



A BIBLE STUDY ON JOHANN ECK

*Staunch Defender of the Infallibility of the Pope and
Luther's Most Outspoken Adversary*

“I TRUST, O LORD, YOUR HOLY NAME”

(TLH 524; LW 450; LSB 4006)

(Ps. 31:1–5; 40:4; 64:10)

“A Council can err, but the Scriptures never err.” Luther at the Leipzig Debate

Johann Eck became Martin Luther's most vocal critic.

A master debater, Eck led the charge to vilify Luther as nothing more than another version of the reformer Jan Hus, who was unjustly condemned by the Roman Catholic Church as a heretic and burned at the stake in 1415 at the Council of Constance. Eck's writings not only defended the mistaken belief that the pope and councils were infallible; Eck helped set the stage for Rome's codification of their wholesale rejection of the reforms advocated by Luther and the Reformation at the Council of Trent. At stake at the Leipzig Debate was the belief in the Holy Scripture as the sole, infallible authority in the Christian Church. Martin Luther, standing on the inspired word of the prophets and apostles, could not compromise. At Leipzig he made his faithful confession to heaven and to the world on the basis of the Word of God, regardless of the consequences.

STANZA ONE

1 I trust, O Lord, Your holy name; / O let me not be put to shame / Nor let me be confounded. / My faith, O Lord, / Be in Your Word / Forever firmly grounded.

This hymn by Adam Reusner (1496–1575) is based on the first five verses of Psalm 31, a plea for rescue by the inspired lips of King David that foreshadows both the faithful confession and the bitter, innocent suffering and death of our Lord — and all who follow Him in faith. This psalm is much more than a simple prayer of complaint or self-pity. It is an expression of a courageous trust in God's redeeming promises, promises that have the final word even in the midst of the traps set by one's enemies.

1. Martin Luther knew that he was placing himself in great risk if he would “take the bait” set out by Eck and publicly confess that everything outside of Holy Writ is unreliable, tainted with sin and error — including fallen human Church leaders (the pope) and fallen human Church meetings (church councils). The Roman Catholic Church taught that the pope or a Church council could not err in what it pronounced, because the pope and

Church councils have been given authority to rule the Christian Church on earth. Therefore no one can judge their pronouncements. In his debate with Eck, Luther stated that the Council of Constance could have very well been in error when it condemned Jan Hus as a heretic and burned him at the stake. Scripture alone is infallible and the final authority in the Christian Church. How does the Word of God reveal itself as the only proper authority for the Church on earth? Why do the fallen world and our old fallen nature look to other authorities when it comes to how we are to be saved?

2. The “formal principle” is the final authority in a religious group, which believers appeal to, especially in the midst of a dispute or disagreement over doctrine. The formal principle in the Roman Catholic Church includes the Bible, the pope, Church councils, tradition and human reason. What was being challenged when Martin Luther announced in front of Eck and those attending the Leipzig Debate that Church councils could make wrong judgments? Why is it so critical for all of Christendom to side with King David and Luther and trust solely in the eternal Word of the Lord?

STANZA TWO

2 Bow down Your gracious ear to me / And hear my cry, my prayer, my plea; / Make haste for my protection, / For woes and fear / Surround me here, / Help me in my affliction.

Once he confessed that the pope and councils could err, Luther knew he could not retreat. He was on record as not only condemning abuses in the Roman Catholic Church; but also condemning the very foundations on which the visible Roman Catholic Church had been built. When Luther sided with Hus (and the position that only the Bible was inspired and inerrant) he knew he would be quickly condemned with Hus as a heretic and an enemy of the Church. But he knew the cause was Christ's and not his own. The night before he was to announce his decision before the Diet of Worms to stand with the Word of God, Luther prayed:

O God, Almighty God everlasting! How dreadful is the world! Behold how its mouth opens to swallow me up, and how small is my faith in Thee! ... Oh! the weakness of the flesh, and the power of Satan! If I am to depend upon any strength of this world — all is over ... The knell is struck ... Sentence is gone forth ... O God! O God! O Thou, my God! Help me against the wisdom of this world. ... The work is not mine, but Thine. I have no business here ... I have nothing to contend for with these great men of the world! I would gladly pass my days in happiness and peace. But the cause is Thine ... And it is righteous and everlasting! ... Thou hast chosen me for this work. I know it! ... Therefore, O God, accomplish Thine own will! Forsake me not, for the sake of Thy well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ, my defense, my buckler, and my stronghold. ... Behold, I am prepared to lay down my life for Thy truth. ... For the cause is holy. It is Thine own! ... I will not let Thee go! No, nor yet for all eternity! And though the world should be thronged with devils — and this body, which is the work of Thine hands, should be cast forth, trodden under foot, cut in pieces, ... consumed to ashes, my soul is Thine. Yes, I have Thine own word to assure me of it. My soul belongs to Thee, and will abide with Thee forever! Amen! O God send help! ... Amen!

3. The Wittenberg Reformer knew what he was getting into when he openly questioned the authority and inerrancy of the pope and the Church councils. In being faithful to the Word of Christ through the inspired prophets and apostles, Luther resigned himself to the same fate as the prophets and apostles and the Lord they served. How does Psalm 31 and the hymn's second stanza point to Christ and his prayerful plea? How does this also apply to Christ's faithful disciples?

4. The great hymn "A Mighty Fortress" was Luther's translation of Psalm 46. But there are plenty of other Scripture passages that call upon God as a strong tower and castle of defense. Psalm 31:2 petitions our gracious Heavenly Father to quickly rescue us in our afflictions. What enabled Luther to boldly confess the truths revealed in Scripture despite the threats from Eck and the Church in Rome? How does the example of Luther, Psalm 31 and this Reformation hymn strengthen our own witness to Christ and his Word?

STANZA THREE

3 You are my strength, my shield, my rock, / My fortress that withstands each shock, / My help, my life, my tower, / My battle sword, / Almighty Lord— / Who can resist Your power?

The hymn confesses, with King David and Christ Himself, the believer's only hope: the Scriptural truth that God's power and might serves His mercy, grace and lovingkindness. The Lord is the strength that delivers; the shield that defends; the unmovable rock that protects God's dear children.

5. "The Lord fights for them." (Ex. 14:25) is apparent to the eyes of faith, even when it is not understood by the world or the world's religious leaders. Eck believed the sure rock was the power and wisdom of popes, councils, Church traditions and human reason. Luther banked all his chips on the clear, simple Word of Scripture. How do we see competing authorities among Church leaders today? Why is "Scripture alone" a watchword that many around us see as too narrow-minded?

6. The power and might of the Lord is especially evident in the realm of His left hand. He rules the nations and the enemies of His people with a will that cannot be challenged or defeated. We see this clearly in God's Law — in the Ten Commandments. Despite our old nature's complaints and attempts to rationalize away God's commands, they stand eternally. How does this compare with Eck's attempts to trap Luther in his own words? Of whom else does this method of entrapment remind us?

STANZA FOUR

4 With You, O Lord, I cast my lot; / O faithful God, forsake me not, / To You my soul commending. / Lord, be my stay, / And lead the way / Now and when my life is ending.

The confident prayer of Christ on the Cross Ps. 31:5, "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God" (Ps. 31:5; SEE LUKE 23:46) becomes the plea of faith of all who follow our Redeemer, including St. Stephen (Acts 7:59), Jan Hus, Martin Luther and all those condemned and persecuted by the world and the world's religions. True faith commends everything into the merciful arms of the almighty Redeemer as it gives witness to the truth of the revealed Word.

7. King David and Martin Luther point to a remarkable hope for rescue and deliverance of sinful sons and daughters of a fallen Adam and Eve. We do not put our trust in our great ability of always getting it right. God-pleasing faith looks to the faithfulness of our merciful God and the gracious One He sent to be our sacrificial substitute. Why is our only comfort and strength in the faithfulness of the Triune God revealed in Holy Scripture?

8. Several Christian hymns contain the plea: "be Thou my stay." The noun "stay" has the sense of a mark, curb or anchor. Our prayer is that Christ and His Word would always be our anchor and one foundation. How is this especially important when we are under attack in our last hour?

STANZA FIVE

5 All honor, praise, and majesty / To Father, Son, and Spirit be, / Our God forever glorious, / In whose rich grace / We run our race / Till we depart victorious.

The Book of Psalms ends with a high doxology, as do many Reformation hymns. Revelation 7 describes heaven's eternal doxology: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen' "
(REV. 7:9–12 ESV).

9. Where in heaven's eternal doxology is praise for the human wisdom of Church councils, the human insights of popes and bishops, the human judgments of Luther or any other Reformer? Where is the focus of all authority, truth and perfection? How is Rev. 7:9–12 a compass and guide for our Christian sojourn here on earth? How does God's redeeming grace make our lives, despite our weakness and sin, a doxology to our Triune God? How was Luther's defense of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture a God-inspired doxology to the Lamb and His saving Word?