

HEADSHIP

Psalm 46 • Isaiah 26:1–15 • Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article IV

PSALM	Psalm 46:1 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”
READING	Isaiah 26:4 “Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.”
BOOK OF CONCORD	Smalcald Articles Part II, Article IV: The Papacy

The Texts

Psalm 46 was the textual and theological seed from which Luther grew *A Mighty Fortress*. Its opening declaration, “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*,” is not an abstract theological proposition; it is a confession made in the face of a specific claim by competing powers: nations rage, kingdoms totter, the mountains shake. The psalmist’s response is not political resistance but theological clarity. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. No earthly institution, no raging nation, no tottering kingdom holds the title of refuge and strength. That title belongs to one party, and to Him alone. The Smalcald Articles, written by a man who expected to die, express the same conviction in confessional form.

Isaiah 26 moves between lament at human kingdoms that fall and confidence in the kingdom that stands. “*For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the foreigners’ house is no longer a city; it will never be rebuilt.*” The strong nations stumble and fall, and Israel walks on the ruins. Then the pivot: “*Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.*” Isaiah 26:4 does not promise that the right human institution will prevail. It promises that the everlasting rock will stand when every human institution has become a heap. SA II.IV’s rejection of the papal claim to supreme headship rests on exactly this theological ground: no human institution can occupy the position Isaiah 26 and Psalm 46 assign to God alone.

Discuss: *Psalm 46 and Isaiah 26 both move through the ruins of earthly kingdoms to the everlasting rock and fortress that God alone is. The Smalcald Articles were composed by a man who expected to die within days. How does the personal historical weight of Luther’s circumstances change the way the class should read SA II.IV’s uncompromising rejection of every claim that a human office can share the title that belongs to Christ alone?*

Key Terms

Term	What It Means
<i>Jure divino</i>	By divine right. The papal claim that the Pope holds supreme headship over all Christendom by God’s own appointment rather than by human arrangement. SA II.IV rejects this claim entirely: the title of head of all Christendom belongs to Christ alone.
The Last Will and Testament	The historical circumstance of SA II.IV: Luther composed the Smalcald Articles in 1537 while suffering an agonizing illness that he and everyone around him expected would kill him. He published them as his final theological confession so that those who lived after him would have his testimony.
The Everlasting Rock vs. a human institution	Luther’s argument against the papal claim to Matthew 16’s rock: if the Pope were the rock on which the Church is built, he would have to be sinless and invincible, but popes sin, err, and act wickedly. Therefore a human office cannot be the rock Isaiah 26:4 describes. Only Christ is.
Head of all Christendom	The title SA II.IV assigns to Christ alone and removes from the Pope. Luther argues that the Church can exist very well without a human monarch at its head, and that it would have fared better if the papacy had never been established.

Discuss: *Luther’s argument against the papal claim to Matthew 16’s rock is precise: if the Pope were the everlasting rock, he would have to be sinless and invincible, but popes sin, err, and fall. Therefore a human office cannot be what Isaiah 26:4 describes. How does the same argument apply to every contemporary institution, whether ecclesiastical or political or ideological, that claims to be the indispensable foundation on which the Church’s security rests?*

Luther's Last Will and Testament

The Smalcald Articles were composed under extraordinary historical pressure. In 1537, Pope Paul III convoked a general council at Mantua, and the Elector of Saxony directed Luther to compile a comprehensive confession defining which points the Lutherans might concede for the sake of peace and which they must hold to the end. Luther's first draft of the Articles was ready; then he was struck by an agonizing attack of the stone, a week of such intense pain that he, the physicians, and the princes gathered at Smalcald all expected him to die. He published the Articles afterward with the specific intent of a dying man leaving his testimony.

Luther's own words explain the circumstance: he had determined to bring the articles to light so that should he die before a council assembled, those who lived after him would have his testimony and confession. This is not a polemical treatise written in comfort; it is the confession of a man who has settled, in the face of death, what he will not surrender. When SA II.IV identifies the papal claim to supreme headship as the work of the devil and names the papacy as the Antichrist, these are not the casual provocations of a healthy controversialist. They are the considered judgment of a man who has lived under the system's spiritual damage and decided, at the last, what the Church's soul requires him to say.

Discuss: *Luther composed SA II.IV while expecting to die within days, intending it as his final testimony. Reading it as a last will and testament rather than a polemical treatise changes its emotional and theological register. What specifically does a deathbed setting require of a theological confession that comfortable classroom discussion does not, and what does it tell us about the article's subject that Luther regarded this as among the things he could not leave unsaid?*

Rejecting the False Fortress

SA II.IV's central claim is compressed into a single sentence: the title of head of all Christendom belongs to Jesus Christ solely and alone. The papal claim was that the Pope holds this headship by divine right, *jure divino*, and that submission to his authority is necessary for salvation. Luther's response is not primarily that the current pope is a bad man, though he says plenty about that. It is that the title itself cannot belong to a human office. Psalm 46's fortress and Isaiah 26's everlasting rock describe a reality that a human institution cannot embody by definition. A human monarch is subject to sin, error, and death; none of these can qualify as a substitute for the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The practical consequence Luther draws is unsparing: the Church can exist very well without such a human head, and it would certainly have remained better if the papacy had never been established by the devil. This is not anti-institutionalism in general; it is the specific theological claim that the function the papacy claimed to perform, providing the Church with an indestructible human rock and the condition of salvation, belongs to Christ alone and cannot be delegated. The Church under Christ's headship has a fortress that does not depend on any pope's holiness, wisdom, or longevity, because the head is not dying of the stone in a sick room. He is risen.

Discuss: *Luther says the Church can exist very well without a human supreme head and would have fared better if the papacy had never been erected. That is not an anti-institutional claim in general; it is a claim about which function a human institution cannot perform. What are the contemporary equivalents of the papal claim: the institutions, offices, or authorities on which Christians today place the kind of dependence that belongs to Christ alone?*

The Everlasting Rock

Isaiah 26:4's declaration that the Lord God is an everlasting rock arrives in the middle of a passage that has watched human fortresses become heaps. The strong city's walls are brought down; the proud nation stumbles. Then, on the rubble, the confidence: trust in the Lord forever. Luther's devastation of the papal claim to Matthew 16's rock follows the same structure. The papacy claimed that the Church was built on the Roman see as its rock and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Luther's counter-argument is simple: if a human institution were the rock, it would have to be invincible, but popes sin, err, and die; therefore the gates of hell regularly overcome them. A human institution cannot be what Psalm 46 and Isaiah 26 describe.

The positive claim is the substance. The true rock is Christ, and the Church is the spiritual building of believers who rest on Him through faith. Earthly empires, human hierarchies, and the papal monarchy are all subject to the fate Isaiah describes for the strong city: they will become heaps. The kingdom of Christ is a spiritual fortress that stands not because of the virtue of its human officers but because its head is the everlasting rock. Psalm 46's therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way, is the confession of those who have understood what SA II.IV is defending: that their security rests on a rock that no pope, no emperor, no council, and no illness, not even the stone that was killing Luther when he wrote these words, can move.

Discuss: *Luther argues that the Church's security does not rest on any human officer's virtue but on the everlasting rock who is Christ. Psalm 46's therefore we will not fear applies to the specific situation of believers whose earthly ecclesiastical structures are fragile, corrupt, or hostile. How does a congregation that has absorbed SA II.IV's positive claim about Christ's headship relate to the structural decline, institutional failures, and external pressures it faces, in a way that is neither naive nor despairing?*

The Payoff

Luther finished the Smalcald Articles, recovered from his illness, and lived another nine years. The confession he had written for his grave became the testimony of a man who survived to see it distributed, debated, and eventually subscribed. Psalm 46's God is still our refuge and strength; Isaiah 26's everlasting rock is still the only foundation that does not become a heap. SA II.IV's insistence that the title of head of all Christendom belongs to Christ alone is not a historical position about sixteenth-century ecclesiastical politics; it is the pastoral assertion that the Church's security in every generation rests entirely on the One who was raised from the dead and who will not fail to be with His people until the end of the age.