

On November 10, 1483, a woman in Eisleben, Germany, gave birth to her first child—a son. The next day, that child was taken to the basement chapel of St. Peter’s Church in Eisleben to be baptized. Because it was the feast day of St. Martin of Tours, these new parents, Hans and Margarethe Luther, named their firstborn son Martin.

As they held this baby boy in their arms, little did they realize the impact he would have, not only on the history of Germany or Europe, but the whole world. Little did they know that over five hundred years later, millions of people from all over the world would assemble in churches influenced by him and his desire to reform the Church along Biblical lines. And little did they know that this child, their son, whom they loved and cherished, would find himself so often in danger and would in fact become a marked man. But this day, the day of his baptism, the only thing little Martin was marked by was the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, along with a splash of water.

It’s very difficult for us to imagine the pressures and difficulties faced by the grown-up Martin Luther. Everyone close to Luther and the principles of the Reformation were putting their livelihoods and lives themselves on the line. We are not used to the idea of your confession of faith being a matter of life or death. But that was the experience of those who dared to support the ideals of Christ Alone; Scripture Alone; Grace Alone; Faith Alone. To take that stance, you need to have a powerful source of spiritual sustenance. No surprise; Luther and the Reformers found that source in Holy Scripture.

A portion of Holy Scripture that became a rallying cry for the Reformation movement was Psalm 46. This Psalm, which became the basis for Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” sends the clear message that God is our Refuge and Strength. The use of this hymn has become a matter of Lutheran identity, something you probably expected to do today on Reformation Sunday, rightly so. Let’s make the most of our Reformation heritage today and look deeply into the truth proclaimed by the hymn and the Psalm that inspired it, to see that God is indeed our refuge and strength. A very present help in times of trouble.

Psalm 46 is not long—only eleven verses. Written under the inspiration of God, the psalm celebrates a miraculous victory of the children of Israel during the days when King Jehoshaphat was on the throne. To summarize, three tribes of nomadic people were gathered against Israel, coming to destroy them. Things looked pretty bleak. Only a miracle could save them. Jehoshaphat turned to the Lord. God responded through his prophet Jahaziel, “Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the battle is not yours but God’s” (2 Chron. 20: 15).

The armies of these three tribes became confused and started fighting among themselves, and ended up basically destroying each other. When the new day dawned and God’s people learned what had happened, they knew the prophet had spoken the truth. Moved by the Spirit of God, the sons of Korah, hymnwriters of the children of Israel, went to work. The song they gave us says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not

fear though the earth give way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea...the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress...Be still and know that I am God.”

Martin Luther recognized the parallels between the situation that gave rise to Psalm 46, and what he saw in his own life. He saw a battle, with powerful enemies aligned against him. The only thing that enabled him to keep going was the trust that this Reformation battle was not his but God’s. He wrote “A Mighty Fortress” as an expression of that trust. In writing the hymn, Luther did more than restate Psalm 46—he interpreted it knowing all the facts. Luther reminds the singer and listener, “Yes, the battle against our enemies is not ours but God’s—and for us fights the valiant one, whom God Himself elected. You ask who is this? Jesus Christ it is.” Not only has Jesus fought for you—past tense—Jesus fights for you—present tense. The idea of Jesus, God’s own Son, taking action for us, to do things we could not do, helped unlock the Christian faith for Martin Luther. Just the thought that God, in Jesus, was fundamentally for him and not against him, changed everything, shaping his life, including his teaching and preaching.

Everything about Luther is explained by his personal awakening. Through his study of Scripture at the university, the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to the grace and love of God. He learned that salvation and forgiveness of sins was not a product of his obedience or good performance, but that Jesus had done everything needed by his life, suffering and death on the cross, and resurrection from the tomb. Believing that God was for him to this degree enabled Luther to stand before religious and political leaders who wanted him to retract his teachings, and say “No.” Believing that God was for him to this degree enabled Luther to persevere through private tragedy, such as the death of his daughter Magdalena. Believing God was for him enabled Luther to serve as a pastor and elder statesman of the Reformation, during his latter years when his health was often very poor. This is not to cast Luther as a superhero or to deify the man, but to see him as a person who had found refuge in God; a person who was not self-sufficient but relied on the strength of God. Martin Luther was a sinful human being who believed God was for Him. Have you come to believe that God is for you, as well? Has that become the foundation of your life?

One way to find out is to think about the way you handle the troubles and trials of life. The things that bring tears to our eyes and sorrow to our hearts are not that different from Luther’s day and the Reformation era. You may be pushed to the limit by illness and chronic pain, or family troubles, or financial woes. Like Martin Luther, you may have stood at the deathbed of someone near and dear to you, feeling like everything is unraveling. It is exactly at those moments that I am tempted to believe, “God must be against me.” Your satanic enemy will leverage that feeling hard into your heart. We need an anchor point to remember what is true. That anchor point is the cross of Jesus. The message of Jesus’ cross is, “God is for you, even now.” God’s own Son laid down His life to save yours. We need God’s Word to point us to the cross of Jesus, and when it does, you can believe, God is for me, not against me. God is my refuge and Strength, present right now to help me. A person who is able to say, “Yes, things are terrible right now, but I believe God is still for me,” has a great gift, and will often be used by God to inspire others.

Once again, Martin Luther comes to mind. Once Luther's breakthrough in the gospel occurred, he was not about to keep it to himself. The good news of salvation by grace through faith was not revealed to Luther so he alone could be at peace. I'm sure you know at least a little of what happened. Luther became an instrument in the hands of God to communicate the truth of Jesus far and wide. Using the latest technology, Luther's writings went viral, becoming incredibly popular. He translated the Bible, which had been inaccessible to most, into the language of the people. We still live in wake of the Reformation movement, something for which to be thankful, but my point is that this was all born of one person's struggle. When Luther's switch got flipped from "God is against me" to "God is for me," his life completely changed, and he wanted other people to experience the same change.

If you have; If you believe that God is for you and the cross of Jesus is proof, then you know that God has not given us these precious gifts for us alone. These gifts are not to be hoarded or guarded in a museum. The gifts of the gospel are to be shared and distributed with compassion and generosity and urgency. To His living Church, God has entrusted the dynamic message of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration in the life's work of Jesus. We are to get the message of Jesus right, clearly communicating his life, death, and resurrected power—and we are to get the message of Jesus out—out there, in the world, out where it can be dangerous to all the powers of darkness.

I know, that sounds like a lot...it conjures up thoughts like, how are we ever going to do something like that? But, remember, the battle is not yours, but God's. When you need protection, "God is your Refuge." When you feel weak, "God is your Strength." Therefore, we will not fear, we who are marked with the name of God in baptism; we who meet the Valiant One at His table today. He's by our side with His good gifts and Spirit. He is for you.