

## Hymns of the Faith: "From All That Dwell Below the Skies"

Psalm 117

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 now here with "Hymns of the Faith" is Dr. Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill Wymond. We are here again for "Hymns of the Faith" as Bill, Derek and I take a look at some of the best hymns handed down to us over the course of two millennia of Christian history, and today we are coming to a Psalm. This is a Psalm paraphrase, the text of which was composed by Isaac Watts, who was really one of the profound influences on English hymnody down to this very day. He wrote hymns in a day when most of the English churches were simply using Psalms, and he paraphrased a lot of the Psalms, Christianizing them, and wrote a lot of famous hymn texts that we use to this day. And we're going to be looking at his paraphrase of Psalm 117, *From All That Dwell Below the Skies*, today.

Before we start out, Bill Wymond, why don't you share with us the tune of DUKE STREET, and then, Derek, I'm going to ask you to tell us a little bit about Isaac Watts.

**Dr. Wymond:** [*Plays hymn.*]

**Dr. Duncan:** Now a lot of you will recognize that tune as the tune to which you sing *Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun*. It's really a versatile tune that's used for a lot of different songs in our hymnal, and I want to get Bill to comment on that in just a few minutes. But, Derek, tell us about this amazing person, Isaac Watts.

**Dr. Thomas:** Isaac Watts and John Newton are probably two of the greatest English hymnologists...hymn writers. He was born in 1674, which is about the time when Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was published. Born in Southampton, which is on the south coast of England (you could sail from Southampton to

France, for example), his father owned a boarding house there, and suffered imprisonment for probably the same reasons as Bunyan himself suffered imprisonment in the middle of the seventeenth century. He was offered an education in Oxford or Cambridge to pursue ordination, but in order to do that he would have to avow the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church.

**Dr. Duncan:** Until 1832, you couldn't go to Oxford or Cambridge if you were not an Anglican — that is, a member of the Church of England — and so this was a really big deal.

**Dr. Thomas:** And Isaac Watts to this day is the hero figure... I don't mean that in a bad way, but he is the hero figure of the independence of folk like Congregationalists and to some extent Presbyterians, but especially Congregationalists in England. And if you were to go today to an independent church, an independent Reformed, Calvinistic church, for example, then Isaac Watts is going to be the man they're going to look to.

He became a tutor, as many of them did, for six years to the family of Sir John Hartopp, and then in 1702 he became a minister, a pastor, of a fairly distinguished independent congregation in Mark Lane in London, which is in the east end of London. Then his health begins to deteriorate, and he lives for the next 36 years presumably under the employment of this family. But he basically composes hymns...and perhaps does some tutoring, but he has an assistant in the church who seemingly more or less took over most of the duties in the church.

And Isaac Watts wrote 600 hymns that we know of. Some of the most famous ones — *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, of course...*Join All the Glorious Names; Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun; Come, We That Love the Lord; Before Jehovah's Awful Throne*; and this one, which is a paraphrase of Psalm 117. We'll talk about the whole business of paraphrasing the Psalms and of Christianizing the Psalms, which is what we associate with Isaac Watts especially

But he also paraphrased other portions of Scripture. Now we don't do that here ("here" meaning First Presbyterian Church in Jackson), but in the Church of Scotland, for example, in their Psalter, which would contain the 150 Psalms, some of them in two different versions, there would also be a section of so-called "Paraphrases of Scripture", which I love. I miss singing those glorious paraphrases...paraphrases of well-known passages of Scripture.

**Dr. Duncan:** One of the most famous is the Church of Scotland Psalter's paraphrase of Romans 8, *The Savior Died and Rose Again, Triumphant from the Grave*. And that's just a tremendous paraphrase!

**Dr. Thomas:** And perhaps *I'm Not Ashamed to Own My Lord*, a paraphrase

of...Romans 1? "I'm not ashamed of the gospel..." is that what it is? I'm speaking off the top of my head now, but I'm pretty sure that's what it is. And what is sometimes criticized by a friend of ours [*Dr. Duncan laughs*] for some aspect of his understanding of the person of Christ, and it's a very abstruse sort of criticism that's far too deep to go into in this program, and I'm not sure about that criticism.

I've never seen that in any of his hymns, to be honest. Now in addition to writing hymns, Watts wrote some hugely important theological texts (and non-theological texts). He wrote a book on logic which was used in Oxford — even though he never went to Oxford. It was used in Oxford for about a hundred years, two or three generations of students at Oxford read Isaac Watts' *Logic* as part of undergraduate studies. Oh, for those days again!

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes! Bill, this tune, DUKE STREET, we sing it to lots of different things. It's in Long Meter. Tell us a little bit about it.

**Dr. Wymond:** The tune really is a simple tune, and I think it's one of my favorite tunes. It just works so well because it doesn't get in the way. It is a joyful tune. Usually we do it faster. We do it about... [*plays*]. So it just kind of gently glides up and down the scale and provides a good vehicle for doing a text like this one — a joyful, exultant kind of text.

And as far as the origin of it is concerned, we know that a man named John Hatton wrote this somewhere around the end of the eighteenth century. John Hatton is one of those interesting fellows who wrote one tune that is known, and they don't find any other tunes from him — or at least none that is used now.

He lived on Duke Street in a small English village, and so the tune name is DUKE STREET. And, just reminding all of us that these tunes that we use actually have independent names themselves. This hymn is not *From All That Dwell Below the Skies*. This tune is DUKE STREET.

We were talking just recently about that phenomenon, that it has usually an association with the place where the person is, or some biblical allusion, or something like that for the tune name. But John Hatton, it is said, met his Maker as a result of a stagecoach accident, and we're thankful to him for giving us this tune.

**Dr. Duncan:** Two things: one, doesn't that remind you that when you hear of someone like this...apparently their sole legacy to the church is one tune...you don't know whether... "Well, Lord, You may have me here to do one thing! If that's what You've got me for, that's great!" It's just a reminder to all of us that you never know what the Lord has in store for you in your life.

**Dr. Thomas:** I often think of that when I read Haggai. The entire prophecy of Haggai takes place in four months. That's all we know about Haggai, four months

of his life. And God raised him up for that.

**Dr. Duncan:** And the whole prophecy can be written out in about two pages of Times New Roman 12-point type, front and back.

**Dr. Wymond:** So here's John Hatton, who wrote this one tune that has benefited the worldwide church, and he's known in heaven now!

**Dr. Duncan:** We use it multiple times a year at First Pres, because it's serviceable. It works with a bunch of different texts well.

Now, Bill, the second thing I was going to say is, it's Long Meter. Tell us what that means. We talked a little about this a couple of weeks ago, but I thought that it would be helpful to address the "L.M." mark that ministers may be scratching their heads about at the bottom right corner of their hymn text.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, we have to have the hymns in meter so that we can sing them to tune. They have to be predictable, regular beats (or feet) to the poetry, and Long Meter means that we just have four lines that have equal meter. All of the lines are eight beats, or eight feet: "From-all-that-dwell-be-low-the-skies"...that should come out to eight. So it's 8-8-8-8.

**Dr. Duncan:** And by the way, those "feet" that Bill Wymond was referring to work out in syllables in the text, so "From-all-that-dwell-be-low-the-skies" is broken out into the first line of that Long Meter. And then, "Let-the-Cre-a-tor's-praise-a-rise."

So if you're trying to figure it out, you can count out the sung syllables of each of the lines in the verse, and it will let you know. You can count that out and you can actually arrive at whatever the meter is. And the Long Meter form has a specific number of feet, or syllables, per sung line. I guess the most common are C.M. [Common Meter], and then L.M., and then what would be after that? Would Short Meter be...?

**Dr. Wymond:** Short Meter is probably the least common of the common! And it's 6-6-8-6.

**Dr. Thomas:** In the days when we had one very competent musician in the church in Ireland (and one, well, not so competent musician) in the church, and I was the one who would choose the hymns, if I chose one with a Long Meter I would always say, "Sing this to DUKE STREET." *[All laugh]*

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, there's a very convenient index in the back of hymnals, the Metrical Index, that shows you the meter of all hymns. And you can just find a similar meter for a set of words to an unfamiliar tune that you want to use, and then you can use the familiar tune to help people to enjoy a new set of words.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill, there's an interesting musical part in the middle of this relatively simple tune that gets a little more complex, and it's where in the first stanza you sing "Let the Redeemer's name be sung." It goes up, and it comes back down. What's going on there in that tune text?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, I think it's a musical flourish, because you've had a lot of slow notes coming just before [plays], so that line has been going, and then [plays] so when you come to the line about the Redeemer's name then it sort of takes off and has a flourish there.

**Dr. Thomas:** But the interval between the notes is a small interval, so it's not difficult to sing...going up four or five notes.

**Dr. Wymond:** Very predictable. You're just going right up the scale, one of the commonest progressions, so it's easy for folks.

I must say something about Isaac Watts, because he was sort of the *bkte noire* for some people who wanted only to sing the pure Psalms, and he was seen as an interloper to some who were thinking that he was trying to get people to sing hymns, who didn't really want to sing hymns. And so what made hymns ultimately acceptable in many churches were these paraphrases of the Psalms and of the Scriptures. They first sang Psalms, then they would sing the paraphrases, and they said, "Oh, well, why not sing hymns?" In fact, some of the hymns we sing are really Psalm paraphrases and we don't even know it...like *Joy to the World* is from Isaac Watts, and I think that's Psalm 90. So we think of them as hymns, not Psalm paraphrases.

**Dr. Duncan:** And, you know, I have great regard for our Psalm-singing friends, but I do think when you look at even the paraphrases of the Psalms, in order to get the Psalms into workable metrical paraphrases that will work with these kinds of meters that we've been talking about, sometimes you have to be so inventive with your English versification that you're pretty close to a paraphrase already, and so people that get all bent out of shape that you can only sing out of *The Scottish Psalter of 1650*, and say that Isaac Watts is an interloper... I mean, I just want to say, "Brothers, let's lay this text side by side and see."

For instance, let me show you what he's done with this. This is a Psalm paraphrase of Psalm 117. Here's Psalm 117. It's a very short Psalm, two verses:

"Praise the Lord, all nations! Laud Him, all peoples!  
For His lovingkindness is great toward us,  
And the truth of the Lord is everlasting.  
Praise the Lord!"

Now there's the Psalm. Now here's what Watts does with it:

“From all that dwell below the skies  
Let the Creator's praise arise;”

Now he's just said “Praise the Lord, all nations.” But he's just said it very elegantly and paraphrastically. And then,

“Let the Redeemer's name be sung  
Through every land, by every tongue.” — [“Laud Him, all peoples.”]

Now he's introduced the idea of Redeemer there. Derek, we'll come back to, because there's his Christianizing of the Psalm, although the God of the Old Testament was Redeemer as well. But this is part of Watts' Christianizing of the Psalm, and this was one of the controversial things in Psalm-singing circles, to introduce the name of Christ, or to mention the Redeemer specifically or the Messiah by name in the Psalms.

“In every land begin the song:  
to every land the strains belong.  
In cheerful sound all voices raise  
And fill the world with joyful praise.”

So he's basically gone back again to “Praise the Lord, all nations! Laud Him, all peoples!” and he's said it in another way.

Then,

“Eternal are Your mercies, Lord;  
Eternal truth attends Your word.  
Your praise shall sound from shore to shore  
Till suns shall rise and set no more.”

There he's picked up again the content of the second verse of that very short Psalm. So it is poetic, and it is elaborative, and it is a paraphrase, but it's actually pretty faithful to the content of the passage. So that gives you a feel for a paraphrase as opposed to a metrical English rendering. I wish I had one of the metrical versions of this Psalm in front of me so that I could describe what it would have sounded like out of one of the old Psalter hymnals, but perhaps sometime I can do that.

Let's talk about the Christianizing of the Psalms, though, that Watts does. What are the ways that Watts "Christianizes" Psalms?

**Dr. Thomas:** I think it's probably difficult for most of our listeners who are not in the exclusive Psalm tradition to appreciate just the extent to which this was a controversy.

**Dr. Duncan:** It split churches.

**Dr. Thomas:** Oh, yes! And I have to put all my cards on the table now: my own son-in-law and daughter, of course, are exclusive Psalm-singers—at least they belong to a church where there is exclusive Psalm-singing...unaccompanied Psalm-singing. And if you've never experienced that, it is quote phenomenal to hear a congregation sing unaccompanied Psalms. I've heard it done badly, but I've heard it done extremely well. They will take your breath away, especially when the congregation is musical and can sing all four parts. That is....

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, the other thing about that is that when you hear that, one of the nice things about it is you are hearing what it would have sounded like for most Christians over 1850 years to have sung in worship, because that's how worship would have been done in most churches in the world, up until about 1850. There would have been no musical accompaniment, and the basic diet of the singing would have been Psalms.

**Dr. Thomas:** Except that in Calvin's liturgy, for example, they did sing other things other than Psalms.

**Dr. Duncan:** Right. But the basic diet was Psalms.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes. But the argument is that one should only sing what is demanded by God in Scripture to be sung, namely the book of Psalms.

The problem with that, as I point out to my exclusive Psalm-singing friends, is that you are then stuck in the Old Testament.

Now we believe in the whole Bible. We believe in the authority of all 66 books of the Bible, but we have to in our worship reflect the transition from old covenant to new covenant.

In an exclusive Psalm-singing church, you can preach about Jesus and you can talk about Jesus in your prayer, and you can read about Him in the New Testament reading for that service, but you can't sing His name. Now, you can sing about Him, but you can't say the name *Jesus* when you're singing—which seems to be to be extremely odd, to say the least.

And what Watts is doing is adopting a method of interpreting the Old Testament along the line of Luke 24, when Jesus speaks to the two forlorn disciples, "...beginning in Moses and all the prophets, He expounded to them the things concerning Himself." So, finding Jesus in the Old Testament...and I think Watts is just doing that with a clue in Psalm 117. There's an important covenantal word there about the merciful kindness of God which includes the idea of redemption. It includes the idea of the coming Redeemer.

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes. You know, I've got a theory as well, and we actually have it in the articles by the various hymnologists commenting on Watts' texts or paraphrases of the Psalms, that one of the reasons that there was an impetus for Watts to do these paraphrases in the first place is that, though there are many glorious metrical renditions of Psalms (you know we still sing Psalm 100 in its original Old Scottish setting, because it's really well-conceived and well-executed; Psalm 23 has come down to us in many, many good renderings), but some of the Psalm metrical versions are atrociously contorted.

And Watts himself had a man challenge him as a young minister, "Write something better than this doggerel that we're singing," because out of the old Sternhold and Hopkins, and out of some of the older metrical Psalm books, some of the metrical Psalms sounded kind of like "Yoda does the Psalms"! You know, "Begun, the Clone War has!" — you know, this sort of thing! You're singing things backward like no one would ever speak them.

**Dr. Thomas:** And the argument that you've already mentioned, that the...is it the metrification...is that the verb? ...is in itself then a breaking of that principle, so that if you were to be true to that principle you would have to sing it in the Hebrew, and even then with the problem of Masoretic vowel pointing you're still not sure if you're singing it as they would have sung it, say, in the temple. So...

**Dr. Duncan:** And Hebrew poetry works differently than English poetry, so that the rhyming that we have is generally not present. There's alliteration in Hebrew poetry, and there is a rhythm and a meter to it, but not in the way that it works in English. So you're trying to match something that's...

**Dr. Thomas:** I'm on Isaac Watts' page on this one entirely, that I think we have not just the right but the duty to shine the light of the New Testament into the Old, not just when we're preaching it, but when we sing it. And I am an inclusive Psalm-singer.

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes...by which you mean...

**Dr. Thomas:** That we should sing Psalms in worship.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill? ...You're telling us that we need to listen to this song now! *[Laughs]* Derek, very subtly he's pointing to the clock and saying, "Ligon, we need to listen to this song!" Okay, friends, here it is: *From All That Dwell Below the Skies*.

From all that dwell below the skies  
Let the Creator's praise arise;  
Let the Redeemer's name be sung  
Through every land, by every tongue.



In every land begin the song:  
to every land the strains belong.  
In cheerful sound all voices raise  
And fill the world with joyful praise.

Eternal are Your mercies, Lord;  
Eternal truth attends Your word.  
Your praise shall sound from shore to shore  
Till suns shall rise and set no more.

**Dr. Wymond:** Victor Smith sang for us *From All That Dwell Below the Skies*. This has been “Hymns of the Faith” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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