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It is a rare thing to have all of Martin Luther’s hymns and music brought together under one cover. It is rarer still to have them brought together in English with practical musical settings for a general audience. When all of Luther’s hymns, ballads, canticles, and liturgical chants are placed side by side, we find most everything that is typically found in a hymnal: hymns for the Church Year and its seasons (from Advent through Pentecost); liturgical music; biblical canticles; psalms; hymns of comfort; hymns of joy; hymns for Baptisms, weddings, and funerals. This book acts like a little hymnal.

Today, these hymns do what they did five hundred years ago. They remain some of the finest examples of Christian hymnody. They proclaim Christ and His saving work. They teach the faith and encourage the faithful. They give voice to the people’s praise of their God for what He has done through His Son. Moreover, they do this with excellent poetry that is rigorous in form and beautiful in language. They do it with music that is bold, sensitive to the text, memorable, and singable. And they do all of this with fidelity to the historic contributions of the Church. But Luther also wrote these hymns to serve as encouragement and as examples for other hymnwriters. Half a millennium later, these hymns do the same things: they help the people sing the faith and serve as supreme models for hymnwriters today.

This book includes thirty-eight hymns and chants that are widely credited to Luther. Five others with uncertain authorship but sometimes ascribed to Luther were not included.

“All Our Heavy Sin, All Our Misdeeds and Our Loss” (Unser große Sünde und schwere Missetat) is translated in Robin A. Leaver’s Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications (Eerdmans, 2007) at page 354, and the music is given in Markus Jenny’s Luthers Geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge (Böhlau, 1985) at pages 313–14.

“Christ Is Arisen” (Christ ist erstanden) is available at Lutheran Service Book (Concordia, 2006) 459.

“Lord, Have Mercy upon Us” (Kyrie eleison) is available at LSB 186.

“O Christ, Thou Lamb of God” (Christe, du Lamm Gottes) is available at LSB 198.

“This Body in the Grave We Lay” (Nun laßt uns den Leib begraben) is available at LSB 759.

All texts and tunes were compared to the original sixteenth-century sources in facsimiles when available or in a critical modern edition. The tunes follow closely the original sixteenth-century rhythmic forms, but in a few instances, preference was given to familiarity.

Previous English collections of Luther’s hymns were for the most part limited to the work of a single translator: for example, Richard Massie’s Martin Luther’s Spiritual Songs (Hatchard, 1854), George MacDonald’s Exotics (Strahan, 1876), Leonard Woolsey Bacon’s The Hymns of Martin Luther ( Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), and the six volumes of F. Samuel Janzow’s The Hymns of Martin Luther (Concordia, 1978–80, 1982). The translations here were drawn from the best available, with preference given to the versions found in LSB and with sensitivity to corporate memory. Because the translations date from the mid-nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, there is a mixture of styles and types of English usage and vocabulary.

In most cases, the musical settings were selected to support congregational singing. Many of the settings are also well-suited for four-part SATB singing. Special thanks are due to Henry V. Gerike who composed five new settings for this book.

The supplemental commentary was adapted from the booklet by Henry V. Gerike that accompanies the four-CD set Martin Luther: Hymns, Ballads, Chants, Truth (Concordia, 2004).

The topical index was developed not as a historical representation of every place each of the hymns was categorized, but rather as a practical guide for selecting hymns and as a means of appreciating the breadth and scope of Luther’s hymns. The categorizations of these hymns were surveyed in the original sources, in C. F. W. Walther’s Kirchengesangbuch für Evangelisch-Lutherische Gemeinden (Concordia, 1917) (which, incidentally, only lacked two of the thirty-eight hymns), and in eight modern American Lutheran hymnals.

Peter C. Reske
Christ, Our Lord, Who Died to Save Us

Jesus Christus unser Heiland, der den Tod

Martin Luther, 1483–1546
Tr. Carl F. Schalk

JESUS CHRISTUS UNSER HEILAND, DER DEN TOD

Geistliche lieder auffs new gebessert, Wittenberg, 1533,
ed. Joseph Klug, ca. 1490–1552
Setting by Henry V. Gerike

1 Christ, our Lord, who died to save us, Over death reigns supreme.
2 For our sins the spotless victim, Sinless blood for us spilled.
3 Death and hell and life and glory Now He holds in His hand.

He is arisen From battlefield and prison.
God’s wrath He carried, Our guilt and death He buried.
Christ will deliver Who trust in Him forever.

Alleluia!

This Easter hymn of Luther’s utilizes the form of the Leise (a medieval vernacular song ending with “Kyrie eleison” but given here as “Alleluia”) to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. In 1533, the text was matched with the tune used here.

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Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice

Nun freut euch, lieben Christen

Martin Luther, 1483–1546

1. Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, With exultation
   springing, And with united heart and voice
   rapture singing, Proclaim the wonders God has done,
   His right arm the victory won.

2. Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; Death brooded darkly
   o'er me. Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my
   mother bore me. But daily deeper still I fell; My
   life became a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me.

3. My own good works all came to naught, No grace or merit
   gain ing; Free will against God's judgment fought, Dead to all
   good remaining. My fears increased till sheer despair Left
   on ly death to be my share; The pangs of hell I suffered.

4. But God had seen my wretched state Before the world's found-
   da tion, And mindful of His mercies great, He planned for
   my salvation. He turned to me a father's heart; He
   did not choose the easy part But gave His dearest treasure.
This, Luther’s first congregational hymn, appeared in print in 1524. It is almost autobiographical in nature, for the first stanzas reveal the guilt and frustration Luther felt, especially in the monastery. What is true of Luther is true of every human being—all are sinners, as this hymn shows. Yet there is reason to rejoice. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take on our flesh and bone, to live, die, and rise from death for our justification. The exuberant, original tune is agile enough to reflect the joy of the redeemed sinner.

5 God said to His beloved Son:
   “It’s time to have compassion.
   Then go, bright jewel of My crown,
   And bring to all salvation.
   From sin and sorrow set them free;
   Slay bitter death for them that they
   May live with You forever.”

6 The Son obeyed His Father’s will,
   Was born of virgin mother;
   And God’s good pleasure to fulfill,
   He came to be my brother.
   His royal pow’r disguised He bore;
   A servant’s form, like mine, He wore
   To lead the devil captive.

7 To me He said: “Stay close to Me,
   I am your rock and castle.
   Your ransom I Myself will be;
   For you I strive and wrestle.
   For I am yours, and you are Mine,
   And where I am you may remain;
   The foe shall not divide us.

8 “Though he will shed My precious blood,
   Me of My life bereaving,
   All this I suffer for your good;
   Be steadfast and believing.
   Life will from death the vict’ry win;
   My innocence shall bear your sin,
   And you are blest forever.”

9 “Now to My Father I depart,
   From earth to heav’n ascending,
   And, heav’nly wisdom to impart,
   The Holy Spirit sending;
   In trouble He will comfort you
   And teach you always to be true
   And into truth shall guide you.

10 “What I on earth have done and taught
   Guide all your life and teaching;
   So shall the kingdom’s work be wrought
   And honored in your preaching.
   But watch lest foes with base alloy
   The heav’nly treasure should destroy;
   This final word I leave you.”
O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold
Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein

Psalm 12
Martin Luther, 1483–1546
Tr. The Lutheran Hymnal, 1941

ACH GOTT, VOM HIMMEL
Eyn Enchiridion oder Handbüchlein, Erfurt, 1524
Setting: The Lutheran Hymnal, 1941

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As silver tried by fire is pure
From all adulteration,
So through God’s Word shall men endure
Each trial and temptation.
Its light beams brighter through the cross,
And, purified from human dross,
It shines through ev’ry nation.

Defend Thy truth, O God, and stay
This evil generation;
And from the error of its way
Keep Thine own congregation.
The wicked ev’rywhere abound
And would Thy little flock confound;
But Thou art our salvation.

A paraphrase of Psalm 12, this hymn was written in 1523, the same time as many of Luther’s other psalm-hymns. It was published in the first Lutheran hymnal, the so-called "Achtliederbuch" of 1524. Luther’s version of the psalm reflects much of his own experience in the early days of the Reformation. Though several different tunes were used for this text with various levels of success, the present tune dates from 1524 and is possibly by Luther himself.
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