

## Hymns of the Faith: “Fairest Lord Jesus”

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. Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan with Derek Thomas, and we are here together, the three of us, for “Hymns of the Faith,” and looking forward to discussing a very, very favorite hymn of many people.

*Fairest Lord Jesus* is a tune that I can remember singing as a child in Sunday School, certainly in summer Vacation Bible School, and can recall singing at various stages all my life. I know it was a favorite hymn of many people in my parents' generation.

There's an interesting story behind the discovery of this hymn and its growing popularity, and we want to give you a little bit of background on it because it's a little bit mysterious. We don't know who wrote the text of the hymn; we don't know how long exactly it's been in currency. It seems to be a folk song that was used in various forms in different places in Germany — Silesia and Westphalia and such. We'll give you a little background on that, but most of you, I think, when I say the name *Fairest Lord Jesus* will already have the tune in your ear or in your mind. But, Bill Wymond, maybe you'd be willing to play that tune just to remind folks if they don't know the tune of *Fairest Lord Jesus*. [Dr. Wymond plays.]

Bill, you were remarking off the air that the tune and the arrangement are very romantic, and they are. It also reminds me of *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*. It has that exuberant, passionate German romantic kind of feel to it as a tune, and very suitable for passionate devotional expression of love and worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. And of course that's what the text is about in the English translation that we have before us.

Albert Edwards Bailey, the famous hymnologist, says about this hymn that a good deal of mythology has grown up around it. No one knows who translated it

into English. One stanza did not appear in German until 1842, while other stanzas of that version differ markedly from the original text which appeared first in 1677. So he gets it all the way back to the seventeenth century, and he argues against this being used by either the Crusaders (even though the hymn name has been called CRUSADER'S HYMN ), and he also disputes whether it was used by German pilgrims as well. But, Derek, I know that another German hymnologist gives a good deal more information about the background to the tune and its discovery, so maybe you would be willing to share with us a little about that.

**Dr. Thomas:** This is not a hymn that's very well known in Britain at all. Of course these days with the advent of the use of American hymn texts and hymnbooks, and internet and so on, it's certainly known. But it certainly wasn't a hymn that I remember singing. It's not one we sang in our school hymnbooks, and I think it wasn't until I got hold of *The Trinity Hymnal* back in the 1980's that I came across this hymn—which is surprising, I'm sure, to American listeners that such a well known hymn would be almost unknown.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, it was introduced into American hymnals in the mid-nineteenth century and it caught on. And you can tell, with the sort of romantic sound of the tune, that it would have clicked with Victorians, although it's interesting that it would not have made itself into circulation into Britain in the same time, because I would have thought that there would have been a similar kind of appreciation from Victorians. But anyway, I interrupt. Go ahead and tell us more about it.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, according to McCutchan<sup>1</sup> the popularity of this hymn and the tune, the marriage of the hymn and the tune, dates from 1850, when Richard Storrs Willis includes it in church chorales and choir studies — sounds like a wonderful read (but Bill Wymond I'm sure will tell us more about that, because there's a fascinating account in McCutchan which only a musician could properly understand, I think, of the possible source of this tune). It's just a beautiful tune, and so married now to these words, that there are some possible roots for this tune going back possibly to the seventeenth century, and possibly even before that. I was fascinated to learn that Franz Liszt seems to have utilized something similar to this tune in *The Legend of St. Elizabeth*, which he finished in 1862. But then there's a little account... "an unexpected treasure was discovered in 1850 in the guise of a Crusader's hymn." Now you've already discounted the possibility that this was a Crusader tune. It was found in the Westphalia amid a number of other curious relics, and according to the traditional text by which it was accompanied, this hymn used to be sung by the German pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. And you and I were talking earlier how Germans certainly like the thought of pilgrimages to Jerusalem — the pietistic strand in German Christianity. And it may, therefore, be regarded as a national air of that time. But Bill Wymond, I think, has some opinions about possibly this tune. I just think it's a perfect tune.

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<sup>1</sup> *Our Hymnody, a Manual of the Methodist Hymnal*, by McCutchan, Robert Guy. The Methodist Book Concern, New York, Cincinnati, 1937.

It's hard to imagine that the tune wasn't actually composed for these words.

**Dr. Wymond:** Isn't it fascinating to think about folk song tunes? We have this whole genre of American Negro spirituals which has so enriched our music, and I have always wondered, well, who was the first person to make up that tune? The legend — or the lore — is that they were sung as people were chopping cotton, working out in the fields. And so one doesn't know, but somehow these things get spread as one worker goes from one farm to the other. And so it must have been with this particular tune. Someone at some point made this up, but nobody knows who did. And there was a search that some musicologists made, and they were looking at various hymn tunes that they thought might be the origin of this and none of them passed the test, because they all started out alike, but then as you got farther into the melody it varied so much that you couldn't say this was the first version of this tune. I know that's not that interesting to you, but nevertheless the search was on.

But nobody really knows where this came from. But it does not sound like a Middle Ages tune to me — something that would have been sung while the Crusades were at their height. It does sound more like an eighteenth century or a nineteenth century folk tune to me. It has such simplicity about it, for one thing, and it has kind of an easy elegance about it which doesn't sound like the more forceful tunes of the 1600's or even the early 1700's. So that's why I think that it's a late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century tune.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill, you were talking about how we have come to be the inheritors of some of those Negro spirituals here in the United States that would have been used in the fields in the 1700's and in the 1800's, and presumably one reason that we have a lot of that material at our disposal today is that musicologists or people that were interested in tunes went out and recorded those, wrote them down. And there's an interesting story similar to that connected to this tune. Apparently a musicologist wanted to hear some of the folk songs in an area, and he and a friend went out and started trying to sort of record tunes and such. Tell us a little bit about that.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, there were two German musicologists, Dr. Hoffman (Heinrich August Hoffman von Fallersleben) was one of them, and the other was Ernst Friedrich Richter, and they were walking through the countryside in Silesia, which was a part of the German east border. And it was in the summer, they say, of about 1836, and toward the evening time they heard the people who were in the fields, who were called haywardens, singing this tune. And so they went over and asked those folks about that tune, and they divided up the responsibility of preserving it. One of them wrote down the tune as he heard it, and the other wrote down the text. So this may be the way that this eventually got into the hymnals and also into Franz Liszt's compositions somehow.

**Dr. Duncan:** Would you play the tune that they list there as what they heard?

The haywardens singing? Because as you said, as the musicologists searched for the origin they got all sorts of tunes that were similar to the tune as we know it today, but not quite the same. And this one was not quite the same, I think!

**Dr. Wymond:** It varies a little bit toward the end. I'll do just the tune. [Plays.] Here's where it varies...then the tune stays the same as we know it...then it changes in time.

**Dr. Duncan:** Wow! That's pretty close.

**Dr. Wymond:** Yes, that one is close. But other tunes that people looked at really had a...let me just play another one. [Plays.] And so on like that...

**Dr. Duncan:** Right; and it veers off, yes.

**Dr. Wymond:** So anyway that was not the origin. I have an idea that most of the people who wrote these tunes must have heard this folk song at some point, and we're all influenced by it. So they started off, anyway.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, this was presumably...even amongst trained musicians it was common to borrow tunes. You would hear something in another great composer that he had written thirty years before, and you would borrow that tune and stick it somewhere in the middle of your composition.

**Dr. Wymond:** Absolutely! Bach did that all of the time. He borrowed from Italian and French composers...he borrowed from himself a lot of the time! So everybody understood that it was okay to echo these things. In our time we've gotten much more careful about copyright, and so you couldn't do that without giving some credit if you borrowed a good bit. But it's a wonderful tradition.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, and even today with copyright you have musicians that do what they call "sampling," where they'll literally pull things out, and they'll have to give credit to where they pulled it from. But they will pull things out of other compositions and plop it right in the middle of their own.

The text of this hymn is a very devotional text focused on Jesus Christ: "Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature, Son of God and Son of Man!" And so there's an immediate identification of Jesus Christ as being fair—and by the way, that is going to be a key to the whole text. It's an acknowledgement that Jesus is more precious, more beautiful, more glorious than anything else in the world. It's an ascription of primacy to Jesus Christ above everything in terms of value. It's not unlike the text from Philippians 3:1-11, in which the Apostle Paul says that he counts everything else rubbish in comparison to the greatness of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of His resurrection. And this devotional hymn is all focused on the glory of Jesus Christ, and how much more precious He is than anything else.

But there's an acknowledgement that He's the ruler of all nations, so it's an acknowledgement of His sovereign rule over the world, and that He's Son of God and Son of man. Which goes right back to the earliest confessions of the church: that Jesus was fully human and fully divine.

And then it expresses the love of the hymn singer to Christ: "Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor, Thou my soul's glory, joy, and crown." And, Derek, I can't hear words like that now without thinking of our friend John Piper, who is all about this. You know, it's all about desiring Christ in all His glory, and valuing Christ more than anything else in the world. And I would think that this would be a text that John would like a lot, because it's all about valuing Christ more than anything, however glorious the other things might be.

**Dr. Thomas:** I've always thought of this hymn as a children's hymn, maybe because the language and poetry is so simple; and perhaps also we tend to associate poetry about nature — meadows and sunshine, and twinkling stars and so on - as being more for children. Although of course the Psalms often reflect on creation. I was trying to work out in my head as you were talking why I'd not ever considered this to be one of the great hymns. I mean, it's a beautiful hymn. And I tend to think that the marriage of the hymn to this very singable and memorable tune gives the poetry greater weight that perhaps it otherwise would have got.

**Dr. Wymond:** Also, Derek, I think it's because we associate this song with our school experience. A lot of us sang this song in school. It's been a favorite song in American folk song singing, because it was considered almost a folk song, and some famous choirs have sung this particular song as one of their theme songs. I think the St. Olaf Choir, for instance, under Christiansen, has used this. And so we have emotional associations with it.

**Dr. Thomas:** I think this is a great "second hymn"! Now let me explain. If you had a service with four hymns — and not every service has four hymns — but if a service has four hymns, I think it's good to have the opening one to God the Father, and the second one to the Lord Jesus, and the third one to the Holy Spirit. And I think this one is a good second hymn devoted to Christ and devoted to an experiential emphasis. Because there's a pietism in the proper sense of the word that comes across.

**Dr. Wymond:** Now, Derek, you have touched one of my favorite theme songs! First of all, I like the fact that a congregation sings a lot of hymns. I think that's their main way of responding, and so I'm always glad when we have time to have four hymns in a service here. And I do think that there is a progression of the spirit and the attitude that you bring to worship, and I think that the worship ought to start on a high note. It ought to end on a high note, but as we think about the pilgrims making their ascent to the temple in Jerusalem, they'd sing these wonderful elevated songs of praise. And even in the synagogue worship, the

worship began with Psalms of praise. And I think that helps to direct the heart and the mind of the congregation the right way: not being so meditative, but rather being exultant as the worship begins. So I agree: this is a good second hymn.

**Dr. Duncan:** The text continues, and says, “Fair are the meadows, fair are the woodlands, robed in the blooming garb of spring: Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer, who makes the woeful heart to sing.” I think it's these two stanzas, Derek, that probably bring to your mind the relative lightness of the text in comparison to other hymns that we've studied on this program, in terms of there's not a lot of deep theological reflection going on in those lines, although there is a comparison of the glories of nature to the glory of Christ, and nature pales in comparison, which is itself a substantive theological thought. And probably the more beautiful the nature that you're seeing — and the German mountains and the German countryside can provide some absolutely breathtaking displays of natural glory...

**Dr. Thomas:** I was thinking of it in terms of where we are here in Jackson, Mississippi, and spring last week, at most! And it's this week with the pollen...

**Dr. Duncan:** [Laughs] When the Bradford pears are blooming, I think is my favorite time in Jackson.

**Dr. Thomas:** It's about a week, or two weeks at maximum. But I have this memory — and I would have been under seven, so five or six years old — growing up on a different farm from where I was a teenager, walking into a forest that was behind the farm. It must have been spring time and the entire floor of the forest — it wasn't a dense forest; there was plenty of sunlight that came down into the forest, so the floor was just a carpet of bluebells. I have that picture in my head that's, you know 45+ years ago now...and this line, “Robed in the blooming garb of spring,” which brings that to mind. But I'm not sure...if you don't have a spring, I'm not sure... you'd have to explain, perhaps, that a little!

But I was listening over the weekend to a friend of ours, Sinclair Ferguson, say something about Spurgeon. And what he said about Spurgeon was that... He was being a little critical of Spurgeon's exegetical prowess in preaching, but he said the thing he liked about Spurgeon was his instinct to see Jesus in the text. And I think that this hymn — I thought about it several hours afterwards — that we can never assume, not just about ourselves in preaching, but about the congregation in its worship — we can never assume that it can see Jesus in the worship. And I think that this hymn brings that right up front, the instinct to see Jesus.

**Dr. Duncan:** And it continues on in the same way in the third stanza, and then concludes with “Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations! Son of God and Son of Man!” [so there's a repetition of the ascription of full humanity and full deity and

His lordship over the nations] “Glory and honor, praise, adoration, now and forevermore be Thine.” And so the whole hymn is taken up with the soul's contemplation of the beauty and the glory and the honor and the dominion of Jesus Christ, and ascribing that to Him. And though that is very appropriate to children, and though the language of the English translation is simple and flowery, there really is some substance to that for the soul to chew on. And that's something that we could do well with more of, really reckoning with the fact that the most beautiful things that we see in this world, the most precious things that this world has to offer, are not as glorious as the Lord Jesus Christ. And having the soul really rest in deep satisfaction in the person and work of Christ.

Now one thing that's not talked about a lot in the hymn is the work of Christ. There's a focus on His person. And I'm not sure of the origin — I notice that one of the hymnologists puts the tune origin in lyrics from Roman Catholic sources. Now I don't have enough information on that to follow up on, although I'm a little surprised, given that this appears, Bill, in the *Munster Gesangbuch*, which presumably means it will be the Protestant City Church in Munster in 1677. I'd be a little surprised for them to have a tune — or a song, a lyric — from Roman Catholic sources there. I just don't know enough about it to follow up on.

**Dr. Thomas:** It's a bit like *Silent Night*. Great, phenomenal tune...words are okay, but it needs something in addition. This text needs an addition. If we sing this, we need a gospel focus text to it.

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes.

**Dr. Wymond:** I must tell you that I had a dear friend here in Jackson for many years who was the organist at the First Baptist Church. Her name was Hazel Chisholm, and she was just a legend in this part because she had a phenomenal ear, played most everything by ear because she just remembered all of the music. And she was there up into her seventies...retired, and lived to be about 96 years old, and was buried in her home town, which is Summit, Mississippi. And so a few years back I was driving by Summit, so I thought I would just stop by and see if I could find her grave in the city cemetery. And sure enough, it was there and I saw it, and over the grave were these words: “Fairest Lord Jesus, my soul's glory, joy, and crown.”

Why don't we listen to this hymn now?

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,  
Son of God and Son of Man!  
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor,  
Thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown.

Fair are the meadows, fair are the woodlands,  
Robed in the blooming garb of spring:

Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,  
Who makes the woeful heart to sing.

Fair is the sunshine, fair is the moonlight,  
And all the twinkling, starry host:  
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer  
Than all the angels heaven can boast.

Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations!  
Son of God and Son of Man!  
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,  
Now and forevermore be Thine.

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