARTBURG

"A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD"

(Text by Martin Luther TLH 262; LW 298; LSB 656)
(Ps. 46:1, 7, 11; Rev. 19:11–16; Rom. 8:31–39; Eph. 6:10–17)

Martin Luther was ready to face the music and — if God willed — follow St. Paul and Jan Hus to the ultimate sacrifice of thanksgiving: the giving up of one's very life for the sake of the pure Gospel. The Edict of Worms (May 8, 1521) had declared him an outlaw. The Roman Catholic Church was out to capture and silence him and anyone else who gave the heretic aid. But Luther's prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, arranged to have Luther kidnapped May 4, 1521, and secretly held in the remote Wartburg Castle above Eisenach. For ten months (May 1521–March 1522), Martin Luther assumed the alias "Knight George." Luther suffered from being cut off from family and friends. In this so-called protective custody, the physical and emotional health of "Knight George" also suffered. The true Church was under attack and other church leaders were turning the Reformation into a religious revolution.

Yet in this imprisonment Christ did not abandon Martin. Struggle and suffering kept Luther's eyes on Christ and the promises of Christ. Denied a pulpit to preach from, Luther found himself translating the Greek New Testament into German, writing sermons and other books that centered on the Word of the Lord and the comfort to be found only in the cross. His understanding of Christian suffering was clarified. While confined to the Wartburg he wrote, "Since the members of Christ's flock are subjected to much suffering for their faith's sake and are humbled and oppressed and despised by all, God manifests His loving-kindness toward them so that after much humiliation they taste and experience ever more how good, loving, and kind God is. Thus the many abasements and sufferings teach the simple believers to become ever better acquainted with God, to trust Him and believe in Him and thereby grow strong and rich and established in their confidence in God's kindness" (*Luther's Works, American Edition* 13:11).

While "A Mighty Fortress," written around the year 1527, is most commonly known as "the Battle Hymn of

the Reformation," Luther didn't write it for a grand and glorious Reformation Day celebration. He wrote it as the faith-in-Christ response of a nothing-redeeming-in-myself sinner. The words are not polished or refined for maximum emotional response. With the words of "A Mighty Fortress," Martin Luther adds his voice to the inspired author of Psalm 46 and the entire Christian Church suffering on account of the name of Christ and His Word. A published version of the hymn from 1529 refers to it as "a hymn of comfort."

STANZA ONE

A mighty fortress is our God, / A trusty shield and weapon; / He helps us free from ev'ry 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.

The Wartburg was the outlaw Martin Luther's prison. Separated from family and friends, Luther

knew that his fallen human abilities could do nothing to properly serve Christ's flock in desperate need of the pure Gospel and unadulterated Sacraments. The work of the devil had been openly revealed in the Edict of Worms. Anyone supporting Luther and the Gospel he was preaching was to be silenced. Would the light of the Word of God be snuffed out?

1. Luther was on the lam in the solitude of his Patmos (REV. 1:9). More was at risk than his personal safety; the preservation and proclamation of the clear promises of Christ and His free gift of salvation was at stake. Luther often felt he was doing little for Christ and the Gospel in his Wartburg prison. Although Luther was in a desperate place, the Psalter — the hymnal of the Old Testament and the earliest intact hymnal of God's people — brought him comfort (PS. 46:1–3; 18:2; PS. 62:6; 91:2; 144:2). How are the Psalms your comfort in times of despair?

"The main thing in the Gospel ... is Christ as the one gift God gives to everyone, the gift that identifies the believer with him. This joyful news is the true preaching of the Christian faith." — Martin Luther

2. It is clear that Martin Luther not only had memorized the Psalter, but he daily prayed it through faith in Christ. How does David's psalm of deliverance (2 SAMUEL 22) parallel Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress"? How does David's Saul parallel Luther's Pope Leo X and Emperor Charles V?

3. Why do we as Lutheran Christians sing that Satan has no equal on earth? What in today's world reveals that the devil is alive and working (both openly and secretly, masquerading as an angel of light) to destroy the Christian and the true Christian Church on earth? (REV. 12:1–17; 2 COR. 11:13–15; 1 PETER 5:8–9).

STANZA TWO

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.

This hymn presents the imagery of a great battle, but the armor of Ephesians 6 is only defensive armor (1 SAMUEL 2:9). We contribute nothing to our eternal deliverance except our sins. The cosmic battle for our salvation is the Lord's and the One He has elected to take the field; it is His to win. When Luther was snatched from his wagon on the way back from the Diet of Worms, he had time to grab only two books: a Hebrew Old Testament and a Greek New Testament. How did the Word of God preserve and deliver Luther?

4. What do we confess when we sing about "the Lord of Sabaoth" (the Lord of the heavenly armies) in the Sanctus as we approach the altar to receive the Lord's Supper? What were the crowds on Palm Sunday expecting as Christ rode into the Roman-army-occupied Jerusalem?

5. The Old Testament may very well point to the pre-incarnate Son of God when it reveals the redeeming "Angel of the Lord" (GEN. 32:24–32; HOSEA 12:3–5). Luther writes while at the Wartburg: "Scripture speaks of Christ as 'Lord of hosts'" (LUTHER'S WORKS, AMERICAN EDITION 13:13). What was God's eternal plan of redemption and how was salvation to be won through His chosen Servant? How are Jesus and the Word of the Lord related to each other? (GEN. 3:16; 1 COL. 2:15; 1 PETER 1:18–25).

STANZA THREE

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..

Lutherans follow the Bible in believing that "the last days" began with the New Testament Church. Christ and His Word will be under attack until He comes again in

power and glory. It seems that Christ and the Gospel will not prevail. But the verdict for all who believe in Christ and His substitutionary sacrifice is certain — just as it is for the devil and his demonic forces.

6. What silly promises does our old sinful nature make with God when under attack? Why is it dangerous for Christians to believe that their human smarts or willpower will be their defense against the devil, the world and their own sinful nature? Why does Luther's hymn put the spotlight on Christ's work and not our own? (IS. 64:6; ECCL. 7:20).

7. What is that "little word" that conquers the evil prince of this world? (JOHN 1:1–14; JOHN 8:44).

STANZA FOUR

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, / Good, fame, child, and wife, / Though these all be gone, / Our vict'ry has been won; / The Kingdom ours remaineth.

While the Word, Christ, died for the sins of the entire world, only a few will receive the work of Christ in their place and believe. Our Champion remains by our side, nourishing our faith and fighting for us. This is what we believe, teach and confess, even in the face of uncertainty.

8. Why do Lutherans often stand when singing "A Mighty Fortress"? Why is this hymn much more than just a song to sing on special Christian festival days? On what other occasions could we sing "A Mighty Fortress"?

9. How does the evil accuser try to shipwreck our faith? What is our proper response when the devil holds up the mirror of God's Law and condemns our sinfulness?

10. One of the first things Luther wrote after arriving at the Wartburg was a commentary on Psalm 68: "This is God's manner — to take devious and desolate paths. These are all paths of faith; and faith does not follow the dictates of reason and the senses, but stands by calmly and permits God to take the lead. Faith neither knows nor wants to know whither, how far, how long, or through what. When God reigns in us through faith, ... we unconcernedly follow him" (*Luther's Works, American Edition* 13:6). Why does only faith see the good gifts of Christ and His Spirit? (HEB. 11:1). What is the one enduring treasure our Lord won for us, even if we suffer the loss of everything in this world? How is living under the victory of Christ completely different from what the fallen world and our fallen nature foolishly believes to be the "victorious life"?