

# HYMNS BY MARTIN LUTHER

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| 2. From Heaven Above to Earth I Come (85)         | <i>Christmas</i>                 |
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**MARTIN LUTHER AS HYMN WRITER** The sudden bursting forth of the Lutheran chorale is one of the most thrilling chapters in the history of the Reformation. It began in December of 1523. Luther expressed his appreciation for some of the older German hymns and his desire to find poets who would write new hymns in a proper devotional style. Before the year was over, several of Luther's hymns and some by his friends were printed and distributed. By late in the summer of the following year, Luther had written twenty-four of the thirty-six hymns that would come from his pen.

Martin Luther versified the Psalms, translated and adapted Latin hymns, improved and spiritualized German folk-songs, and wrote original hymns. To the modern ear, Luther's verses sometimes sound awkward. They lack the rich emotional overtones and the mellow flow of words which mark the hymns written in the past century. But Luther's hymns were not meant to create a mood; they were meant to convey a message. They were a confession of faith, not of personal feelings. They were written not to be read, but to be sung by the whole congregation. And Luther's people learned to sing them. Practices were set during the week for the entire congregation; and in the home, after the catechism hour, the family was encouraged to sing. (adapted)

## **All Praise to Thee, Eternal God (80)**

Translation of an 11<sup>th</sup> century Latin sequence, the first German stanza appeared in 1370. It was a late middle ages Christian hymn, and together with our 187 and 231, were the Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost hymns of the late middle ages. The melody came from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Luther added six stanzas to it in 1523 and published it for the Christmas service that year, making this the first Christmas hymn of the Reformation. This hymn and its tune were used by Bach in his *Choralkantate* for Christmas Day.

## **From Heaven Above to Earth I Come (85)**

One year as Luther was thinking about his Christmas sermon and rocking the cradle of his youngest at the same time, the words and the music of this lovely Christmas hymn came to him. He picked up his lute and sang these words. This hymn was penned in 1534 for his children and family.

"Luther was accustomed every year to prepare for his family a happy Christmas Eve's entertainment...and for this festival of his children, he wrote this Christmas hymn. Its opening lines are modeled on the song "Aus Fremden Landen Komm' Ich Her", and

throughout, he successfully catches the ring of the popular sacred song. It is said that Luther celebrated the festival in his own house in this original fashion: by his orders, the first seven verses of this hymn were sung by a man dressed as an angel, whom the children greeted with the 8th and following verses.” (Lauxmann, in Koch)

### **To Shepherds As They Watched by Night (103)**

Based on Luke 2:10-11, Luther wrote this hymn in 1543. It was used as a substitute for “*From heaven above to earth I come*” due to its shorter length. This is a beautifully written Christmas hymn that clearly announces the purpose, means, and result of the birth of Jesus.

### **In Peace and Joy I Now Depart (137)**

Luther based this hymn on the words of Simeon recorded in Luke 2:29-30 when he saw the baby Jesus in the temple. It was written in 1524; the author and origin of the tune is unknown.

### **Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands (195)**

When this hymn was first published in 1524, it was published under the title, “The hymn ‘Christ ist erstanden’ improved” (see Hymn 187). Hymn 187 is the oldest German Easter hymn in existence and dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Hymn 195 stands next to hymn 262 in importance. Stanzas two and three of Luther’s original are omitted in our hymnal. They read:

No son of man could conquer Death,  
Such mischief sin had wrought us,  
For innocence dwelt not on earth,  
And therefore Death had brought us  
Into thraldom from of old  
And ever grew more strong and bold  
And kept us in his bondage.  
Hallelujah!

But Jesus Christ, God’s only Son,  
To our low state descended,  
The cause of Death He has undone,  
His power forever ended,  
Ruined all his right and claim  
And left him nothing but the name,  
His sting is lost forever.  
Hallelujah!

### **Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord (224)**

Based on a medieval Latin antiphon “Veni Sancte Spiritus” Luther revised a German version of this antiphon for his first stanza and added two more stanzas of his own. These were set the tune “Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott” and published together in 1524.

### **We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost (231)**

The first stanza of this hymn was taken from a German hymn quoted by a Franciscan preacher in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1524, Luther slightly revised this verse and added three more stanzas. The hymn has been used for Pentecost, Communion, the ordination of ministers, and as the hymn before the sermon. It is also fitting for the opening of worship.

### **Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old (249)**

Based on Isaiah 6:1-4, Luther wrote the words and melody in 1526. It was often sung in connection with the Lord’s Supper in the liturgy after the consecration and distribution of the bread. If this hymn was not sung, then 313 or 311 were used. After this hymn the wine was consecrated and then distributed.

### **We All Believe in One True God (251)**

This hymn is based on the words of the Apostles and/or Nicene Creed. It is thoroughly Trinitarian. Luther wanted a hymn explaining each part of the catechism. This hymn was published in 1524 and again in 1525, each time with a different melody. The first tune was written either by Luther or his friend, Johann Walther. The 2<sup>nd</sup> tune was based on an old Latin Credo in use already in 1300.

Luther translated the Bible into German and explained it in his lectures and writings. He preached on many parts of the Bible and published his sermons. He also wrote the Large and Small Catechisms. “If he had done nothing else in life, the world could

never thank him enough for his catechism.” Luther maintained that while doctrinal sermons build up the congregation, young people benefit more from “quizzes at home, definitions of the catechism, and questions concerning the confession of faith.” At the same time, he knew that poetry is often easier to remember than prose. So he set about writing a hymn for each part of the catechism.

### **Flung to the Heedless Winds (259)**

There are two stanzas of this hymn in our hymnal; Luther actually wrote twelve. This was the first poetical production of Luther. The ballad was written in 1523, commemorating the martyrdom of two young Lutheran Augustinian monks in the Netherlands. The hymn in our hymnal is a paraphrase of stanza ten and one other, written in 1843 by John Alexander Messenger. The tune we have comes from 1904; it's the same as hymn 420, “My Jesus, As Thou Wilt”.

At Worms, Emperor Charles the Fifth had declared Luther to be a devil in human form and put him under the ban. But for the next 25 years, the emperor was too busy to come after Luther. Wars with the French, the Pope, and the Turks left him no time to root out the “Oak of Saxony.” In most of lower Germany, Lutherans were in the majority. The people rejoiced to hear pure Gospel. Under the advice of Luther and Melanchthon, churches were organized, abuses corrected, and preachers and teachers were instructed. But where Lutherans were not in the majority, or the ruler opposed them, things were not so pleasant. To preach and defend Lutheran doctrine in the Netherlands, for instance, meant arrest and execution. On July 1, 1523, Heinrich Voes and Johann Esch were burned at the stake in the market place in Brussels. Lying rumors were spread that the two young men had denied their faith as they breathed their last breaths. But Luther wanted the truth known. In an age without newspapers, radio, or TV, wandering minstrels were the news broadcasters. They played and sung folk songs. So Luther's first hymn was written in the form of a folk-song which spoke of the two martyrs.

### **O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold (260)**

Stanzas one, three, four and six are metrical paraphrase of Psalm 12. They were written in 1523 and published in 1524. Luther wrote only the hymn, not the melody. The translation in our hymnal is a composite; the composer is unknown.

### **Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word (261)**

This hymn was written in 1541 and published in 1543. It was written by Luther for a special service in Wittenburg in the face of the threatening Turk army. Luther called it “a children's hymn to be sung against the two arch enemies of Christ and His Church....The Pope and the Turk.”

### **A Mighty Fortress Is Our God (262)**

This is called the Battle Hymn of the Reformation. There are various views of the time and place of origin. There is weighty evidence that it was composed in 1529 for the Diet of Spires when the German princes made formal “protest” against the revocation of their liberties and received the name “Protestants”.

It is based on the theme of Psalm 46; some verses are reminiscent of the text. The tune is Luther's as well. This is a hymn of all Protestantism, not just Lutheranism. There are different versions of the melody. This hymn has been translated into more languages than any other hymn. There are 70-80 English versions. Two examples: “A Safe Stronghold Our God is Still” and “A Might Fortress Is Our God, A Bulwark”.

This hymn expresses Luther's heart; it helped him overcome his fears.

“The good this hymn has done, the faith it has inspired, the hearts it has comforted, the influence it has exerted, cannot be measured and will first be revealed to us in eternity, where the saints of God

will praise their Lord and Redeemer for many blessing, not the least of which will be the privilege of having known and sung this hymn here on earth” (The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal).

### **If God Had Not Been On Our Side (267)**

This hymn is a metrical paraphrase of Psalm 124. It was written in 1524. A new melody was given by Johann Walther in 1537. “Once, when Knight George, as Luther was called, went on a hunt with other knights, he pictured in the nets and the hunting dogs, the devil entangling and pursuing human souls.” This picture can be seen in the hymn.

### **That Man a Godly Life Might Live (287)**

This hymn was a hymn meant to teach the Ten Commandments and reinforce the Catechism. It was written by Luther and published in 1524. The melody came from an old German melody of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which was a favorite pilgrim song.

### **O Lord, We Praise Thee (313)**

The first stanza is 15<sup>th</sup> century; it was used as a post-Communion hymn. Luther wrote stanzas two and three as a supplement to this well known hymn and published them in 1524. This hymn was a favorite of Luther and his people and has been a favorite for many in the Lutheran Church since then. The translation is a composite. The tune is that of an old German folk-tune.

### **From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee (329)**

Written in 1523 and based on Psalm 130, this hymn originally had four stanzas. A year later, John Walther rewrote the second verse and expanded it into verses two and three. In 1525, on May 9, this hymn was sung at the funeral of Luther’s friend and patron, Frederick the Wise, in the Castle Church in Wittenburg.

The hymn is a wonderful funeral hymn. In 1545, it was sung at Halle when Luther’s body was brought from Eisleben to Wittenburg. It was also sung by Luther and his aides at Coburg castle during the Diet of Augsburg. This hymn bears the first tune written by Luther. Many consider this hymn to be Luther’s best.

### **Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice (387)**

This was Luther’s first congregational hymn, penned in 1523 under the title “A Christian hymn of Dr. Martin Luther, setting forth the unspeakable grace of God and the true faith.” It is said that Luther wrote down the melody as he heard it sung by a traveling artisan in 1524.

### **Our Father, Thou in Heaven Above (458)**

This hymn was written in 1539 on the Lord’s Prayer. It includes the address and the seven petitions and the word “Amen”, but not the doxology. It, too, is one of Luther’s finest hymns. The melody comes from an unknown composer. Luther had one, but later he discarded it. The composer’s tune was later improved by Luther.

### **May God Bestow on Us His Grace (500)**

Written in 1525 and based on Psalm 67, this was the first missionary hymn of Protestantism. The composer is unknown.

### **In the Midst of Earthly Life (590)**

This hymn was based on a medieval Latin antiphon from the 10<sup>th</sup> century which had been translated into German by the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The powerful refrain is based on the Trisagion of the Greek liturgy from around 450 A.D. In 1525, Luther added stanzas two and three. The tune comes from a 13<sup>th</sup> century gradual.

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In 1524, the first Lutheran hymnal had 8 hymns! There were four by Luther, three by Paul Sparatus, and one by Justas Jonas. Other hymns and hymnals soon followed.