



# A BIBLE STUDY ON JUSTUS JONAS

*Faithful Teacher of God's Word and Luther's Closest Friend*

## "If God Were Not Upon Our Side"

(to the tune NUN FREUT EUCH—TLH 124, LW 150, LSB 492;  
or ALLEIN GOTT IN DER HÖH—TLH 33, LW 181, LSB 899)  
(Psalm 124)

**20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.**

— Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation (1518)

Justus Jonas is not on anyone's short list of individuals who brought about the Reformation in 16th century Europe, though he played a major role. Justus Jonas (born Jodokus Koch) was a skilled scholar, accomplished educator and university administrator. He served as rector of the University of Erfurt (1519–1521) until elected supervisor of the Castle Church and professor of Church Law at the University of Wittenberg (1521–1541). At Wittenberg his prior admiration for Erasmus was tempered after he witnessed the Leipzig Debate between Luther and Eck. Jonas was much more than simply an eyewitness for many important events that shaped the Reformation: the Diet at Marburg and the Diet at Augsburg; he served as a witness at Luther's marriage to Katharina von Bora, and later was at Luther's side during his final days in Eisleben (1546). Jonas preached Luther's funeral sermon in Eisleben and accompanied the body back to Wittenberg. He not only translated works of Luther and Melancthon into German and Latin, he wrote one of the first hymns of the Reformation ("In the Name of Jesus We Begin"). His hymn "If God Were Not Upon Our Side" was published in 1524. Sadly, Jonas became a wandering preacher from 1546 until his death in 1555 after being banished by Duke Maurice of Saxony — all because of Jonas' faithfulness to the gracious Christ rediscovered by Luther in the Holy Bible.

### STANZA ONE AND TWO

*1 If God were not upon our side/When round us foes are raging,/Were not Himself our help and guide/When bitter war they're waging,/Were He not Israel's mighty shield,/To whom their utmost craft must yield,/We surely must have perished.*

*2 But now no human wit or might / His chosen people frighteth,/God sitteth in the highest height,/And He their*

*counsels blighteth;/When craftiest snares and nets they lay,/God doth His work another way,/And makes a path before us.*

This hymn is based upon Psalm 124, a song of thanksgiving by David for the Lord's rescue. Jonas follows David in portraying the severity of the attacks by "the threatening foe" and the mighty deliverance by the hand of the Lord. Jonas and the other reformers saw firsthand the warring of the enemies of the Gospel of Christ — not only the Turk and Pope but those who used Luther and the Reformation as an excuse to fuel social unrest and political revolution. Both Luther and Jonas understood their own human inability to rescue anyone from the religious, political and social evils of the day.

**1.** Psalm 124 confesses that if it had not been the Lord on Israel's side they would have been swallowed up alive. As the Israel of God (GAL. 6:16) the one, holy and apostolic Church on earth remains under attack by forces against Christ and the pure teaching of the saving Gospel. Is the Gospel of Christ and His Church in danger of being swallowed up alive today, or are we much more capable to defend Christ's Church from attack than 500 years ago? Why do many Christians today feel little need for the Lord as their mighty shield and weapon against forces bent on twisting and destroying the Gospel and Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper?

**2.** The Christian and the Christian Church under attack cry to Yahweh Sabaoth — the Almighty Lord of the Heavenly Armies. God-given faith trusts that the Lord will surely find a way to rescue and deliver His people. Justus Jonas paraphrases the thoughts of Psalm 124 by comparing the wisdom of this fallen world with God's perfect wisdom. What are some examples in the Bible of how God's wisdom delivered believers in the face of worldly plans to snare them? How is this evident in the life of Martin Luther and the faithful reformers who continued after Luther's death?

### STANZAS THREE AND FOUR

*3 Against our souls they rage and mock,/Exciting great commotion:/As billows meet with angry shock/Out on the stormy ocean,/So they our lives with fury seek;/But God hath pity on the weak,/And Him they have forgotten.*

4 *They call us heretics, and aye/Their Christian name are flaunting;/They seek to spill our blood, while they/Their fear of God are vaunting./Ah, God! that precious name of Thine/O'er many a wicked deed must shine,/But Thou wilt once avenge it.*

**Both Luther and Jonas were persecuted for their faithfulness to the Christ and Gospel revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Opponents attacked them, made fun of them, called them heretics and tried to silence them forever. The fourth stanza points out that the situation is even more pitiful when the opponents of the true Gospel use the Lord's name against the Lutheran reformers, as they did with Jan Hus and other Christian martyrs.**

**3.** What are some plain examples from our own time of people calling themselves Christian but attacking the very commands and promises Christ has revealed through His inspired prophets and apostles?

**4.** In stanza three we sing: "But God hath pity on the weak." (See **PS. 72:13**) Jesus says the same when He announces, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (**MATT. 5:3**) What does this weakness and poverty consist of? How is this different from the slogan of Liberation Theology that mistakenly believes God favors the economically poor? What words or phrases in the Lutheran Divine Service reflect the kind of weakness and poverty Jonas presents in these stanzas?

## STANZAS FIVE AND SIX

5 *They open wide their rav'nous jaws,/And threaten to devour us,/But thanks to God, who rules our cause,/They shall not overpower us;/Their snares He yet will bring to naught,/And overthrow what they have taught;/God is too mighty for them.*

6 *How richly He consoleth those/Whom no one else befriendeth!/The door of grace doth never close;/Sense never comprehendeth / How this may be, and deems all lost,/When through this very cross a host/Of champions God is raising.*

**Jesus has warned His own, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me" (JOHN 15:18–21). Jonas continues the language of Psalm 124 with fearful images of perishing by being caught in a net (through the enemy's crafty and hidden snares) or by being attacked and devoured by "ravenous jaws" (through the enemy's open and brute force). The devil and his minions can have it either way; Satan can masquerade as an angel of light (2 COR. 11:14) or openly fight against Christ and His Church (REV. 13:7).**

**5.** Martin Luther and Justus Jonas saw both during their lifetimes; sometimes they were overwhelmed, other

times they were tempted to give up all hope. What phrases (besides those in "A Mighty Fortress") from our hymnody expresses our belief that God will continue to preserve Christ's Word and Church — even when persecution and suffering comes?

**6.** The Lord consoles those the world mocks and tries to silence. After Luther's death Jonas was banished to roam around looking for a few faithful Christians who would go against the commands of Emperor Charles V and provide food and shelter and allow him to preach the Gospel. Saint Paul, Luther and Jonas all followed their Lord by bearing their cross for the sake of their Savior and His redeeming Word. How is this understanding of the "theology of the Cross" (Heidelberg Disputation) different than the "theology of glory" preached by so many who call themselves Christians these days?

## STANZAS SEVEN AND EIGHT

7 *Our foes, O God, are in Thy hand,/Thou knowest their endeavor;/But only give us strength to stand,/And let us waver never,/Though reason strives with faith, and still/It fears to wholly trust Thy will,/And sees not Thy salvation.*

8 *But heav'n and earth, O Lord, are Thine./For Thou alone hast made them;/Thy light let on Thy people shine,/And in their sorrows aid them;/Ignite our hearts to love and faith/That shall be steadfast e'en to death,/Howe'er the world may murmur!*

**Our old nature can never believe that it is better to wait on the Lord (PS. 27:14) than to put faith in the fallen wisdom of a dark and dying world. But our new nature puts all hope on the gracious and merciful will of our Deliverer God, whose power and might serve His desire to forgive and strengthen all who repent and stake everything on the Good News of Jesus (MARK 1:15).**

**7.** Luther and Jonas and the other reformers knew that the fight to preserve and proclaim the truth of the Gospel was the Lord's fight (2 CHRON. 20:15). How do we follow Luther and Jonas in placing the battle in Christ's hands? Is this "holy resignation" to just sit back and do nothing for the Lord and our neighbor-in-need? In what way does God work in the world? What does it mean that we are the "masks of God" (*larvae Dei*) in the world? What role do we have as justified by faith separate from works, but also living a life of sanctification in a world that does not know God?

**8.** The Divine Service begins with a confession from Ps. 124:8, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." The creation of the world and its salvation should always be connected as we see in the first two Articles of the Creed. In what way does the First Article of the Creed serve the Second? Is the miracle of being brought to saving faith even greater than the miracle of creating the heavens and earth out of nothing? Were these two Articles ever meant to be read in isolation? What of the Third Article? What are the dangers of looking at any one Article of the Creed without reading the other two? How is the focus on Christ and His cross well pleasing to both our heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit?

