

Hymns of the Faith: “Jesus Shall Reign”

Psalm 72

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith”....and here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond! This is Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas, for “Hymns of the Faith,” where we talk about the great hymns that have been passed down over the course of the past 2,000 years in the history of Christianity. A repository of the devotional treasures of the ages, that's what our hymnals are, and “Hymns of the Faith” explores some of the very best hymns from the English-speaking churches over the last not just 500 years, but really over the whole course of Christian history.

Today we have the privilege of looking at one of the really fine hymns based on Psalm 72 written by Isaac Watts, who was a real master of English hymnody. He has been called “the father of English hymnody.” He wrote at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the beginning of the 1700's, in Britain. The hymn that we're going to look at today, Derek and Bill, is *Jesus Shall Reign Wher'er the Sun*.

I was reading one of the entries, I think, in *Julian's Dictionary of Hymnology*, and he was saying that this hymn really gained popularity in the nineteenth century with the rise of the missions movement because, though it is a paraphrase of Psalm 72, it uses the name of Jesus and stresses the universal reign of Jesus Christ; and, consequently, it was very, very popular amongst those who were promoting the cause of missions — that is, sending people around the world to tell people about the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I think those of you who sing hymns in your churches will know this tune immediately. It's a very famous tune, DUKE STREET, and it might be good, Maestro, to play that for them. Bill, would you play DUKE STREET for them? [*Dr. Wymond plays.*] I love DUKE STREET! It's just a great sturdy tune. We use it for

lots of different songs, Bill, because it's in Long Meter, and so if we don't have a good tune for a good song that's in Long Meter sometimes we'll go and use DUKE STREET. Why is it so flexible? Why can we use it for so many different things?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think it is because of the meter, and there are so many texts that are set in this Long Meter, which I believe has eight metric feet, it's 8.8.8.8. But anyway, it's a very, very common meter used for hymn stanzas.

It's a very singable tune. It has a certain kind of energy to it. The tune is in some ways period dated. Hymns written during this period of time often started with a long note and ended with a long note in the phrase. This one has long pauses along the way [*plays*]...so you have those long notes there, and each of the phrases starts with a long note and ends with a long note. But there's a kind of a solid, sturdy feel to this tune that just sets the majesty of these words so well, I think. There's nothing unusual about the tune, nothing that's strange or difficult to catch, and so I have always liked this tune a lot for those reasons.

Dr. Thomas: In Britain this hymn would be sung to TRURO, and not DUKE STREET.

Dr. Wymond: Oh, really?

Dr. Thomas: Umhmm. And now I can't get DUKE STREET out of my head, to pick up TRURO again! I had it in my head a second ago.... [*Dr. Thomas and Dr. Wymond hum the tune.*]

Dr. Duncan: What do we sing TRURO to, Bill? There is a hymn that we regularly use TRURO to.

Dr. Thomas: Well, partly, TRURO is used because it is a well-known psalm tune in Scottish and Irish Presbyterianism, so because this is a Psalm it sort of has adopted that tune. But now here I've sort of got used to singing it to DUKE STREET.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, you were saying off-air that we don't know a lot about John Hatton, the composer of DUKE STREET. Did he work at a church on Duke Street, or do you know what the origin of the name DUKE STREET is?

Dr. Wymond: Well, actually he lived on a street named Duke Street in a town called Whittle. Derek, I don't want to put you on the spot, but....

Dr. Duncan: This is not Duke Street in London; this is Duke Street somewhere else...?

Dr. Wymond: In Lancaster....in England. And the only thing we know about this

man was that he lived on that street, that he died as a result of being thrown from a stage coach (even back in those days there were those traffic mishaps), and we know about the sermon that was preached for his funeral. That's all we know about John Hatton, but we're glad that he wrote the tune.

Dr. Duncan: Do we have any other hymns that he composed, or is that the only tune that we know of that Hatton composed?

Dr. Wymond: This is the only tune that we know of.

Dr. Duncan: Interesting. You know, musicians...I'm not saying that he was a professional musician, but musicians will write hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hymns, but only have one or two that will survive the time. That's a real lesson for today. I think when people try and overbalance the singing in their congregation of things that have been written in the last ten or fifteen or twenty or thirty years, they are delegating the congregation to a singing diet of stuff that's not going to last in the long run!

Dr. Wymond: I always make the argument that if you will sing the traditional hymns, you will have the very best of the tunes distilled over years and years and years. I think I have cited before the figure that there were about 80,000 tunes in American hymnals over the last several hundred years, and out of those we use four or five hundred tunes, at the most. So the very best have survived.

When we're using our contemporary tunes, which we certainly ought to do, because at one time all music was contemporary, but unfortunately, so much of it sounds alike to me, as it would in any period. All the tunes would sound alike. But every tune seems to start off about the same way, and they would be so easy to write today; I could write ten just standing here, in ten minutes, because they are so simple, and stylistically all the same.

Dr. Duncan: [*Laughs*] That's true! Derek, Isaac Watts is just an amazing influence on the writing of English hymnody. Tell our listening audience a little bit about Isaac Watts.

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course he grew up in the eighteenth century when writing poetry was perhaps more common than it appears to be today (although somebody might disagree with that statement). He was criticized by the literati for the "doggerel" (so called) of his poetry. But he's the father of English Non-conformity, so if you're not...

Dr. Duncan: ...and that means, by the way, for those who are not used to the parameters of the established church in Britain...if you're a Non-conformist in England, what does that mean?

Dr. Thomas: It means, basically, that you're an independent as far as church

government is concerned.

Dr. Duncan: Let's take them back on that, because they may not even know what an independent is. In England, there's an official state church even to this day...

Dr. Thomas: The Church of England.

Dr. Duncan: ...and that's the way it was in Isaac Watts' time.

Dr. Thomas: I should say "the Church of England and Wales"...and although in England, of course, there never has been really a Presbyterian church, so that wasn't an alternative in England; and the alternative then would be a form of congregationalism — churches in which the rule of authority lies within the local church, basically. And they may meet together for fellowship and maybe to agree on certain issues, but not as far as the government of the local church.

Dr. Duncan: And so, sometime in the late 1600's, all ministers that were not in the Church of England or were not in accord with certain practices in the Church of England were ejected from the established Church of England, and those became known as the Non-conformists.

Dr. Thomas: Right. But...in one sense, anyone who isn't Church of England is Non-conformist...Congregationalists...

Dr. Duncan: Yes, the stray Presbyterian, etcetera. Everybody's a Non-conformist. But typically, Non-conformists were sort of congregational independents? Is that how that worked?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, stressing very much the economy of the local church. And Isaac Watts was actually offered...he was a brilliant young man, and he was actually offered money to help him towards education, so long as he took holy orders and was ordained in the Church of England. And of course he refused...

Dr. Duncan: Right. And one of the reasons was that to be a Member of Parliament in Britain or to attend Oxford or Cambridge, the two agent universities, you had to be a member of the Church of England.

Dr. Thomas: ...and to have voting rights, at one time.

Dr. Duncan: That's true, until 1832, yes.

Dr. Thomas: ...and so it was a pretty significant step not to be a member of the Church of England, certainly in terms of your social standing.

Watts had a parish church. He grew up in Southampton, which is on the

southernmost coast of England (from Southampton, you can see France on a good day, across the English Channel) and had a parish. He was a minister in an independent church for a while. His health was never good. There's a story about him becoming ill and going to recuperate at somebody's house. He was going to stay there for a few weeks, and it ended up being 35 years or so. He's most well known today because of what he did for the Psalms.

And it's interesting from a theological point of view — you know we have to keep reminding ourselves that until 200 years ago, the church only sang the Psalms, plus perhaps the *Lord's Prayer*, the *Magnificat*, or the *Benedictus*, or the *Te Deum*, or a few other things. But basically the hymn book of the church, both Catholic and after the Reformation, the Protestant Church, was the Psalms. I think it's important to keep emphasizing the need for singing the Psalms inclusively, rather than exclusively.

Dr. Duncan: But Watts thought that the poetry of the psalters of his day was really, really bad! That was one of his motivations, right?

Dr. Thomas: One of his motivations, but another motivation — which is a fascinating issue for me — is that if you just sing the Psalms of David as they were written, they speak in prophetic terms about Christ, but they are still part of an Old Testament canon. So Isaac Watts “Christianizes” the Psalms; so instead of speaking in metaphor about the coming of Jesus, as in this Psalm, “Jesus shall reign where'er the sun,” but it's actually Psalm 72.

Dr. Duncan: And it's a Psalm that David has written pertaining to the reign of his son, Solomon, and yet it's messianic. It points forward to the reign of Christ, and so instead of simply leaving it in those Old Testament messianic prophetic terms, Watts puts Jesus right in the center of the Psalm.

Dr. Thomas: And it raises...for those with theological acumen, it raises a very important issue that we discuss hot and heavy today about Christ-centered interpretation of the Old Testament. To what extent can you read Christ into the Old Testament? And if you believe that the Old Testament is basically a book about Christ, then to what extent does the New Testament go back and reinterpret the Old Testament? And that's a bigger question than it may sound, with a wide range of possible answers, even among our own community. But for Watts, I personally think that what he did was quite amazing in introducing us to an interpretation of the Psalms that puts them squarely, as it were, on the other side of Pentecost.

Dr. Duncan: We sing a bunch of his Psalm paraphrases: *Joy to the World* is probably the Psalm paraphrase by Isaac Watts that's better known maybe than any other Psalm paraphrase, partly because we sing it at Christmastime. It's not just an advent hymn; it's a hymn that speaks of both the first and the second coming of Christ, but it's sung so often at Christmastime that people sing it. They

may not know that they're singing a Watts song; they may not know that they're singing something that wasn't originally intended to be a Christmas carol; and, they may not know that they're singing a Psalm paraphrase; but, they're doing all those three things at the same time when they sing *Joy to the World*. So that's one of his Psalm paraphrases. And there again, you know, he works Jesus into the warp and the woof of that song, whereas messianically Jesus is there in Psalm 98, but, boy! he puts it very explicitly!

Dr. Thomas: Now our brothers and sisters who are exclusive Psalm-singers, then and now, are fairly critical of what Isaac Watts did. And he was severely criticized at the time for "tampering with the word of God," as they saw it.

Dr. Duncan: You know, as best I can tell, the division in American Presbyterianism in the early 1700's was not only over revival — the old-side/new-side division that occurred in the days of Jonathan Edwards — it was not only over revival, it was over whether you could sing Watts' paraphrases in worship, or whether you could only sing the old Scottish metrical psalms.

Dr. Thomas: And just for completeness and fullness here, exclusive Psalm-singers have actually gone to the extent of criticizing Watts' theology, and his theology about Christ. I've never bought that. I think that's unfair.

Dr. Duncan: They do the same with Doddridge, don't they?

Dr. Thomas: Some of our dear friends have actually done that.

Dr. Duncan: That's true.

Dr. Wymond: But what I think is interesting about what happened in this controversy and the mechanism of these paraphrases is that they were the bridge for many people moving to singing hymns, not just singing these paraphrases. But so many of the Presbyterian churches that would only sing the Psalms, then did these, and then they moved into singing other hymns. And it's interesting to see how when hymnody changes, it happens sometimes in meetings or places outside of the congregational formal worship and then is brought into the worship, with so many of the instances of their being sung informally in homes, or in informal meetings rather than in church, or later on in Sunday School first, and then they were so popular that they were incorporated into the worship itself.

Dr. Thomas: There are a couple of verses of this hymn, *Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun* (doth its successive journey's run) that don't appear now, and when I read them it's obvious why they don't appear:

"Behold the islands with their kings..."

[He's giving a rendition of the original Psalms]

“And the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
Shall bring presents...”

[And he paraphrases that...]

Behold the islands with their kings,
And Europe their best tribute brings;
From north to south, the princes meet
To pay their homage at His feet.

There, Persia, glorious to behold;
There, India shines in Eastern gold,
And barbarous nations at His word
Submit and bow, and own their Lord.

Dr. Duncan: And I might add, this is a hundred years before the Empire and all its glory, but you can also...I'll bet they didn't leave that one out of the English hymnals in the late nineteenth century, Derek! [*Laughs*]

Dr. Thomas: They did not! A fascinating verse actually recalls Milton's *Paradise Lost* with its portrayal of the fall:

“Where He displays His healing power,
Death and the curse are known no more.
In Him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost.”

Now there have been reams of discussion on that statement, that Milton-esque statement that more blessings are gained as a result of the fall than would have been the case had there been no fall. Augustine's *o felix culpa* “happy fall” that lies behind it...one could talk forever about that!

Dr. Wymond: Or in your “Lessons and Carols Service” that is sung from King's College, that

carol based on this, that if the fall had not happened, Mary would not be queen of heaven, it says, I remember. That's why I can't do that song!

I do think, just in passing, how the verse that talks mainly about missionaries going from Europe to other places, what a reversal now today when we have Korea and other Eastern countries sending missionaries to Europe.

Dr. Thomas: It is an ideal psalm-hymn to sing at a time when one is commissioning missionaries, or one has Missions Sunday, for example. It's an

ideal song to sing. I'm intrigued, Ligon, because obviously post-millennialists love this Psalm and this hymn, because it seems to imply a state of affairs in which the gospel is reigning and ruling throughout the world, in one sense.

Dr. Wymond: And post-millennialism...?

Dr. Thomas: ...is the view that before Jesus comes back, the world will be Christianized.

Dr. Duncan: So the gospel will be totally successful, or comprehensively successful in the world before the return of Christ, and so there's an optimism about the progress of the gospel, which of course was very typical in nineteenth century as the gospel was spreading, as it perhaps had never spread before.

Dr. Thomas: Right, and I think the empire mentality added a little to that. And I think those of us who are not post-millennial [and I can hear folks switching off their radio sets just as I say that!] [*laughter*] probably want to interpret *Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun ...*

“Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.”

Perhaps as inclusive of the new heavens and new earth, a redeemed cosmos then...

Dr. Duncan: The five stanzas that remain in our hymnal out of the original eight stanzas are really solid gold. Just like the tunes...just like there's a sort of culling of the tunes of hymns over the course of the years to where you're down just to the cream of the crop being used, the same thing happens to the texts. Some of these great hymns will have eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, fifteen stanzas, but by the time they've been sung for a hundred or three hundred years, there's a culling down to just the cream. And the five stanzas of this hymn are just solid gold:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

To Him shall endless prayer be made,
And praises throng to crown His head;
His name, like sweet perfume, shall rise
With every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue

Dwell on His love with sweetest song;
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on His name.

Blessings abound where'er He reigns;
The pris'ner leaps to lose his chains,
The weary find eternal rest,
And all the sons of want are blest.

Let every creature rise and bring
Peculiar honors to our King;
Angels descend with songs again,
And earth repeat the loud amen!

We need to hear this song, don't we, Bill?

Dr. Wymond: Dr. Duncan, Ben Roberson will sing for us *Jesus Shall Reign*.

[Hymn is sung by Ben Roberson.]

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