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“Die Wittenbergisch nachtigal” (1523)

By HANS SACHS

This free rendition of the German original was prepared by Prof. Phil. J. Schroeder and presented here as a tribute to Dr. Theodore Hoyer, whose understanding of Reformation history is all but epitomized in this excerpt.

Awake, the day is drawing near!
In woodland thicket a voice I hear
Of winsome, happy, nightingale
On bluff and in the sunny vale.
The night moves to its occident,
The day dawns in the orient;
The low’ring clouds must soon give way
To leave their place to radiant day.
Obscured is now the moon’s pale light;
It is the planet of the night.

My bird so gay on lively pinion
Is Martin Luther, Augustinian.
’Tis he who called us out of night
Away from darkest lunar light.

This darkened light does represent
The sophists’ abstruse argument,
Four hundred years in every season
Its lodestar was but human reason,
Which led us ever more and more
From blessed Jesus’ Gospel lore.

Our blessed Martin did indict
The prelates for not living right;
Then, too, for us he did reveal
God’s Word which men tried to conceal.
In German tongue one hundred pieces
In four short years were press releases.

And briefly I will now explain
What this great corpus does contain:

Foremost the Prophets and the Law —
That is the morning-red we saw.
In this our Martin shows that all
Are heritors of Adam’s fall —
So full of evil, lust, and sin,
To keep God’s Law none can begin.
And e’en if outward show is good
The heart contains an evil brood.
And Moses, too, does this attest,
The heart makes evil all the rest;
Our Father looks upon the heart
And judgment o’er it does impart.
To God’s wrath all we subject be,
Condemned to all eternity.

If this truth shines in brightest light,
And sin and evil cause us fright;
And if to God we humbly pray
He sends the radiant light of day:
The Gospel of our Christ and Lord
Brings surcease in Redemption’s word.

Christ kept the Law by His own power,
Removed the curse and paid the dower,
Shook hell and won the devil’s game;
Consigned him to the searing flame.
Eternal life is thus our own
As blessed John has clearly shown.
Freedom’s banner is now unfurled:
The Lamb has borne the sins of the world.