

**GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH****Sermon for Reformation Day 2018****Psalm 46**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Psalm 46, the Psalm we read as our Introit before: **<sup>1</sup> God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in troubles.**

**<sup>2</sup> Therefore we shall not be afraid, although the earth quakes and the mountains topple into the middle of the seas, <sup>3</sup> although its water roars and foams and the mountains quake with its surging.**

**<sup>4</sup> There is a river, and its streams make the city of God glad, the holy dwelling-place of the Most High.**

**<sup>5</sup> God is inside it. It will not be shaken. God will help it when the morning dawns.**

**<sup>6</sup> Nations rage, kingdoms totter. He utters His voice, the earth melts.**

**<sup>7</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.**

**<sup>8</sup> Come! See the works of the LORD! He has brought devastation on the earth.**

**<sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in pieces. He burns the chariots with fire.**

**<sup>10</sup> “Cease striving, and know that I am God! I shall be exalted among the nations. I shall be exalted in the earth.”**

**<sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Being Reformation Day, there are many facets of the life of Martin Luther on which we could focus our attention and give thanks to God for what He achieved through His servant. For instance, we could well focus our attention on those events surrounding Luther's nailling of the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Those Ninety-five Theses declared: *You cannot earn or buy forgiveness from God. Rather, in Jesus Christ you have complete and full forgiveness. Believe it and be saved.* Looking in a slightly different direction, we could focus our attention on the three basic truths that became for Luther the hallmarks of the Reformation: *Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone.*

But the specific emphasis on which we want to focus our attention today is the truth that Luther found in Psalm 46. It is that same message and truth that served as the basis for his hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” As we mediate on the words from Psalm 46 on our celebration of the Reformation, we thank God that He is our **Refuge and Strength**.

Psalm 46 was one of Luther's favourite psalms. Written under the inspiration of God, the psalm celebrates a miraculous victory of the children of Israel during the days when King Jehoshaphat was on the throne of David. Briefly, the circumstances surrounding the psalm were this. The nomadic tribes of the Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites were gathered together in siege against the children of Israel. Things looked dismal for the children of Israel. In fact, only a miracle of God could save them, and they knew it. So Jehoshaphat turned to the Lord. God responded through His prophet Jahaziel who said, “*Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, . . . for the battle is not yours but God's,*” (2 Chron. 20:15).

The armies of Moab and Ammon and Mount Seir were filled with confusion and began to fight with one another. The battle was fierce, and the outcome was devastating. They ended up literally destroying one another. When the morning hours arrived, and the children of Israel saw what had happened, they immediately knew that this victory was not theirs, but God's. Moved by the Spirit of God, the sons of Korah, hymnists of the children of Israel, penned this psalm, which says, “**God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in troubles... Therefore we shall not be afraid, although the earth quakes and the mountains topple into the middle of the seas... The LORD of hosts is with us... Come! See the works of the LORD!... Cease striving, and know that I am God!**”

Luther recognised the close parallel between what he saw here in the lives of the children of Israel and what he saw in his own life and the unfolding of the Reformation. He picked up the emphasis of this psalm, and in his hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” he speaks both to himself and to his fellow believers down through the ages: don't ever forget that yours is a mighty, saving God. Yes, God is truly and always will be our **Refuge and Strength**. Whenever

it seems as though things are getting a little tough - whenever questions begin to arise in our minds as to whether God really is aware of all our problems – we need to remember that we have a God about whom we can say boldly: **God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in troubles.** Yes, a mighty fortress is our God. He was then. He is today. And He will ever be such a God to the end of time.

It really doesn't take all that much examination of the life of Luther to see what an impact this divine spiritual truth had on him. At the beginning of his work as a pastor and professor, in the middle of the Reformation, and at the end of his life, to Luther God was - again and again - a mighty fortress, his **Refuge and Strength, a very present help in troubles.** Repeatedly you see this in the various aspects of Luther's life, and repeatedly you see the power, the strength, and the courage that this truth, again and again, gave to him as step by step he moved from one phase of life to the next.

For instance, one cannot help but think of Luther's own personal faith life and what he says concerning it. The God Luther first had come to know and believe in was not a God who loved him and wanted to save him. If anything, He was a God who was just waiting to throw Luther into eternal damnation for all eternity. The only reason Luther wanted to become a monk was because he wanted peace with God. But even after he entered the monastery, where he tried even harder to make peace with God, the further he felt himself drifting from God. Finally, writing to a friend, Luther makes this statement: *"I daily find myself approaching closer and still closer to hell."* And he signed his letter *"An exiled son of Adam."*

But then, thanks be to God, Luther began to study the Scriptures with greater intensity. He came across passage after passage in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians that pointed him to the fact that he could not earn peace and forgiveness from God, but that peace and forgiveness *have already been earned* for us through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is a free gift from God to all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour. As this truth more and more began to take possession of Luther's life, Luther could see in it a God who was truly his **Refuge and Strength**, first of all when it came to his own salvation.

Turning to still another segment of Luther's life, what you see and find in Luther's personal faith life you also find in his work as a reformer of the Church and in his dealings with his family. Early in the Reformation, Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms, there to defend his faith and the truth of God's Word. Luther's friends and associates advised him not to go. They were convinced that if he went, he would be put to death. But Luther replied, *"Even if there are more devils on the rooftops than clay shingles, I will still go to Worms and defend the truth of God's Word."* For Luther, God was his **Refuge and Strength.**

Regarding his family life, who can ever forget Luther the father as he sat in the upper room of their home in Wittenberg, holding in his arms his dying child, Magdalena, his little girl whom he loved so much? With tears flowing from his eyes, Luther said, *"Oh, how it hurts to lose my little Maggie. But God wants her, and she is His. Therefore, I release her into the hands of a gracious and loving God."* God is our **Refuge and Strength!**

Turning to the end of Luther's life, we find Luther going to Eisleben to mediate a dispute that had arisen between two princes. The trip was difficult, and Luther was not well. But once again, he went - working to the very end. We are told of the severe chest pains he had, and he knew the end was approaching. We are told of his standing at the window and praying, *"The pain is so severe, God, but I am ready to come home to You, Father."* And shortly before his death, when he was asked, *"Brother Martin, are you willing to die in that faith which you have proclaimed?"* Luther could say with much gusto, *"Yes, yes."* A little later he fell asleep in the Lord - in the hands of a God who was again showing him that He truly is his **Refuge and Strength.**

Again and again, as we view the life of Luther from almost any aspect or angle, clearly Luther had come to see that in Jesus Christ we have full and free forgiveness from God. You can see the impact that this truth had, not only on Luther, but also on the entire Reformation. To Luther, whether it was in his hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" or in his preaching, his teaching, his defense of the Gospel, his dealing with his family, his life, and his death, Luther had learned to say with the psalmist here in Psalm 46, **"God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in troubles."**

By the same fantastic grace of God, that same conviction, that same dynamic truth that Luther found in these words of the Psalter, are also yours and mine. Like Luther, we are not unaware of our sins and transgressions before God. We know that daily we sin much and deserve nothing but God's wrath and damnation. We also know that if God were to deal with us according to His justice, there would be but one thing that He would have to say to us: *"Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,"* (Matt. 25:41). But thanks be to God,

like Luther, you and I have also come to know a God who has not only sent His Son into this world to keep the Law perfectly in our stead, but also went to the cross and rose victorious for your sins, my sins, and the sins of all humankind. Through faith in that saving God in Christ, we, too, have come to recognise that God truly is for us - when it comes to our sins and eternity - a **Refuge** and an unending **Strength**.

Life is not always free from troubles and trials that frequently bring tears to our eyes and sorrow to our hearts. Perhaps it has come in the form of illness, family troubles, or financial woes. Perhaps, like Luther, you, too, have stood at the deathbed of your child, your husband or wife, feeling the burdens of life as only these can weigh down on us. But again, also like Luther, through your faith in Jesus Christ, you have come to know and believe in a God who has said in His Word such things as, *“I will not leave you or forsake you... Cast all your burden on Me... Come to Me, ...and I will give you rest,”* (Josh. 1:5; Psalm 55:22; Matt. 11:28). Just like Luther, we too, have found God to be **our Refuge and Strength**.

Like Luther, we also know that the day will come when we will cross the threshold of death and face our God and Creator at the conclusion of our life. Maybe it will be six months from now, maybe six years from now, maybe sixty years from now. But thanks be to God that, like Luther, we also have come to know and believe in a Saviour who has said, *“In My Father’s house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you, because I am going to prepare a place for you. <sup>3</sup> If I go to prepare a place for you, I shall also come again and take you to be with Me, so that you also may be where I am,”* (John 14:2–3). Yes, we have a God who even in the moment of death continues to be for us an unending **Refuge and Strength**. What power, what confidence, what glorious comfort it is for us, the children of God, that together with the psalmist here, with Luther, and with countless believers through the ages we can declare in this Reformation service, **“<sup>1</sup> God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in troubles. <sup>2</sup> Therefore we shall not be afraid:** Jesus Christ is my Saviour.”

It is significant that once Luther came to know this glorious truth of God’s Holy Word and the full assurance that was his through this truth, he was not about to keep it to himself. Luther recognised that God had not revealed this divine truth to him just so he alone could be saved and feel secure. Rather, God revealed this truth to Luther in order that he would now become an instrument in the hands of God and spread this message of salvation and grace to those around him, both in Germany and all the world. All you have to do is read through the life of Luther to see how willingly, how completely, he allowed himself and his life to be spent - yes, totally spent - declaring to all alike that in Jesus Christ there is salvation; yes, that God is truly **our Refuge and Strength** in Christ.

Dear friends, it is to that same task, that same mission, that every one of us here today has also been called. Whether you are a man or woman, young or not so young, God did not entrust this glorious truth to us in order that we might sit on it. Rather, He places before us both the duty and the challenge of reaching out in every direction to those who are around us, and to people all around the world, in order to share with them in an ever-expanding manner the Good News of our God and the salvation we have in His Son.

We surely thank God that He truly is for you and for me, **our Refuge and Strength**. May we have a renewed determination to spread as far and wide as possible the knowledge of this God and the salvation that is ours through Him. May we spread that Word until, like Martin Luther, and like thousands of other believers who have gone before, we, too, finally join the great throng of believers gathered before the throne of the Lamb who say, *“Worthy is the Lamb who has been slain, to receive... honour and glory and blessing!”* (Rev. 5:12).

Yes, on this Reformation Day, thanks be to God, both now and forever, that truly ours is a God about whom the psalmist could say, **“<sup>1</sup> God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in troubles. <sup>2</sup> Therefore we shall not be afraid, although the earth quakes and the mountains topple into the middle of the seas,... <sup>7</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.**

Thanks be to God for this great assurance through His almighty, Spirit-filled Word. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Lord God almighty, we praise You for calling us by the Gospel into the glorious company of the saints, into the Church of Jesus Christ. We praise You for Your kindness to us, and for Your continual care of Your Church. Continue to protect Your people from the attacks of Satan and from all enemies of Your Word and will.

We praise You especially that, when the Church was weakened by the false words and misguided wisdom of men, You freed and revived it by Your grace and goodness. When people had tampered with the Gospel that we are justified through faith in Christ, without doing what Your Law requires, You once again restored the Gospel. Through Your Holy Spirit You raised up people of courage, and faith, who led Your people back to the living truth of Your Word, and restored to them the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ. Grant that we may continue in Christ by continuing in His Word, which makes us free.

Protect Your Church today from every false way. Liberate us from all false teachings that reject or corrupt the Gospel of free grace in Christ. Rid the Church of all half-heartedness, love of this world, fear of ridicule, and persecution of the truth. Renew and strengthen it for Your gracious purposes. Preserve each one of us in faith in Your Son, through which we are justified in Your sight. Grant that we may continually trust in Your loving kindness, receive the peace of Your free pardon, and live by the Spirit in faith, hope, and love. Send out workers into Your harvest to preach Your pure, unchanging Gospel to all nations, and richly bless Your Word.

Look kindly on the nations of the world, and especially on our own. Give those who govern us love of the truth, warmth of heart, and purity of mind, that they may serve our country faithfully on Your behalf. Let Your light shine in countryside and city, that people everywhere may come to know You and turn to You in repentance and faith.

God of all comfort, we commend to Your loving care our homes and families, and all people in every situation and circumstance. Be the refuge and strength of all, always ready to help in times of trouble.

Bless us daily with Your Spirit so that we may always trust in Your grace alone to save us, through Jesus Christ Your Son. Finally receive us into Your eternal presence, where we shall serve and praise You for ever and ever. Amen.

### REFORMATION DAY

Revelation 14:6-7

<sup>6</sup> Then I saw another angel flying in the zenith of the sky. He had the eternal Good News to tell those who are living on the earth and every nation, tribe, language and people. <sup>7</sup> He was saying with a loud voice: "Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour has come for Him to judge. Worship Him who has made the heaven, the earth, the sea and the springs of water!"

Romans 3:19-28

<sup>19</sup> We know that, whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, no human being will be justified in His sight by doing what the Law says. For through the Law comes the recognition of sin.

<sup>21</sup> Now, however, the righteousness of God apart from the Law has been made known, and the Law and the Prophets testify to it. <sup>22</sup> It is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe. For there is no difference. <sup>23</sup> For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. <sup>24</sup> They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God has publicly displayed Him as the propitiatory-cover through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because He had let go unpunished

the sins that had been committed in the past, <sup>26</sup> in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Therefore, where is boasting? It has been excluded. Through what principle? Through the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded through the principle of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.

Matthew 11:12-19

<sup>12</sup> From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been advancing with triumphant force, and violent men are laying hold of it. <sup>13</sup> For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. <sup>14</sup> If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. <sup>15</sup> Let the one who has ears hear!

<sup>16</sup> "To what shall I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: <sup>17</sup> 'We have played the flute for you, and yet you have not been dancing. We have sung a funeral song, and yet you have not been mourning.' <sup>18</sup> For, when John came, he was neither eating nor drinking, and people used to say, 'He has a demon.' <sup>19</sup> When the Son of Man came, He was eating and drinking, and people are saying, 'Look at the glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is proved right by her actions.