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# Journal of Theology

**Editor:** Wayne C. Eichstadt / 11315 E. Broadway Avenue / Spokane Valley, WA 99206 / editor@journaloftheology.org / (509) 926-3317

**Assistant Editor:** Norman P. Greve

**Business Manager:** Benno Sydow / 2750 Oxford St. North/ Roseville, MN 55113 / bennoSydow@yahoo.com

**Staff Contributors:** D. Frank Gantt, David T. Lau, Nathanael N. Mayhew, Bruce J. Naumann, Paul G. Naumann, John K. Pfeiffer, David J. Reim, Michael J. Roehl, Steven P. Sippert, David P. Schaller, Paul M. Tiefel Jr., Mark S. Tiefel

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# The Unshaken Church

## An Exegesis of Psalm 46

Nathan J. Pfeiffer

It is hard for us today to imagine what the early days of the Reformation would have been like. One can imagine Martin Luther, having been excommunicated from the church in January 1521 and declared a heretic in April of the same year, as jumping at strange noises or being leery of dark corners. It is hard to imagine the government, backed by the Pope, physically warring against Lutherans in 1547 because of what they taught. The fact that an orthodox confessional Lutheran church exists 500 years later is not due to the idea or boldness of one man, nor even an army of men. The success of the Reformation is found exactly where Luther placed it—with God. He writes in a hymn:

If God had not been on our side  
And had not come to aid us,  
The foes with all their pow'r and pride  
Would surely have dismayed us;  
For we, His flock, would have to fear  
The threat of men both far and near  
Who rise in might against us.

Blest be the Lord, who foiled their threat  
That they could not devour us;  
Our souls, like birds, escaped their net,  
They could not overpow'r us.  
The snare is broken—we are free!  
Our help is ever, Lord, in Thee,  
Who madest earth and heaven. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 267:1,3)

All glory be to God on this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. In the Reformation, the reformers returned to what God Himself had been saying in His Word all along. In God's Word we find a solid foundation for our faith and life. The Word is the one thing that does not change in this ever-changing world. With His Word, God Himself is active in us and through us. His Word strengthens us and makes us steadfast and immovable. With Him in the midst of the Church, she remains unshaken—forever.

## Psalm 46

### Introduction (Hebrew v. 1)<sup>1</sup>

שִׁיר׃	עַל־עֲלָמוֹת	לְבָנֵי־קֹרַח	לְמַנְצִיחַ
a song	upon / alamoth	of the sons / of Korah	to the director

### Translations

**Author:** To the director. Of the sons of Korah. On alamoth. A song.

**NKJV:** To the Chief Musician. *A Psalm* of the sons of Korah. A Song for Alamoth.

**ESV:** To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamoth. A Song.

**NASB:** For the choir director. *A Psalm* of the sons of Korah, *set to* Alamoth. A Song.

**NIV:** For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to *alamoth*. A song.

**EHV:** FOR THE CHOIR DIRECTOR. BY THE SONS OF KORAH. ACCORDING TO *ALAMOTH*. A SONG.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original work, the author included five published English translations in addition to his own. These five are all provided in this first Hebrew verse. Throughout the rest of the exegesis, NKJV and EHV will be included for each verse, but only those translations of the remaining three that differ in a significant way will be added. The five translations are: **NKJV:** New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved. / **ESV:** The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. / **NASB:** New American Standard Bible Copyright © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation / **NIV:** Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1984 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. / **EHV:** The Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV), New Testament & Psalms © 2017. *Evangelical Heritage Version*® and *EHV*® are trademarks of the Wartburg Project.

As is the case 116 times in the psalms, Psalm 46 begins with a heading or introduction. While there is debate as to whether they are a part of the original text or later additions to the psalms,<sup>2</sup> there is Scriptural evidence for the inclusion of these headings. In Habakkuk 3:1, before Habakkuk's prayer, we read, "*A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.*" We read almost the exact same words for David's song in 2 Samuel 22:1 as we do in the heading of the corresponding Psalm 18.

There is also historical evidence for their inclusion. John Brug writes, "The standard Hebrew text of Psalms, the psalms found among the Dead Sea manuscripts, and the Septuagint . . . all include the headings."<sup>3</sup>

The debate is a much longer study than we will be taking up here. However, this author believes that the heading is a part of the divine text and should not be dismissed or relegated to a footnote.

Psalm 46 was delivered to the "chief" or "director" of music at the temple. (קַנָּה — Piel "to act as overseer or superintendent or director or chief," *Brown-Driver-Briggs*<sup>4</sup>) by or from "the sons of Korah."

The Korahites were of the tribe of Levi. In Numbers 16 we hear of Korah's rebellion in the wilderness, in which the earth swallowed Korah and the other rebels. However, we learn later on in Numbers 26:11 that "*the children of Korah did not die.*" In the days of King Jehoshaphat, when the Lord told Jerusalem that He would deliver them from the hands of the Moabites and Ammonites, we read, "*Then the Levites of the children of the Kohathites and of the children of the Korahites stood up to praise the LORD God of Israel with voices loud and high*" (2 Chronicles 20:19). The sons of Korah seem to have been involved in the music ministry of the Old Testament church. The writing of the God-breathed words of Psalm 46, along with twelve other psalms, is attributed to them. The preposition לְ is also used of the "psalms of David" throughout the book of Psalms.

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<sup>2</sup> *The New English Bible* omits the headings and *The Good News Bible* places them in footnotes. The *Evangelical Heritage Version* includes the psalm headings and adds themes for each section of the psalm. For example, this verse is labeled, "Heading," verses 1-3, "The Earth Shaken," and verses 4-11, "A City Unshaken."

<sup>3</sup> John F. Brug, *Psalms*, Volume I, The People's Bible Series, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992) p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *Hebrew-Aramaic and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (BibleWorks 4, 2001).

One question which immediately confronts us is how we are to understand the Hebrew word, עֲלָמוֹת. *Brown-Driver-Briggs* offers the following definitions: 1) young women, soprano? 1b) a term in psalm heading—Alamoth.

Is “alamoth” a name? A tune? A voice (soprano/tenor)? *Keil-Delitzsch*<sup>5</sup> states that the use of this word suggests that the psalm was to be sung by young tenor voices. Leupold, however, rejects that because of the content of the psalm. “. . . [S]ince ‘alamoth can mean ‘young women,’ [it] could have a meaning something like, ‘to be sung by the sopranos.’ But there appears to be no good reason why the sopranos should render this psalm. Its sturdy character would seem to be better rendered by the basses.”<sup>6</sup>

While the bass section of the choir might agree with the sentiment of Leupold, his argument seems to be a bit of a stretch. We are, therefore, left with no certain answer to this question, which is why most translations simply render the word “Alamoth.”

### Verse 1 (Hebrew verse 2)

				<i>(emphasis)</i>
וְעֹז	מְחֻסָּה	לָנוּ	אֱלֹהִים	
and strength	a refuge	for us	GOD	
				<i>Niph. Pf—3 m sg</i>
מְאֹד	נִמְצָא	בְּצָרוֹת	עֲזָרָה	
much	He has been found	from distress	help	

### Translations

**Author:** GOD is a refuge and strength for us, / He has been found to be much help from distress

**NKJV:** God is our refuge and strength, / A very present help in trouble.

**EHV:** God is our refuge and strength, / a helper who can always be found in times of trouble

<sup>5</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978).

<sup>6</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992) p. 363

The psalm begins with a resounding point of emphasis, “ELOHIM!” This is followed immediately by the preposition + pronoun, “to or for us.” Notice the change from typical Hebrew sentence structure of verb/subject/object. It is a challenge to bring the emphasis of the holy writer into English—“God, He Himself is for us. . . .”

The Hebrew word for *refuge*, מְחֻסָּה, is used twenty times in the Old Testament, twelve of which are in the psalms. It carries the idea of finding security in a place or person. We will find a synonym of this word in verse 7. David knew a thing or two about needing refuge from those who sought him harm. Whether it was mad King Saul or his own son, Absalom, David knew that true refuge and security was found only in the *LORD*, “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For You have been a shelter (מְחֻסָּה) for me, A strong tower from the enemy” (Psalm 61:2b-3).

What does it mean to have God as our refuge? Psalm 91 helps us, “Because you have made the *LORD*, who is my refuge, Even the Most High, your dwelling place, No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways” (Psalm 91:9-11). Those who have God as their refuge are protected.

These words hint at the gospel. In Christ, the weary sinner finds refuge for his soul in the forgiveness he desires and the righteousness he needs. May the opening words of this psalm continue to echo from our pulpits and in our counseling as we preach the gospel, that repentant sinners may always find refuge in God alone.

If we consider this psalm in the context of the events of 1517, our mind turns to the battle hymn of the Reformation—“A Mighty **Fortress** is Our God.” Luther did not always see God as a refuge. For the first third of his life, Luther was looking for refuge *from* God. His conscience plagued him, accusing him of his sin and guilt before the righteous God. Luther was told by leaders in his church to find refuge in his works and in his prayers. Once the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to Scripture to see that the righteousness of God was not the righteousness God required of him, but was righteousness God credited to him through faith in Jesus, then God became to him a refuge—a place of security rather than a place of fear. Luther found refuge from his sin and guilt in the God who justifies “by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28).

“. . . and strength.” The local, orthodox church often struggles with perceived weakness. We feel small compared to megachurches and especially insignificant when compared to the humanistic world around us. Our congregations are old. Our pews are half empty on Sunday morning. We don’t know how our congregation will be able to meet its budget in the coming years.

The psalmist turns our focus away from ourselves and emphasizes that God is strength for us. “He is first like a strong fortress into which a man may flee and be absolutely safe; He is at the same time an unfailing source of strength, enabling one to cope manfully with the dangers that assail him.”<sup>7</sup> While “refuge” points to *external* protection, “strength” is *internal* help.

When buffeted and weakened by that messenger of Satan, the apostle Paul was reminded that the strength of the Lord’s amazing grace was all that he needed. “*Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong*” (2 Corinthians 12:9b-10). Our strength is not found in numbers, but in One. “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*” (Philippians 4:13). ELOHIM is strength for us!

“Help.” At the close of the verse, a translation needs to be chosen for the Niphal Perfect, מָצָאָה. In the Qal, the word carries the idea of “coming to” or “arriving at” something, to “find” or “reach.” The Niphal is simple passive or reflexive. For the Niphal Perfect, third person singular, Weingreen suggests a translation of “he has been . . .” or “he was. . . .”<sup>8</sup> Gesenius<sup>9</sup> suggests translating the Niphal of מָצָאָה with “1) to be acquired by anyone, 2) to be found” (also offered by Holladay<sup>10</sup>). Most English translators render it “very present.” To help bring out the passive feel of the verb, I have offered the translation, “he has been found.” “The second half of the verse scarcely

<sup>7</sup> Leupold, op.cit., p. 363.

<sup>8</sup> J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1959) pp.100f.

<sup>9</sup> H.W.F. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).



stresses the face of His nearness but rather what experience has amply demonstrated with reference to Him; therefore: ‘a well-proved help in troubles.’”<sup>11</sup>

“Distress.” The noun for “distress” or “trouble” is **צָרָה**. Its root carries the idea of something “narrow” (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*). The Septuagint translates it with the Greek word, **θλίψις**. King Hezekiah uses this word to describe to Isaiah how Jerusalem felt after the taunting of Sennacherib and Assyria, “*This day is a day of **trouble**, and rebuke, and blasphemy; for the children have come to birth, but there is no strength to bring them forth*” (2 Kings 19:3). The heathen army had already defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel as well as many other great nations of the day. Many of the fortified cities in Judah had been captured. Now Sennacherib had turned his attention to Jerusalem on the way to Egypt. Jerusalem felt like things were “narrowing” or “pressing” in on them. But King Hezekiah and Jerusalem found God to be much help in their distress.

Mindful of the Reformation, we might think of the events of 1521. Luther was an enemy of both church and state. We can only imagine the **צָרָה** Luther must have felt as the world, seemingly, began to narrow in around him. Or, reviewing the events surrounding the Augsburg Interim of 1548, we may not agree with Melanchthon’s compromise through the Leipzig Interim, but we can imagine the **צָרָה** that led him down that path for the sake of peace.

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 Lutheran Hymnal*, 262:1)

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<sup>11</sup> Leupold, op.cit., p. 363

**Verse 2** (Hebrew verse 3)

	<i>Hiph Inf Construct</i>		<i>Qal Impf—1 pl</i>	
אֶרֶץ	בְּהִמִּיר	לֹא-נִירָא	עַל-כֵּן	
earth	in causing to change	we will not be afraid	upon / therefore	
			<i>Qal Inf Construct</i>	
יַמִּים:	בְּלֵב	הַרִים	וּבְמוֹט	
seas	in the heart	the hills / mountains	and in the shaking	

**Verse 3** (Hebrew verse 4)

	<i>Qal Impf 3 pl</i>		<i>Qal Impf 3 pl</i>	
מֵימֵיו	יִחַמְרוּ	יִהְיוּ	יִהְיוּ	
waters	they rage	they make noise	they make noise	
			<i>Qal Impf 3 pl</i>	
סֵלָה:	בְּנִאֲוָתוֹ	יִרְעֲשׂוּ-הַרִים	יִרְעֲשׂוּ-הַרִים	
selah	in the lifting up of it (him)	they will shake / the mountains	they will shake / the mountains	

**Translations**

**Author:** Therefore we will not be afraid in the changing earth and in the shaking of the mountains into the heart of the sea; Though the waters roar and rage, And the mountains shake in its rising. Selah

**NKJV:** Therefore we will not fear, Even though the earth be removed, And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though its waters roar and be troubled, Though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah

**ESV:** Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah

**NASB:** Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; Though its waters roar and foam, Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah.

**EHV:** That is why we will not fear when the earth dissolves and when the mountains tremble into the heart of the sea. Its waters roar and foam. The mountains quake when it rises. Interlude

In a recent Bible Class, we discussed the radical change that came after the Gentiles were declared to be “clean” by God in Acts 10. The class was asked how they thought the Jews in Jerusalem were going to react to this new development after fifteen hundred years of their current practice. The class was also asked why we so often are hesitant to welcome new things into our life. One of our widows replied, “I just want things to stay the same and not change! I like things to be predictable!” Sound familiar?

Each new day brings with it new changes, new developments, new catastrophes. There are changes in workplace, in technology, in homes, relationships, and in health. These changes are often unsettling and difficult.

The Hebrew word in verse 2 that is translated as “change” is **מִוֶּרֶ**. (Gesenius, “to change, to exchange” / *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament*, “to be altered” / Keil-Delitzsch, “changeth” / Leupold, “change”).

Every Old Testament occurrence of **מִוֶּרֶ** is translated to “change/exchange” one thing for another. “*He shall not substitute it or **exchange** it, good for bad or bad for good; and if he at all **exchanges** animal for animal, then both it and the one **exchanged** for it shall be holy*” (Leviticus 27:10). “*Thus they **changed** their glory Into the image of an ox that eats grass*” (Psalm 106:20).

The usage of **מִוֶּרֶ** in this verse is of the earth around us changing from what is familiar to something different.

Consider an example from recent history. Satellite images of Southeast Asia before and after December 26, 2004, show how the landscape and shoreline of Indonesia were altered by the great earthquake and tsunami of that day. “In addition to generating a devastating tsunami, it permanently dropped the Acehense coastline by up to 1 m, and uplifted nearby islands by up to 2 m.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Coastline changes to Aceh from the great 2004 Sumatra-Andaman earthquake <https://serc.carleton.edu/vignettes/collection/25462.html>

So great was the force of the earthquake, as well as the force of the water that was moved by the resulting tsunami, that it affected the rotation of the earth and even the length of day (-2 microseconds). In a matter of only a few minutes the earth changed and the waters roared and raged.

Even if the landscape around us should change from what is familiar to us to something else, the redeemed child of God does not need to be afraid. Gesenius suggests “to tremble” as a possible translation of **נָרַא**. This presents an interesting contrast. Though the earth itself should tremble, we will not because ELOHIM, the One who made the very earth itself, He Himself is our refuge, strength, and help. If the powerful oceans should rage and roar, as they did in this summer’s hurricanes affecting Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico, we will not be afraid. ELOHIM is our help. He commands the seemingly out-of-control waters, *“This far you may come, but no farther, And here your proud waves must stop!”* (Job 38:11). In the middle of the storm He says, *“Peace, be still!”* (Mark 4:39), and the wind and the waves cease.

Commentators are divided as to whether to take the violence of the earth, mountains, and water as literal natural disasters or symbolic for disasters we face in our lives. Leupold strikes a fine balance by stating that these refer to natural events on the planet (hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides), but application can extend to disasters in our daily lives that cause things to change from one thing to another. *“He helps us free from ev’ry need / That hath us now o’ertaken. . . . We tremble not, we fear no ill, / They shall not overpower us”* (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 262:1,3).

Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know  
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below. (*The Lutheran Hymnal* 651:2)

**Verse 4** (Hebrew verse 5)

	<i>Piel Impf 3 pl</i>	<i>(emphasis)</i>	<i>(emphasis)</i>
<b>עִיר-אֱלֹהִים</b>	<b>יִשְׂמְחוּ</b>	<b>פְּלָגִיו</b>	<b>נְהָר</b>
God - city	they make glad	A CHANNEL	A RIVER
	<b>עֲלִיוֹן:</b>	<b>מִשְׁכְּנֵי</b>	<b>קֹדֶשׁ</b>
	Most High	Habitation / dwelling place / tabernacle	holy

## Translations

**Author:** A river and a channel causes the city of God to rejoice, the sacred dwelling place of the Most High

**NKJV:** There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.

**NIV:** There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

**EHV:** There is a river – the streams bring joy to the city of God, to the holy dwelling of the Most High.

The earth, the mountains, and the raging seas are all great, powerful things; and when they are out of control, they are very fearful things. But in verse four we find something much different—a simple river, a channel of water flowing through Jerusalem (פְּלֵגָה—Brown-Driver-Briggs and *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, “a channel, a canal” / Leupold, “The ‘channels’ are the little runlets used for irrigation purposes, which, insignificant though they seem, nevertheless serve their purpose.”<sup>13</sup>).

Naaman might remark that there are better streams of water in greater cities around the world. But this city is different. This is the city of God, the city in which the one, true God has made His glorious name known, the city in which He meets with His people and blesses them. In this city, the gentle stream of water is there to refresh the people of God in the midst of tumult and change.

When New Testament believers hear “city of God,” our thoughts immediately turn to the Holy Christian Church. “*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, . . . to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel*” (Hebrews 12:22,24). Each believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit, in whom God Himself dwells.

Amid the tumult all around us in nature and society, we too are “made glad” by the “still waters” that refresh the Church. Jesus says, “[W]hoever

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<sup>13</sup> Leupold, op. cit., p. 365.

*drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life”* (John 4:14).

The gentle, calm waters of the gospel and the sacraments quench the spiritual thirst of the Church and make glad God’s people. Without such water, life becomes a desert in which nothing grows. But because there are streams of irrigation, the people of God are glad as they are refreshed even as the world around them rages with chaos in nature and society.<sup>14</sup>

Leupold quotes Luther, “Though Luther’s paraphrase of the verse is not a translation in the ordinary sense of the word it catches the spirit of the verse beautifully: ‘Yet for all that the city of God shall maintain its marvelous cheerfulness with its little wells, for there are the holy dwelling places of the Most High.’”<sup>15</sup>

### Verse 5 (Hebrew verse 6)

<i>Niph Impf 3 fem sg</i>		<i>(emphasis)</i>	
בַּל־תִּמּוֹט	בְּקֶרְבָּהּ	אֱלֹהִים	
nothing will shake her	in—the interior; inside; heart /midst; inner part — of her	GOD	
<i>Qal Inf</i>		<i>Qal Impf 3 m sg</i>	
בֹּקֶר׃	לְפָנָיו	אֱלֹהִים	יַעֲזָרָהּ
morning	before the face	God	He will help

### Translations

**Author:** God is within her, nothing will shake her; God will help just before morning.

<sup>14</sup> This verse reminds us of what we are told concerning Paradise in Genesis 2:10, “Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden.” We are also told about the Paradise of God, “And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month” (Revelation 22:1-2a).

<sup>15</sup> Leupold, op. cit., p. 365

**NKJV:** God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.

**NIV:** God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

**EHV:** God is in her. She will not fall. God will help her at daybreak.

The psalmist once again begins by emphasizing ELOHIM! The city of God is the dwelling place of the Most High. He Himself is in the midst of her. The presence of God in the Holy Christian Church provides stability.

Note that the psalmist uses the same Hebrew word here (מִלֹּט) as in verse 2 (Hebrew verse 3) where those once-stable mountains were “shaken.” While that may happen to the great mountains around us, that is not the case with the Church. ELOHIM is within her (בְּקִרְבָּהּ), she will not be shaken. She is stable because ELOHIM is her protection and strength.

Jesus has promised His presence in the Church, *“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”* (Matthew 18:20). The word for “midst” in Matthew 18:20 is μέσσω—the same word which the Septuagint uses in Psalm 46:5.

When we read *“God will help her, just before the morning,”* we might think of the taunts of Sennacherib and the mighty Assyrian army in the days of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 19). King Hezekiah brought the blasphemy of Sennacherib to the LORD. The LORD promised to fight for them. That night the Angel of the LORD killed 185,000 Assyrians, sending Sennacherib in retreat back to Nineveh. What a sight it must have been that morning as the sun rose to reveal the LORD’s great slaughter. The LORD helped His city, just before the morning. Because of this, some commentators suggest that the sons of Korah wrote this psalm after the defeat of the Assyrian army.

The greatest help that came “just before the morning” was on the Third Day. On the dawn of that third day, after being “shaken” on Good Friday and Saturday, Christ burst forth from the tomb, crushing Satan underfoot and conquering death for us. This is the greatest help that God has supplied the city of God, the Church. We are forgiven. We are justified. God is in our midst. We are helped. We will not be shaken by natural disasters or disasters in our society. *“Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of*

God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-39). GOD! He is our refuge and strength. He has been found to be of much help in distress.

**Verse 6** (Hebrew verse 7)

	<i>Qal Pf 3 pl</i>		<i>Qal Pf 3 pl</i>
מַמְלָכוֹת	מָטוּ	גוֹיִם	הִמְרוּ
kingdoms	they shook	nations	they made noise
	<i>Qal Impf 3 f sg</i>		<i>Qal Pf 3 m sg</i>
:אֶרֶץ	תִּמּוֹג	בְּקוֹלוֹ	נָתַן
earth	she melts	at His voice	He gave

**Translations**

**Author:** The nations roared, the kingdoms shook, He gave His voice, the earth melts.

**NKJV:** The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.

**ESV:** The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

**NASB:** The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted.

**EHV:** Nations are in turmoil. Kingdoms fall. God raises his voice. The earth melts.

What was seen in nature is also seen in the kingdoms of the world. Just as the seas roared (הִמְרוּ) in verse 3 (Hebrew verse 4) with violent unrest, so too do the nations. We remember how the nations roared on Good Friday as Christ was crucified and during the persecutions that arose against Christians in the centuries to follow. One might also think of the roaring unrest at the Diet of Worms as Luther made his “Here I stand” declaration. “Pandemonium broke out. The emperor rose to his feet, saying he had had enough. The meeting broke up. Two of the emperor’s men escorted Luther out of the hall as a Spanish attendant cried out, ‘Into the fire with him!’”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Gene Edward Veith Jr., *A Place to Stand: The Word of God in the Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House Publishing, Inc., 2005) p. 71.



As the once-stable mountains shook (מִרְט) in verse 2 (Hebrew verse 3), the kingdoms of the earth do the same here. Though they seem so stable one moment, they show their instability the next. One might think of the so-called Arab Spring of 2010 or when the Iron Curtain fell in the 1990s. All the while, the Church will not be shaken (מִרְט) because God is in the midst of her!

The very voice that helps the Church, the psalmists says, causes the earth to melt. Rahab reports that this is what happened in Jericho as the Israelites camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. *“I know that the LORD has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted (מִרְג) because of you”* (Joshua 2:9). Such is the power of God’s voice. Though the heathen fight against it, they cannot triumph over it (Psalm 2). When Christ returns on the Last Day with a shout, with the voice of an archangel (1 Thessalonians 4:16), the earth and everything in it will melt, but we will be with the Lord forever!

Tho’ devils all the world should fill,  
 All eager to devour us.  
 We tremble not, we fear no ill,  
 They shall not overpow’r 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 Lutheran Hymnal* 262:3)

**Verse 7** (Hebrew verse 8)

*(emphasis)*

<p>עִמָּנוּ</p> <p>with us</p>	<p>צְבָאוֹת</p> <p>(Sabaoth) / armies</p>	<p>יְהוָה</p> <p>Lord</p>
<p>סֵלָה:</p> <p>Selah</p>	<p>יַעֲקֹב</p> <p>of Jacob</p>	<p>אֱלֹהֵי</p> <p>God</p>
		<p>מִשְׁגָּב־</p> <p>לָנוּ</p> <p>A rock of refuge / for us</p>

## Translations

**Author:** The LORD of Armies (He is the one who) is with us; The God of Jacob is a rock of refuge for us. Selah.

**NKJV:** The LORD of hosts *is* with us; The God of Jacob *is* our refuge (ESV and NIV, *fortress* / NASB, *stronghold*). Selah

**EHV:** The LORD of Armies is with us. The God of Jacob is a fortress for us. Interlude

The Church is unshaken even as chaos surrounds it, because the LORD, the God of angel armies, is with us! We note, once again, the psalmist directing our attention to our God by placing His name first for emphasis. This time he uses the covenant name of God—“Jehovah,” “Yahweh,” or “LORD.” This is the “I AM” God who is eternal and unchangeable, who makes His promises and keeps them. This is the God who put His holy name on you in holy baptism and said, “*You are Mine*” (Isaiah 43:1). He is the Covenant God who said, “*I will never leave you nor forsake you*” (Hebrews 13:5). This is the Good Shepherd who promised, “*I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand*” (John 10:28). He is with us! (עִמָּנוּ) is closely related to אֱלֹהֵינוּ אִמְנָן—*Immanuel*, God with us.

With the LORD is the mighty angel army (Sabaoth LORD). Just as the LORD’s angel army surrounded Elisha and his servant (2 Kings 6:17), so the LORD gives His angels charge over us. We will not be shaken.

It is a struggle to know how best to translate “YAHWEH Sabaoth” into English in order to preserve the words and meanings of the original. Some may be more familiar with “hosts” because of the “heavenly host” of Luke 2. The NIV’s “LORD Almighty” falls well short of the original text. The EHV does better with “LORD of Armies.”

The God of Jacob, who was with Jacob as he fled from Esau—He is with us. He is our “rock of refuge.” Though somewhat synonymous, the word מְשֹׁנֵב here (and also in verse 11, Hebrew verse 10), is different from what we translated as “refuge” in verse 3, Hebrew verse 2 (מִחְסֵה). A translation should reflect that difference. For מְשֹׁנֵב, Gesenius offers the following: “a height; a lofty place; a rock affording shelter and security, hence, a refuge.” The *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament* gives the basic definition of “high place, tower” and explains further, “The allusion is to the fact that in the

ancient world, safety to either the one fleeing or to the one at rest was synonymous with reaching and remaining upon some fortified height which would be inaccessible to beast and enemy alike. The Psalmist, as well as the prophets, saw this to be the precise picture of the believer’s security in God.”

The LORD is our lofty place of security. He is far above the partisan bickering of our nation, the ever-changing weather patterns, and the unstable moral climate of today.

**Verse 8** (Hebrew verse 9)

<i>Qal Pf 3 m sg</i>		<i>Qal Impv pl</i>	
אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם	יְהוָה	מִפְעֻלוֹת	לְכוּ-חִזּוּ
which / he set	of the LORD	works	come / behold
		בְּאֶרֶץ	שִׁמוֹת
		in the earth	desolations

**Verse 9** (Hebrew verse 10)

			<i>Hiph Ptc m sg</i>
הָאֶרֶץ	עַד-קֵצָה	מִלְחָמוֹת	מִנְשִׁבִּית
of the earth	as far as / ends	wars	cause to cease
	<i>Piel Pf 3 m sg</i>	<i>Piel Impf 3 m sg</i>	<i>(emphasis)</i>
חֲנִית	וְקִיּוֹן	יִשְׁבֵּר	קֶשֶׁת
spears	and be cut off	He thoroughly breaks	BOW
		<i>Qal Impf 3 m sg</i>	<i>(emphasis)</i>
	בְּאֵשׁ	יִשְׂרֹף	עֲגָלוֹת
	with fire	He burns	CHARIOTS

## Translations

**Author:** Come, look at the works of the LORD, Who has set desolations in the earth. Causing wars to cease unto the ends of the earth, The bow He thoroughly breaks and has cut off the spear; The chariots He burns with fire.

**NKJV:** - Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts (ESV and NIV, *shatters*) the spear in two; He burns the chariot (NIV, *shields*) in the fire.

**EHV:** Come, look at the works of the LORD. What a wasteland he has made of the earth! He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He shatters the bow. He cuts up the spear. He burns the carts (or *shields*) with fire.

To further comfort and encourage the believer, the psalmist urges us to examine the works of the LORD. Note the use of the Hiphil and Piel in verse 10 of the Hebrew. The Hiphil is causative and the Piel is intensive active.<sup>17</sup> Afraid of wars? The LORD causes them to cease. Afraid of Kim Jong Un's missiles? The LORD thoroughly breaks them. The spears? The LORD breaks them. The chariots? The LORD burns them with fire.

If this psalm was indeed written after the LORD killed those 185,000 Assyrians (2 Kings 19:35), how striking it would be to tell the residents of Jerusalem to go for a walk and see for themselves what the LORD of Armies had done.

For us today, don't just breeze through your Old Testament history, look at it, walk through it carefully. *"For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope"* (Romans 15:4). Look at what He did to the Assyrian army after King Hezekiah's humble prayer. Look at what the LORD did to the mighty Egyptian army at the Red Sea. Look what He did with mighty Babylon. Where are the hanging gardens of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar's glorious palace now? Look at what He did after the Romans and Jews crucified His Son. Look what He did with one Augustinian monk who discovered the truth about the righteousness of God. This is the same God who says that He is

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<sup>17</sup>Weingreen, op. cit., pp. 100, 105

with us. *“The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”* (Psalm 118:6).

**Verse 10** (Hebrew verse 11)

		<i>Qal Impv</i>	<i>Hiph Impv</i>
כִּי־אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהִים		וְדַעוּ	הֲרַפּוּ
God	That / I am	And know	Let it go
	<i>Qal Impf 1 sg</i>		<i>Qal Impf 1 sg</i>
בְּאֶרֶץ	אֲרוֹם	בְּגוֹיִם	אֲרוֹם
In the earth	I will be exalted	Among the nations	I will be exalted

**Translations**

**Author:** Let it go and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.

**NKJV:** Be still (NASB, *cease striving*), and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!

**EHV:** Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted on the earth

In the previous nine verses, the psalmist has been standing with us, reminding us of who God is, that He is for us and with us, and reminding us of what He has done. In this verse, we hear the voice of God Himself speaking.

What is He saying? The words are familiar and form a very well known verse. I’ve been in several Christian homes where the words, “Be still, and know that I am God,” are painted on the wall or on a piece of artwork. My favorite hymn, “Be Still My Soul” (*The Lutheran Hymnal #651*), is based on these words. Most English translations contain the words “Be still.”

The Hebrew language has a word which means, “be still, silent.” It is דָּמָם. If we are looking for a word to say “tranquil,” it is שָׁקֵט. The Holy Spirit did not choose either of these words.

Instead, we find the Hebrew word רָחַף in the Hiphil (causative), for which “be still” is *not* offered in any lexicon to which I have access. רָחַף in the Qal

means “to cast, to throw, 2) to cast down, to let fall, 3) to be let down” (Gesenius). Making it causative in the Hiphil, we arrive at something like “cause to cast down or be let down.” Gesenius gives a first translation of “let down the hand.” The word is used this way in 2 Samuel 24:16 during the plague after King David’s census, *“And when the angel stretched out His hand over Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the destruction, and said to the angel who was destroying the people, ‘It is enough; now restrain your hand.’”*

The next exegetical question which confronts us is explaining to whom God is saying יהוה ירפנו. Christians place these words on the wall of their home to remind themselves to “be still, settle down, relax . . . and know that God is God.” Certainly, that is how I have always taken these words and there is Scriptural truth in understanding it this way. God is God—our refuge, strength, and help. Because He is God and is in our midst, we will not be shaken. We can “be still” in this knowledge.

However, the context might lead us to apply the word יהרהר as being spoken to nature and the nations. The nations are raging like the waters of a hurricane. They are fighting against God and *“against His Anointed”* (Psalm 2:2). Do you remember Gamaliel’s advice? *“And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God”* (Acts 5:38-39). This unconverted Jew was, essentially, telling the Christ-haters to “drop their hands” and “let it go.”

This understanding of יהרהר and the context of the verse have lead this writer to understand that God is speaking to the nations warring against Him and His gospel. He is commanding them to “drop it” or “let it go.” Keil-Delitzsch, Leupold, and the translators of the NASB all seem to understand it this way also. Leupold translates the word, “desist,” and Keil-Delitzsch translates it, “Cease ye!”

No matter to whom the imperative is directed, the result is the same. The Church is comforted knowing that God is God. We can still tell ourselves, “Be still my soul.” Though nature and nation seem to be against the Church, the God who died on a lowly cross will be exalted. *“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on*

*earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).* Therefore the Church can “let go” of their fears, God is in the midst of her, she remains unshaken.

### **Verse 11** (Hebrew verse 12)

The words and structure of this verse are identical to Verse 7 (Hebrew verse 8).

#### **Translation**

**Author:** The LORD of Armies (He is the one who) is with us; The God of Jacob is a rock of refuge for us. Selah.

The psalmist ends the psalm where he began, by emphasizing to the Church who exactly is with her: SABAOTH LORD! It is fitting that this should be echoed at the opening and closing, for this is the beginning and the end of the Church itself. Because He is with us, because He is a rock of refuge for us, we will not be shaken, “the Kingdom ours remaineth!”

We conclude with Luther’s comments:

“The 46<sup>th</sup> psalm is a psalm of thanks, sung by the people of Israel because of the mighty deeds of God. He had protected and saved the city of Jerusalem, in which was His dwelling, against all the rage and the fury of all the kings and the nations and preserved their peace against all warfare and weapons. And, in the manner of the Scriptures, the psalm calls the character of the city a little stream that shall not run dry, as opposed to the great rivers, seas, and oceans of the heathen—their great kingdoms, principalities, and domains—that shall dry up and disappear.

“We, on the other hand, sing this psalm to praise God for being with us. He miraculously preserves His Word and Christendom against all the gates of hell, against the rage of the devil, the rebellious spirits, the world, the flesh, sin, death. Our little spring of water is also a living fountain, while their puddles, pools, and ponds become foul, malodorous, and dry.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *Reading the Psalms with Luther* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007) p. 114

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 ours remaineth. Amen!** (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 262:4)

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# **Martin Luther—from Fear to Faith, from Faith to Confidence, from Confidence to Joy**

## **The Journey of One Soul, the Mentorship of Many Souls<sup>1</sup>**

*Paul D. Nolting*

As we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, it is fitting that the celebration include thanksgiving to our Savior for the blessings He bestowed upon the schools of the Lutheran church through Dr. Martin Luther.

“Luther’s work as an educator can so easily be overlooked in a consideration of his life, for as is the habit of man, we tend to dwell on the heroic events in his life instead of the everyday work of his life. We view him somewhat in awe as God’s courageous reformer standing before Emperor Charles V risking life and limb for the truth, or as God’s chosen preacher striding into the pulpit of the Castle Church in Wittenberg to calm the troubled populace during his stay at the Wartburg. We must remember, however, that Luther was in a position to reform the church by the grace of God, because he was an educator. He sat in the chair of Biblical Theology at the University of Wittenberg for a period of thirty-four years. He had sworn to uphold the truths of the Scriptures, and this he was determined to do. It was Luther as an educator who nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in 1517 with the hope that a scholarly debate would ensue. It was Luther as an educator who translated the Bible into German with the hope that such a translation would touch not only the lives of his students but also those of the common people in Germany. It was Luther as an educator who helped lay the foundation for a new church through the instruction of thousands of students over the years at Germany’s first Lutheran university. Yes, Luther was an educator.”<sup>2</sup>

It was while serving as an educator that Luther, through his studies of God’s Word and the blessing of the Holy Spirit, was led from fear to faith, then from faith to confidence, and ultimately from confidence to joy! His was the journey of one soul, but that solitary journey led to the mentorship of many souls—

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<sup>1</sup>This essay was presented to the 2017 General Teachers’ Conference of the Church of the Lutheran Confession.

<sup>2</sup> Paul D. Nolting, “Luther the Educator,” *Journal of Theology*, Volume 23, Number 3, September 1983, p. 11.

first by Luther himself, but since then by countless individual Lutheran teachers in countless classrooms down through these last five centuries. That legacy continues in classrooms where teachers use the truths of God's Word to mentor the students whom God has placed under their care. What a privilege it is to lead those students from fear to faith, from faith to confidence, and ultimately from confidence to joy!

### **From Fear to Faith**

*“Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (Revelation 19:15).*

If you were to identify one word to describe the driving force behind late medieval Christianity and, consequently, the environment in which Martin Luther grew up, it would be *fear*. Life in the late medieval world was often short and always difficult. Just over a century before, Luther's ancestors had survived the black plague, which had decimated Europe, claiming over 60% of its population. People lived in constant fear of death, which in the popular mind was followed by something potentially far worse—standing in the presence of an angry God for the eternal judgment of their souls.

The church sadly had lost sight of the gospel and therefore had little comfort to offer its members. Unscrupulous officials within the church often misused the law simply to impose their authority upon and maintain their status within the society of the day. Frustration combined with fear for the laity because separate legal systems were established to govern the clergy—systems that were much more lenient than those imposed upon the laity. Consequently, priests could prey upon parishioners with little external consequence. Excommunication and the interdict were regularly used to force individual lay-leaders and entire countries to submit to papal power.

In addition, the late medieval culture was immersed in superstition—superstition accepted as truth by Luther's parents and Luther himself. This added to the general atmosphere of fear. One historian describes the situation in this way: “For them the woods and winds and water were peopled by elves, gnomes, fairies, mermen and mermaids, sprites and witches. Sinister spirits would release storms, floods, and pestilence and would seduce mankind to sin and melancholia. Luther's mother believed that they played such minor pranks as stealing eggs, milk, and butter; and Luther himself was never emancipated from such beliefs. ‘Many regions are inhabited,’ said he, ‘by devils. Prussia is

full of them, and Lapland has witches. In my native country on the top of a high mountain called Pubelsberg is a lake into which if a stone be thrown a tempest will arise over the whole region because the waters are the abode of captive demons.”<sup>3</sup>

Reformers, such as John Wycliffe and John Hus, who attempted to restore the truths of God’s Word and share its comfort with a frightened population, were condemned by the church, and in John Hus’ case, burned at the stake. The church preferred to present Jesus not as a loving and compassionate Savior, but rather as a future judge from whose mouth proceeded a sword of judgment. The word-picture in Revelation 19:15, originally directed by the apostle John to the unbelieving world as a stark warning, was used as a spiritual club to force submission from the faithful.

Obedience to the church was the highest goal of the church—obedience that they claimed was necessary for the salvation of souls. Well-meaning parents were convinced that the eternal destiny of their children was dependent upon the church and obedience to the church. They followed the lead of churchly representatives and treated their children harshly as a matter of course in order to instill obedience to themselves, but also to the religious fathers.

As an adult, Luther recollected his mother once “whipped him until blood appeared because of a single nut.” His father once punished him so severely that he withdrew from his father, and his father “had some trouble winning him back.”<sup>4</sup>

Luther developed an extraordinary sensitivity in spiritual matters. He had a heightened sense of fear early in his youth which later combined with recurrent periods of depression to plague him throughout his life.

As one biographer concluded: “The only religious sentiment that could then be discovered in [the young Luther] was fear. Every time he heard Jesus Christ spoken of, he turned pale with fright; for the Savior had only been represented to him as an offended Judge. This servile fear—so alien to true religion—may

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950) p. 26f.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther—His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985) p. 7.

perhaps have prepared him for the glad tidings of the gospel, and for that joy which he afterwards felt, when he learned to know Him who is meek and lowly in heart.”<sup>5</sup>

Sadly, these sentiments were only fostered by Luther’s teachers. Concerning his religious instruction in school, Luther would later comment, “We were all taught that we had to atone for our own sins, and because we could not do this we were directed to the saints in heaven and advised to invoke dear Mother Mary to pacify the wrath of Christ and obtain mercy for us.”<sup>6</sup>

It was fear of dying and standing before a righteous and angry God that drove Luther into the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. While a student at the university, Luther became severely ill and thought he would never recover. Shortly thereafter, while returning home for a visit, Luther accidentally severed a main artery in his leg with his rapier, causing him to cry out to the virgin Mary for help.<sup>7</sup> But it was a near-death experience in a thunderstorm that led to his final decision. One of Luther’s many guests would later relate this fact: “He was so frightened by a thunderbolt that in terror he shouted: ‘Help, dear Anne, I will become a monk.’”<sup>8</sup>

It was fear of God that drove Luther’s quest to be a faithful monk and ultimately a priest. “I devoted myself entirely to fasting, vigils, prayers, the reading of Masses, etc.,” Luther would later write. “Meanwhile, however, I constantly fostered mistrust, doubt, fear, hatred, and blasphemy of God with this sort of sanctity and self-confidence. And this righteousness of mine was nothing but a dunghill and a realm most pleasing to the devil. For Satan loves such saints and regards with the greatest delight those who destroy their own bodies and souls by defrauding and depriving themselves of all the blessings of God’s gifts.”<sup>9</sup>

How was it that Luther could move from fear to faith? How did he move from a focus on self to a reliance on his Savior? It came in accordance with that Savior’s promise, “*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And*

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<sup>5</sup> J. H. Merle D’Aubigne, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Gustav Just, *Life of Luther* (West Point, NE: Anchor Publications) p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, Volume 2 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959) p. 834.

*you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:31-32). It was through the study of God’s Word that Luther came to understand the true nature of God’s grace and favor through Jesus Christ.

Throughout his early life, Luther had understood “the righteousness of God” to be that righteousness God demanded of man in His law—a righteousness no man could ever attain through his works, for he ever remained a sinner no matter how hard he tried. This filled his heart with fear. Through his study of God’s Word, Luther was led by the Holy Spirit to see that “*the righteousness of God . . . revealed from faith to faith*” (Romans 1:17) was a righteousness bestowed upon the sinner by God as that sinner was led by the Spirit of God to place his trust in Jesus. It was a righteousness gifted “*freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith*” (Romans 3:24-25). Luther came to realize that salvation comes from outside of oneself. It is found in Jesus Christ—in His life, death, and resurrection. As one historian puts it: “Luther realized that the state of his own pathetic emotions was not so important. Jesus died for him. So what if he struggled with a sense of his own inadequacy before God? Of course he was inadequate before God. But Jesus died for him.”<sup>10</sup> Another historian writes, this change in understanding “was the beginning of a tide that washed away the medieval theology and religious practice.”<sup>11</sup>

It was this understanding that removed any reason to fear God, or Jesus whom He had sent. Jesus now became for Luther everything God intended Him to be—his gracious Savior and dear Lord! This then is to be the goal for which to reach as we teach: to move the hearts of our parishioners and students from fear to faith!

We too live in an age dominated by fear—a fear that arises by nature within the hearts of human beings, but also a fear engendered by the society within which we live. Every child conceived and born into this world is conceived in sin and so in a state of rebellion against God (cf. Psalm 51:5, Genesis 8:21). That rebellion remains in effect until hearts are broken by God’s law, and then healed by the mercy and grace of God proclaimed through the gospel and sacraments. That, of course, is the situation of our members and students—

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<sup>10</sup> Gene Edward Veith Jr., *A Place to Stand: The Word of God in the Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House Publishing, 2005) p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) p. 89.

individuals broken but then healed, individuals lost but then found and embraced by a heavenly Father who sent His Son out of love for the world of sinners (cf. John 3:16).

But our society, stoked by the lies of Satan, stands in opposition to that gospel message and seeks to engender fear within the hearts of our members and students, even as was the case in the late-medieval period. It is not the outward church with its ecclesiastical officials which seeks to dominate our culture, but rather the anti-church forces within our secular society with their academic priests—those holding PhDs who question God’s Word and with increasing frequency strive to suppress its public expression. These forces seek to sow seeds of fear and then paint themselves as saviors.

We are not dealing today with medieval superstitions of witches and goblins, but rather modern superstitions in the form of biological evolution, multi-culturalism, global warming, and the latest—transgenderism, which Satan seeks to use to undermine faith and replace it with fear. The faith of our members and our students is being challenged by our society—challenged to doubt and then ultimately to give up their faith so that they can fit in and, they are told, succeed in this life.

We must stand with Luther and remove any and all reasons to fear as we study and share the truths of God’s Word. *“Faith (still) comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”* (Romans 10:17). We must *“revere Christ as Lord”* in our hearts and *“always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks”* us *“to give the reason for the hope”* we have. Let us *“do this with gentleness and respect”* (1 Peter 3:15 NIV84), for then the Spirit of God will do for our members and our students what He did for Luther—move them from fear to faith!

### **From Faith to Confidence**

*“ . . . preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence”* (Acts 28:31).

When Luther became a Doctor of Theology and began his duties lecturing at the University of Wittenberg in October, 1512, his approach to teaching differed little from those professors who had preceded him. In his lectures on the Psalms (1513-1515), for instance, he presented the text in the traditional way, claiming that it had a fourfold meaning: the literal, the allegorical (suggesting Scripture has symbolic meaning), the tropological (interpreting

Scripture in a figurative, moralistic sense), and the anagogical (a mystical interpretation of Scripture suggesting it has hidden, spiritual meanings).<sup>12</sup> He presented extensively the thoughts and opinions of the church fathers, although he soon introduced contemporary illustrations and anecdotes to liven up his subject.

As Luther continued to study the Bible directly, and especially after the Holy Spirit led him to understand that man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (cf. Romans 3:28), his whole approach changed. For Luther, the proper understanding of the “righteousness of God” (cf. Romans 1:17) became the key to the whole Bible.<sup>13</sup>

In his lectures on Galatians (1516-1517), for instance, the traditional fourfold meaning approach was replaced by a simple presentation of the literal and spiritual meaning of the texts. Luther now focused on the grammar (what do the words actually say), and the historical context (what is the situation in which the words were spoken). Luther’s lectures became alive, for he was now presenting the living Word of God (cf. Hebrews 4:12). Students began to flock to his lectures, for his was a new, interesting, and challenging approach. It was that Word of God which gave Luther the confidence he needed to first examine and then challenge the theological darkness of the day.

In 1517, that darkness took the form of Johann Tetzel’s sale of plenary, jubilee indulgences for the building of St. Peter’s cathedral in Rome.<sup>14</sup>

Indulgences originated within the Roman Catholic Church as an inducement for soldiers to join the Crusades against the Muslims and in order to encourage the financial support of those Crusades. In view of the profits made, the church expanded their sale to all Christians for the purpose of removing the earthly penalties imposed through and associated with the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance.

The particular indulgence being sold by Tetzel offered four chief graces: 1) The complete remission of sins under the following conditions: contrition of heart, confession or at least the intention to do so, and the visit of seven

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<sup>12</sup> Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 286.

<sup>14</sup> Brecht, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-180. A “jubilee” indulgence was at first limited to special years, for instance, century marks; but it was later also used on “special” occasions, as here for the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral. “Plenary” meant that with just a few exceptions, it covered all sins including adultery and theft.

churches in which certain prayers were to be offered. 2) The possibility of obtaining a confessional letter which entitled one twice to receive absolution from all sins, even those sins reserved for papal absolution. 3) By buying the confessional letter, the purchaser and his dead relatives could receive blessings from all of the church's goods (prayers, fasts, alms), even without confession and in a state of sin. 4) Remission of punishment for souls in purgatory by means of the pope's intercession when one paid for these souls.<sup>15</sup>

Luther, who in addition to serving as a professor at the University of Wittenberg also served as a parish priest in Wittenberg, apparently learned of this special, soul-destroying indulgence as Easter approached in April 1517. His parishioners raced the nearly 22 miles to Jüterbog to obtain their indulgence because their sale was forbidden in Saxony. Luther had long questioned the sale of indulgences in view of its undermining of genuine repentance. He had preached against the abuses, pointing out that indulgences in essence gave a license to sin and were a disgrace to the cross of Christ,<sup>16</sup> and that it would be better to forgive one's neighbor than to buy ten thousand indulgence letters.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the summer and early fall of 1517, Luther worked on a document that would become known as his 95 Theses. Luther's study of God's Word gave him the confidence to voice publicly and be ready to debate his theses. Among others, the following theses placed him in direct opposition to ecclesiastical authority.

- 1) When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
- 5) The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.
- 20) Thus those indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved from every penalty and saved by papal indulgences.
- 27) They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.

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<sup>15</sup> Brecht, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-182.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 188.



32) Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.

36) Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.

43) Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.

46) Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences.

62) The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

71) Let him who speaks against the truth concerning papal indulgences be anathema and accursed.

75) To consider papal indulgences so great that they could absolve a man even if he had done the impossible and had violated the mother of God is madness.

79) To say that the cross emblazoned with the papal coat of arms, and set up by the indulgence preachers, is equal in worth to the cross of Christ is blasphemy.

94) Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell;

95) And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace (Acts 14:22).<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the following years, Luther's faith demonstrated confidence—a confidence not in self, but rather a confidence based upon and tied to the Word of God. Whether one is talking about his 1519 debates with Dr. Eck in Leipzig, or his three main treatises in 1520, or the burning of the papal bull on December 10, 1520, or his remarkable stand at Worms in 1521, Luther demonstrated a Spirit-inspired confidence in the truths of God's Word.

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<sup>18</sup> Harold J. Grimm, Editor, *Luther's Works*, Volume 31 (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1957) pp. 25-33.

It is for such a Spirit-inspired confidence that we, as Christian teachers want to pray for each of our students. Such a confidence will come only as our students become more and more grounded in the Word of God. Consequently, our daily devotions, prayers, chapel services, and religious courses ought never become a mere add-on, but rather are to be the focus of our efforts. Yes, we want to and must strive for excellence in the teaching of mathematics and the sciences, in bringing to life the events of both world and American history, and in training our children both to speak correctly and to write fluently. Yet, to instill within our students a love for the Scriptures and an understanding of its content will afford the Holy Spirit countless opportunities to bear witness to their faith in confidence. Our goal must be to take our students first from fear to faith, and then from faith to confidence, for then they will be in a position to fulfill their God-given callings.

### **From Confidence to Joy**

*“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11).*

Late in his life, as Luther prepared a preface for a collection of his writing, he wrote the following: “As violently as I had formerly hated the expression ‘righteousness of God,’ so I now was as violently compelled to embrace the new conception of grace and, thus, for me, the expression of the Apostle really opened the Gates of Paradise.”<sup>19</sup>

True spiritual joy can only be achieved when one is confident of his relationship with God and the future God has promised through the atoning work of Jesus. The more Luther understood the Word of God, the closer he came to Jesus, the greater was his joy.

In one of his many Pentecost sermons, Luther wrote, “You should learn that God does not want you to be sad and frightened but joyous and confident in view of the certain and positive promise of His grace which is proclaimed to you by the Holy Spirit Himself. And He tells you that what you feel in your heart and imagine about the wrath and punishment of an ungracious God, who could damn you to hell, is not the truth but your own erroneous, foolish notion and a deception of the devil. Therefore, let the Word and command of God be and mean more to you than your own feeling and the judgment of all the

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<sup>19</sup> Schwiebert, op. cit., p. 286.

world, lest you charge God with lying and deprive yourself of the Spirit of Truth.”<sup>20</sup>

In dinner conversation with his friends, Luther commented regarding those times when Christians are afflicted by sickness or low spirits, “A Christian should and must be a cheerful person. If he is not, then he is being tempted by the devil.”<sup>21</sup>

For Luther, especially after God had given him a wife and family, Christmas and its message of God’s love for mankind fulfilled in the Christ-Child became a great source of joy. It can be seen in the hymns he wrote. In 1534 he wrote for his children what is no doubt his most famous Christmas hymn, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” In 1543, Luther, upon the request of his parishioners, penned a shorter version of the hymn to be used more easily in the church service, “To Shepherds as They Watched by Night.” It likewise features the thoughts of Christian confidence in Christ leading to joy.

To shepherds as they watched by night  
Appeared a host of angels bright;  
Behold the tender Babe, they said,  
In yonder lowly manger laid,

At Bethlehem, in David’s town,  
As Micah did of old make known;  
’Tis Jesus Christ, your Lord and King,  
Who doth to all salvation bring.

Oh, then rejoice that thro’ His Son  
God is with sinners now at one;  
Made like yourselves of flesh and blood,  
Your brother is th’ eternal God.

What harm can sin and death then do?  
The true God now abides with you.  
Let hell and Satan rage and chafe,  
Christ is your Brother—ye are safe.

Not one He will or can forsake  
Who Him his confidence doth make.  
Let all his wiles the Tempter try,  
You may his utmost powers defy.

Ye shall and must at last prevail;  
God’s own ye are, ye cannot fail.  
To God forever sing your praise  
With joy and patience all your days.

(*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 103)

The confidence and joy with which Luther lived his life, and the joy he wished for every Christian to live his life are reflected in the explanations Luther placed in his *Small Catechism*. For nearly five centuries, this catechism has been

<sup>20</sup> Plass, op. cit., p. 512.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 233.

and continues to be the key tool of religious instruction within our schools. Consider these familiar quotations:

“God also promises grace and every blessing to those who obey these commandments. Therefore, we should love and trust Him and willingly do what He commands” (The Conclusion to the Ten Commandments).

“God does all this because He is my good and gracious Father in heaven, not because of anything I have done to earn or deserve it. For all of this it is my duty to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him” (The First Article of the Apostles’ Creed).

“He did this that I should be His very own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and joy; just as He is risen from death, lives and reigns in eternity” (The Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed).

“With these words God tenderly encourages us to believe that He is our true Father and we are His true children, so that we may ask Him boldly and with complete confidence as dear children ask their dear Father” (The Address of the Lord’s Prayer).

Why should we proclaim and remember His death? We should do this so that we learn (1) to believe that no creature could possibly do enough to pay for our sins; only Christ, true God and true man, could; (2) to be frightened by our sins and consider them to be great indeed; and (3) to find joy and comfort in Him, knowing that we are saved through this same faith” (The Christian Questions, #16).<sup>22</sup>

The spiritual journey Luther traveled was not easy, but it was necessary. So it is for each of us and every one of our students. We begin always in fear, for we are all conceived and born in sin (compare Psalm 51:5). From fear we move to faith, as the Holy Spirit sanctifies us through the waters of baptism and the instruction of His Word. With the faith and from that faith comes confidence—not in ourselves, but rather in the power of God and the completed work of Jesus who came to save us. From that confidence springs joy—joy that fills our hearts and minds and finds expression in our words and activities.

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Sydow, *Luther’s Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (Eau Claire, WI: 2006, CLC Board of Education and Publications) pp. 7-19.

This is the journey we remember on this 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and are privileged to share with each other and our students, until that day when we, God's "purchased possession" are redeemed to heaven "to the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:14).

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A Reformation Sermon

## Our Threefold Reformation Prayer<sup>1</sup>

David T. Lau

*Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Dear Friends in Christ,

It is obvious that both the world and the church need another reformation. In general, the way of life and the culture in our world today is not a way of life and culture that revolves around the things of God. We are not living in a God-centered civilization, but a man-centered and earth-centered civilization—a civilization which does not glorify God and His name, but wants to make a name for itself, even as did the builders of the Tower of Babel. Our civilization does not honor God as its Creator according to His revelation either in nature or in the Scriptures. Rather, it fashions God according to its own ideas and thus, worships the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

As far as the church is concerned, we might say that the world wields a greater influence on the church than the church on the world. Many leaders of the church are joining the world in tearing down the foundations of the church. More energy is spent in reinterpreting the Scriptures to coincide with modern scientific theories than in presenting the Scriptures faithfully, regardless of the consequence. Various statistical surveys of various churches indicate that both pastors and laymen really don't believe in their hearts what they profess in their creeds. For example, it is a clear Christian teaching that all men are born with inherited sin. Yet, a majority of so-called Christian pastors and members in this country do not believe it. The widespread success of the ecumenical movement also shows that most people have no conviction that their particular beliefs are more correct than the beliefs of others. The American ideal of toleration has been extended to this degree that most people are willing not only to tolerate the teachings of others but also to

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was written fifty-three years ago, yet its message is timely because God's Word is timeless. That Word is true and stands forever. It is our great heritage!

accept them as just as true as their own. And this acceptance goes beyond so-called Christian denominations even to other religions, so that many so-called Christians are willing to say that Judaism or Islam or Buddhism is just as valid in its religion and just as sure as a way to heaven as Christianity. All of this, even though, the apostle Peter plainly told the Jews: “*Nor is there salvation in any other*” (Acts 4:12) except Christ.

This spirit of our culture has affected the church to such an extent that most Protestant churches seem to regret that there ever was a Reformation, and most Lutheran churches do not have the zeal to repeat or reenact the Reformation that is necessary in our own day. We ourselves are also weak; and I am not thinking primarily of our weakness in numbers, but our weakness in spiritual matters. Our lives do not revolve around God as they should either. Our thinking from day to day is not permeated with the love of our Savior and the marvelous God of all grace who is alone our Creator, our Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

In this Reformation season, it is appropriate that we address our prayers to the real Hero of the great Reformation, God Himself, and ask Him to make a beginning of a modern Reformation by reforming us first of all. **Our Threefold Reformation Prayer** is based upon the last two verses of Second Thessalonians, chapter one. I. **May God make us worthy of His call to be Christians, II. May God produce in us the good fruits of faith by the power of His Spirit, and III. Above all, may God lead us to glorify, not blaspheme, the name and gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!**

#### I.

First of all, we pray: “May God make us worthy of His call to be Christians!” Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “*Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling.*” There are two words that perhaps should be clarified: the word *calling* and the word *worthy*.

*Calling* sometimes means our vocation or our station in life. But here it refers, as almost always in the Scriptures, to God's calling us by His Word to make Christians of us. We use the word that way in Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed where we confess “*that the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel.*” God had His Word of salvation preached to me and that Word of God had within it the power to make me a believing Christian. “[F]aith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). God called us—that is, He invited us to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior for He died for the sins of the whole world. He moved us by this invitation to accept

it. We could not even accept the invitation by our own power, for we were “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1).

This now helps us to understand the word *worthy*. When we ask God to make us worthy of His call, we certainly are not asking Him to make us the kind of people He is likely to invite, for He has already invited us when we were totally unworthy and He has moved us to accept His gracious invitation, contrary to our own original intentions. No, this worthiness for which we pray is the worthiness that comes *after* He called us. We are asking Him to keep us faithful to His gospel call. We are asking him to preserve our faith in His gospel and to preserve our walk in the gospel. May God make us worthy of His call to be Christians! May He make us more and more what He called us to be—lights in a crooked and perverse generation. May God make us become in fact and deed what we already are by His grace: holy saints unblemished and unstained for by faith in Christ we have total forgiveness for all our sins.

This is certainly a very necessary prayer. C. F. W. Walther used to say that it is easier to become a Christian than to remain a Christian. The enemies are striving to take away from us again what God gave us when He called us, and these enemies have a spy in our own flesh which make their battle easier and ours more difficult.

The Thessalonians knew that remaining a Christian was not easy. As soon as they became Christians, they had to suffer violent persecution from the unbelieving Jews and their own countrymen. But God made them worthy of His original call, and Paul tells them in this chapter: “[W]e ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (2 Thessalonians 1:4). God made them worthy of His call by giving them patience and faith in their troubles. This very endurance in troubles, Paul says, is “*manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer*” (2 Thessalonians 1:5). God gave the Thessalonian Christians this patience and perseverance in persecutions in order to make them worthy of the kingdom of God to which they were called.

We ask God to make us worthy of His call: that He will give us strength to endure the abuse of people who disagree with us, that He will strengthen our faith in His gospel and our religious convictions founded on His Word, for both the world and the church as we know it oppose this faith and will continue to do so. Paul holds out the end goal to the Thessalonian Christians to encourage them. He tells them God will “*repay with tribulation those who trouble you,*”



but He will give those who are troubled *“rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels”* (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

So, if God will make us worthy of His call, He may not give us rest on this earth. He may give us rather trouble but with it the patience to endure the trouble, and there is a rest for the people of God when our Lord returns. May God keep us worthy of His call until that day!

## II.

Our second prayer is this: *“May God produce in us the good fruits of faith by the power of His Spirit!”* In Paul’s words, *“[W]e also pray always for you that our God would . . . fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power.”* So we first of all prayed that God would keep us faithful to the end. Now we pray that God would make our faith work because it is true that *“faith without works is dead”* (James 2:20), and Jesus says, *“He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5). We can not do good things by our own power. That's why we ask God to produce the good fruits in us by His power.

It is a tragic thing that there are so many nominal Christians in our land who have a certain form of godliness but deny its power (compare 2 Timothy 3:5). In other words, they go through the motions of being Christians, but they resist the Holy Spirit every time He leads them to live as they profess. They are willing to be Christians if all it means is attending an hour’s service on Sunday and contributing a few dollars, but they cannot imagine that this Christianity is in any way going to change their lives. They don't want to go all the way. They want to reserve for themselves an area of freedom in which they do not want God and His Word to lead them or judge them.

But, dear friends, a true Reformation does not change a few external customs here and there. A true reformation goes to the heart of the matter and exposes the corruption that wants to remain hidden and calls for genuine repentance and the fruits of faith in the words of John the Baptist: *“Bear fruits worthy of repentance. . .the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”* (Luke 3:8f). May God produce in us the good fruits of faith by the power of His Spirit, so that no outsider will be led to ridicule the gospel by our ungodly behavior.

## III.

This leads us to our third prayer: *“May God lead us to glorify, not blaspheme, the name and gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!”* Paul writes, *“that*

*the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."*

This, finally, is the purpose of our other two prayers also. We asked God to make us worthy of His call, we asked God to produce in us the fruits of faith, so that the name of our Lord might be glorified. Oh, this is what we need above all in our day, because our world and the church does not glorify the name of Jesus.

The first petition of the Lord's Prayer is an oft-forgotten petition: "Hallowed be Thy name." Our whole life, our thinking, our speaking, our doing, our reading, our education, our culture ought to revolve around the blessed name of our Lord and Savior, but we know it does not. The world teaches that the world is not responsible to a Creator God and His absolute standards, but to society and its relative morality so that something is deemed to be wrong only when it hurts somebody. This kind of teaching does not glorify our Lord, it glorifies man.

The world teaches that the world came into being by the process of evolution and that this world is evolving into a better and better place through the scientific and cultural achievements of man. This kind of teaching does not glorify our Lord, it glorifies man.

The church, in general, teaches that the Bible is not reliable as God's Word but that it is subject to the criticism of man's scientific and moral judgment just as any other book. This kind of teaching does not glorify our Lord, it glorifies man.

The church, in general, teaches that man can either save himself, or contribute somewhat to his salvation, or choose to be saved by his own decision. It just has no feeling for the cardinal Christian teaching that our creation, our redemption, and our sanctification are from beginning to end solely the work of God's grace.

Because this attitude of the world and of the church is all around us, we certainly need to pray this prayer, that God may lead us not to blaspheme God's name and the gospel of grace, but to glorify it by our teaching and by our daily lives. As Martin Luther, God's instrument in the great Reformation, said in his *Small Catechism*: God's name is holy among us "when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God lead a holy life according to it. To this help us, dear Father in heaven." Amen.

## Book Review

*David T. Lau*

**Curtis Jahn, Editor, *Reformation 500: The Enduring Relevance of the Lutheran Reformation*, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2017, hard cover, 262 pages, 7 preliminary pages.**

I believe the ten authors who wrote chapters in this book are all members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). They are, in the order of their chapters, Mark Zarling, John Brenner, Joel Fredrich, Charles Cortright, John Brug, David Valleskey, Paul Prange, Wade Johnston, Paul Wendland, and Daniel Deutschlander. The WELS president, Mark Schroeder, is the author of a brief preface.

The topics treated in these chapters are all of current interest: the Biblical canon, infant baptism, church fellowship, counseling pastors, adiaphora, and the New Perspective on Paul. In all of these matters Luther is quoted often, and the point is firmly established that the convictions drawn from Scripture at the time of the Reformation are indeed relevant for our Christian teaching and life at the present time.

In this review I wish to comment only on the last three chapters, written by Johnston, Wendland, and Deutschlander. Johnston's chapter deals with the Adiaphoristic Controversy and the role played by Matthias Flacius over against the compromises promoted by Philip Melancthon and his followers who were known as the Philippists. Flacius was a tenacious fighter for the pure gospel of Christ as recovered by Luther, and he perceived rightly that all of the benefits would be lost if compromises were made for the sake of external peace. Even the key doctrine of justification by faith alone was in jeopardy through the compromising documents approved by Melancthon.

Johnston states: "Flacius insists that the Lutherans must accept absolutely nothing foisted upon the church by the magistrates. One simply could not confess Christ and accept the Interim and consider himself a Christian in Luther's mold, or perhaps of any kind. It was impermissible to make concessions to God's enemies—the Antichrist, the devil, and the impious. It would be much better to offend Caesar tenfold than to forsake Christ" (p. 188).

We may be faced by similar conflicts in our time, and it would be good for us to reexamine what is meant by such passages as First Corinthians 7:23:

*“You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men,”* and Galatians 5:1: *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”*

The *Formula of Concord* eventually adopted the conclusion of Flacius, that “nothing is an adiaphoron in a state of confession and offense” (p. 193). Johnston concludes his chapter with these words: “By adopting Flacius’ approach, the Formula declares his position consistent with Luther’s teaching, and therefore is worth thoughtful consideration still today” (p. 196).

Wendland’s chapter deals with the so-called New Perspective on Paul, espoused by theologians E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright. He rightly points out: “If the New Perspective on Paul is correct, then the Reformation’s doctrine of justification is a great mistake” (p. 201). What is the New Perspective? Basically the New Perspective declares that Luther was altogether wrong in his understanding of Paul’s teaching on justification in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. Paul’s opponents were not teaching salvation by works rather than by grace, his opponents were also teachers of grace. Rather the conflict between Paul and the Judaizers had to do only with the status of Gentiles in the Church.

Wendland carefully analyzes the teachings of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright and concludes that Luther got it right. “The real problem is sin, as Paul powerfully argues in Romans. The only solution is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus in our place for the forgiveness of sins. Our works are excluded from the calculation. Out of God’s sheer grace, Christ died for the ungodly. This precious gift is received by faith and by faith alone. . . . This doctrine is and shall remain central to Scripture and vital for the church” (p. 237).

The last chapter by Deutschlander is a passionate plea for us to remain steadfast in the face of all the current opposition to the gospel in its truth and purity. “Let us be resolved to follow in the footsteps of our fathers. Let us not abandon the unique heritage that by God’s grace still remains to us. Let us flee with horror the temptation to ‘join the crowd’ in teaching less and then still less of his Word in the hope of reaching some who will not listen to any of it until we rid it of whatever they may find objectionable” (p. 261).

