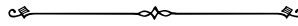




A Mighty Fortress

Meditations on the Sufficiency of God



T. M. Moore

Christian Focus





Christian Focus Publications

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For Kevin, Kristy, Casey, and Ashley

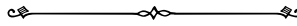


That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our daughters may be as corner stones, polished after the similitude of a palace (Ps. 144:12).





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'With those that despise music, as all fanatics are wont to do, I am not pleased; for music is a gift bestowed by God.... Next to theology, I esteem and honor music.'¹ Thus Martin Luther summarized his view of music, and offered something of an explanation as to why he, a great theologian and Church leader, devoted a portion of his busy ministry to preparing music for the churches of the Reformation to use in the worship of God. Luther believed that music was an effective means of teaching, second only to Scripture; that it could ennoble the soul and build character; and that it was a great and glorious

1. Quoted in F. V. N. Painter, *Luther on Education* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1889), pp. 165f.





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outlet for expressing our love for God and renewing our commitment to Him.

Among the many hymns that Luther wrote and set to music none is better known or more beloved than 'A Mighty Fortress'. The inspiration for this majestic hymn of faith came to Luther from his meditations on Psalm 46, a psalm of hope in God's strong presence and trust in His wonderful grace. Borrowing a melody from an ancient liturgical chant, Luther wrote words expressive of his own experience of that psalm in the difficult and tumultuous times in which he lived. At particularly trying times in his ministry he would often turn to his closest friend and colleague, Philip Melanchthon, and say, 'Come, Philip, let us sing the 46th.' There is hardly a Christian alive who has not sung some version of this great song of faith at one time or another.



And yet, to observe some Christians singing 'A Mighty Fortress', as I have often done when leading in worship, one could almost conclude that these people do not like this song. They seem distracted, bored. Hardly a trace of emotion or thoughtful engagement with the lyrics ever comes on their faces. They look around, chat with their neighbor, or simply stare ahead without singing. Do they despise music, and are they fanatics against it, as Luther suggested? I don't think so. Probably what I am seeing is nothing more than a version of 'familiarity breeds contempt'. We become so used to something that exercising ourselves over it again becomes a mere routine, something we engage in mindlessly and without much





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real conviction. Just as we can become bored with our jobs, weary of some avocation, or tired of the same old food, we can grow bored and indifferent to the disciplines of our faith, including the great hymns. The words lose their meaning and significance; the melodies fail to enthrall; the themes become little more than abstract ideas with no reference to our everyday lives. So we go looking for other hymns, new hymns – lively, foot-stomping, hand-clapping, first-person praise and worship songs, with tunes more like what we're used to hearing every day. There we go. That's it. That's much more satisfying, much more to my liking. I could sing this stuff forever, yeah!

Still happily humming away to 'Kum ba ya' are we? The praise and worship songs we take such delight in today will one day become as wearisome to us as the grand hymns of the Christian tradition that we left behind yesterday, and we will go on a quest for something newer and more pleasing once again. The problem is not with the hymns, especially those that have stood the test of centuries. The problem is with the singers – with us. Singing provides a special opportunity of loving God with our minds, as we concentrate on the lyrics of the hymn; with our hearts and souls, as we allow the melody and lyrics to search the depths of our being, challenge our most cherished convictions, and deepen our faith; and with our strength, as we give our voices in earnest, heart-felt expression to the praise of the glory of His grace. That singing the great hymns of the faith is, for





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many Christians, something less than such an experience is no fault of the hymns. Rather, it is *our* fault, who have allowed the discipline of hymn-singing to become a mere religious routine, and who are merely going through the motions of religious ritual rather than sincerely expressing the depths of our love for God.

The purpose of this book is to explore the theme of the sufficiency of God for all our needs, and to encourage the reader to draw near to Him in more sincere love and devotion through the use of Luther's majestic hymn, 'A Mighty Fortress'. Based on the lyrics of Luther's hymn – a chapter for each half-stanza – the book develops the message behind those lyrics, what Luther had in mind and hoped we would have in mind and would experience as we sang his words. Each chapter intends not so much to expound as to illustrate and reaffirm the message of the four stanzas of 'A Mighty Fortress'. By so doing I hope to lead the reader to a deeper understanding of what it means to know, love, serve, and worship the God Who is our Refuge and Strength, a very present Help in times of trouble.

Each of the following chapters will explore the meaning of one-half stanza of 'A Mighty Fortress'. I have taken them in order so that you can better see the thematic development of the lyric. From a bold statement of God's sovereign-might the hymn descends to a renunciation of fleshly dependence in a world filled with demonic adversaries, then rises to a climactic declaration of confidence in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, ending





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with an emphatic statement of dedication to His Kingdom. As you meditate on the examples of great saints from Church history and Scripture who lived out the teaching of these stanzas, and as you apply the teaching of the hymn in the 'Think About It' section at the end of each chapter, your understanding of the hymn's message and relevance will deepen, and you will be better able to sing 'A Mighty Fortress' as Luther intended – boldly, passionately, and with real conviction. Indeed, I suggest that you take time at the end of each chapter to sing through the lyric provided at the beginning of the chapter in the light of your study. You should find as you do that those words begin to become more real and meaningful to you, that you can sing each stanza with deeper understanding and commitment, and that this hymn can help you to know the sufficiency of God in new and exciting ways. A concluding appendix will lead you to experience even more of the beauty and power of this enduring hymn by introducing you to settings of it by two great Christian composers of the past.



The melody line of 'A Mighty Fortress' consists of three themes or ideas. The first theme, which carries the first half of each stanza (explored in chs. 1, 3, 5, and 7) is like a trumpet blast, a mighty proclamation of Scriptural truth. Radically disjoined, the first theme covers the whole lyrical range of the hymn, like the declaration of an all-embracing world view. Noted initially at the top of the hymn's tonal register, these lines are intended for bold, emphatic, deeply convicted singing. They verily beg





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to be shouted. Just consider the message they carry: God is our Mighty Fortress, our Helper! We will not trust in worldly ways or inclinations, for we would surely fall if we did. Christ stands beside us, and we will trust in Him. We expect to be assaulted and assailed in this world, but we will neither tremble nor fall. God's Word can and will sustain us against the attacks of our foes; in Him we will surely have the victory!

These are not lyrics to yawn through, and this is not music to mutter. These lines are a gauntlet thrown down at the feet of the world, the flesh, and the devil, defying their seductive schemes and destructive devices, and proclaiming our full intention of standing firm on the Rock of our salvation, come what may. Here is an opportunity to declare our deepest convictions, the life-and-death beliefs that make us the people of God and set us apart from a desperate and dying generation.

The second theme takes up the middle of each stanza (chs. 2, 4, 6, and 8), is in the middle of the tonal register, and is more reflective, more observant of the realities of life in this world. The melody is more conjunct, inverting in the second half of the theme, almost like someone whose thoughts have gone out in a question and come back with some preliminary resolution: our ancient foe, the devil, still seeks to destroy us, and he's a crafty fellow. Do you ask who can help us against him? Jesus Christ, the Lord of Hosts, that's Who! We're not afraid of the prince of darkness! We can stand up against whatever he might throw at us. Sure, he may take away our wealth,





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our friends, even our own lives. But God's truth, opened to us and expressed through us by His Spirit, will never fail!

The final theme is the recapitulation or restatement of the initial theme (chs. 2, 4, 6, and 8). Each stanza of 'A Mighty Fortress' ends with a confident re-assertion of great Biblical truth, using the melody line of the ending of the first theme. We begin with proclamation, and each stanza ends with it as well: make no mistake about it, the enemy of our soul is strong. But Christ can beat Him in battle; one little Word from Him and the devil is history! God's Kingdom is forever!

The combination of words and melody in 'A Mighty Fortress' makes this a hymn of great strength, a powerful meditation on the sufficiency of God to rescue, sustain, guide, empower, and deliver us from evil in a world filled with temptations and trials. It is a mighty statement of trust in God and commitment to the cause of His Kingdom. As we sing this hymn we need to let the full significance of its message capture our imagination; the full power of its melody fill the chambers of our heart and soul; and the full strength of its confession become our confession as well. As we do, our sense of the sufficiency of God for all our needs will grow stronger and become more real for us, and we will grow in faith and the joy of our salvation.

I want to thank my wife, Susie, for her constant encouragement as I have worked on this book. In many ways her bold, uncompromising faith represents the very



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embodiment of all that Luther expressed in this hymn, and of what I strive more and more to know in my own walk with the Lord. May God be pleased to use this book to help us recover something of what has been lost in our worship of God, and to enable us to depend more confidently and consistently on our Mighty Fortress amid the trials and challenges of Kingdom living in the world.

