

Hymns of the Faith: “How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place”

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. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan and I'm delighted to be with you and with Derek for “Hymns of the Faith” as well as speaking with all of you who have joined us in our listening audience. Good morning, Derek. How are you?

Dr. Thomas: Good morning, Ligon. I'm well, thank you.

Dr. Duncan: Delighted to be looking at a wonderful hymn with you this morning. This hymn is, I think, one of the favorites of our congregation. And it's not one that we've sung for a long, long time, but it's a hymn that I think I first came into contact with in Britain. A number of my friends in various reformed and evangelical churches in Britain sang this text and I think that's where I first sang it. I sang it there with its old title, *How Sweet and Awful Is the Place*, using the term awful in its proper sense: awe-inspiring; awe-invoking; full of awe. We, in our hymnal, have it as *How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place*. Now awesome, you will often point out to us, is an overused American term.

Dr. Thomas: For ice cream.

Dr. Duncan: For ice cream and other trivial aspects of life! But if it's taken in a deeper and profounder sense, perhaps it conveys the original sense of awful. I remember Sam Hensley telling the story of Queen Anne being taken into St. Paul's Cathedral in London immediately after it had been completed and the great architect, Sir Christopher Wren, gave her a personal tour. And she said to him, when it was asked by someone in the party of attendance, “Well, Majesty, what do you think?” and she turned to him and said, “It is awful and artificial.” And Sam was saying now today that would be taken as a horrible criticism and a very disappointment, but Sir Christopher Wren was deeply moved and appreciative by the kind words of the Queen which meant it was awe-invoking,

awe-inspiring, full of awe, and that it manifested tremendous skills and artifice — not artificial in the sense of looking fake. And so words change in their meaning. But before we discuss this great hymn, *How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place*, just in case there are those of you in the listening audience that don't know the wonderful tune, ST. COLUMBA, Bill, would you play it for us?

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

Now Bill, I like that tune. Why do I like that tune?

Dr. Wymond: I think you like that tune because it's an Irish folksong. It's just — folksongs have a way of getting right into our hearts. There's something about the beautiful melody and generally they're sort of gentle. And this is a gentle tune.

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

And it's in three-four time and I've hardly ever seen an unhappy tune in three-four time. And that's partly because it is a dance beat. We've talked about that many times before. It's the waltz beat, so you always get the sweeping feel of the waltz.

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

It's that wonderful dance. And so this gentle tune, which is not hard, just goes up and down the scale. People have no trouble learning it. And so I just think it's really, in some ways, fitting, because this hymn is a comforting hymn even though there are challenging aspects of it. Nevertheless, it's a comforting prayer I think; it ends up anyway that way. And so I love this tune too.

Dr. Duncan: And I notice in our hymnal it was, this particular arrangement, was done around 1990. Do you happen to know from what historical era this Irish tune comes? I mean is this something that's been around for several hundreds of years? I'm just not familiar with the age or anything about the tune at all.

Dr. Wymond: It's sort of hard to date these tunes because this tune could be three hundred or more years old or it could be fairly recent, as we see in the Getty tunes, of the Getty and Townend hymns. Their tunes are modeled after the Irish folk tunes and that's not too hard to do for a creative person. But I would suspect it's at least two hundred fifty years old; something like that.

Dr. Duncan: Okay. Derek, the author of the text is Isaac Watts, and we've had how many occasions now in the last couple of years to comment on Isaac Watts and his amazing production of texts. But this is an excellent text and it tackles a doctrine that you don't hear tackled that often in hymnody, which is God's effectual calling of sinners to Himself and His choosing of those sinners in His love to be the recipients of His saving benefits. And that's not something that

many hymn writers are brave enough to tackle in a text. Talk to us a little bit about this text.

Dr. Thomas: Well, that's true. I noticed that in our hymn book it actually comes in the section on election, and actually reading the text you might not have thought of this as a hymn on election. It's certainly a hymn on the sovereignty of God in salvation and that we owe our salvation to a prior work of God in us and in calling us. The only reference to election in the entire hymn, in as far as I can see, is right at the very end when it speaks of the "chosen race." So I think you could sing this and not realizing that you're singing a hymn ultimately about God's predetermining choice and predetermining sovereignty.

Actually, we sang it in Belfast at communion. We always sang the hundred and eighth, hundred and sixteenth — oh my goodness — one of those Passover Psalms, the Hallel Psalms.

Dr. Wymond: One hundred eighteen.

Dr. Thomas: One hundred eighteen — we sang that a lot, either to begin or to close. But we often sang this one because of the reference to a feast that we are being invited to attend a feast. And that, for us, made this a very appropriate hymn to sing at the time of the Lord's Supper.

Dr. Duncan: I think the middle stanzas, especially the end of stanza two and then the full content of stanzas three and four, focus us most directly not on the issue of election but the issue of what we would call effectual calling, not just the general Gospel call to come to the Lord Jesus and to embrace Him by faith, but the drawing of the Father of sinners to the Son. And the song does meditate on that for a couple of stanzas and the significance of why we came and why others didn't and what the origins of that was. And so it focuses on that effectual call and then the source of that effectual call and the Father's love.

And as you say, I think rightly, if you were going to look at a topical place to place the hymn it would be better under effectual calling than it would be under the subject of election because it doesn't say as much about that as it says about this effectual calling. That'd be the place to put it in the hymnal. But really, every stanza has something important to say. Why don't we just walk through a few of those together?

The first acknowledges how awe-invoking and filled with delight it is to be able to have communion with Christ. And it says this — and by the way, that's I think the first stanza as much as the stanza about the feast, makes it a great communion hymn. I mean, I can see how that, the very idea of "how sweet and awesome is the place with Christ within the doors," already you're thinking of a place in which there is fellowship in a home, in a house, in a place with Christ. What better way of describing what's happening at the Lord's Table?

Dr. Thomas: Although I suspect that some will sing these opening lines and think of church, and perhaps even think of a church building. “How sweet and awesome is the place with Christ within the doors” — and I suspect folk are thinking how sweet it is to go to church, which isn't quite what it's saying. It's not disassociated from the assembling of ourselves together in a particular locality and so on, but it is, as you say, it's communion with Christ and what it means to be a Christian in fellowship with other Christians that is at the heart of what it's saying.

But isn't it important how the opening line of a hymn can set the tone for the rest of the hymn? Even if the poetry is sort of substandard in the rest of the hymn, just those opening words will rivet your attention — “How sweet and awesome is the place.”

Dr. Duncan: True. The end of the first line uses terminology that would have been very common to the marketplace in the time that Watts was writing this hymn, and perhaps would have continued to be very common for the next couple of hundred years, especially in Britain, but maybe a little bit strange to American ears. And maybe you could explain when it says, “While everlasting love displays the choicest of her stores”? What's the image and what's the meaning there, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course we only use the word choicest in our vernacular speech, I suppose, but I think of an open-air market when I see that or I think of one of these wonderful stores where everything is out for display, a fruit stand, for example, with just beautiful, luscious, ripe fruit of every description and color. And I love to walk around a market where everything is set out so beautifully. And I think that's what's being conveyed here, that we're being invited to dinner, a feast, in a great, great banquet, in a great 17th, 18th century hall out in the country. And you walk in and there's a thirty-eight foot dining table that's just laden, for Bill Wymond's eyes with pastries.

Dr. Duncan: Desserts of every kind!

Dr. Thomas: Every description! And in cartoon language, you know, your eyes are dropped down to the floor on springs. Just what is this? And it's a sense of overwhelming generosity and provision.

Dr. Duncan: Well that image is indeed the image that continues for the next four lines because -

Dr. Thomas: Isn't it important though, because I think it is a prevailing tendency of the devil, to make us think that God's love is, well I can't use that word now, but it's miserly, stingy, that God loves reluctantly, and that when He loves His arm is twisted behind His back and that love is given not in its fullest extent.

Dr. Duncan: And I think the very image of, as you say, that English manor house or that castle with a thirty-eight foot table spread with indescribable delicacies is designed to depict the generosity and the lavishness of Christ's love.

Dr. Thomas: Because in the Garden, that's what Satan said. You know, make your eyes look on the one thing that God said "no" and ignore everything else that is yours and focus your eyes on the one thing that God says "no" to. And I think we live our Christian lives like that and we forget His bounty and provision that He's made.

Dr. Duncan: Well, having walked into this hall and having seen this scene, Watts, who's speaking for us all, it's like he's the, not so much the narrator of an event from a third-hand perspective, but he's the spokesman for all of us as we're looking on this scene, he says in the second stanza, "While all our hearts and all our songs join to admire the feast, each of us cries, with thankful tongue, 'Lord, why was I a guest?'" Why was I invited to this feast? Why was I allowed to come to this particular party? So he speaks that particular question for us. What's the nature of the question, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Well, I often think about it. In December of 1971, "I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Come unto Me and rest.'" And I heard it through Matthew 11:28 — "Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." And I often wonder, why me and why not my members of my family? Why not some of my school friends, some of whom I've been reacquainted with in recent weeks as it happens, but are not Christians? Why me? Was it my intuition? Was it my cleverness? Was it deep down something in me? And what this hymn is going to drive you to is that it was all of God and all of grace from beginning to end. Why was I invited to this great banquet?

Dr. Duncan: And then the question is extended and elaborated on in the third stanza. "Why was I made to hear Your voice, and enter while there's room, when thousands make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come?" Now that's a reflection on why I come when the Gospel calls, goes out to the whole world, and so many thousands do not respond to it.

Dr. Thomas: And I suspect, Ligon, and comment on this verse, I suspect that Isaac Watts is thinking of that verse that is not easy to understand initially — "Many are called, but few are chosen." What does that verse mean? "Many are called, but few are chosen."

Dr. Duncan: Well, obviously in the context Jesus is indicating that there is a Gospel call that goes out universally and sincerely to which thousands upon thousands upon thousands, it falls upon their deaf ears, and they do not respond. And only some, I mean he uses different images, doesn't he? Sometimes he talks about a narrow gate. Sometimes he talks about His sheep who hear His

voice and enter in through the door. He uses all sorts of different images to indicate that there are many people who are confronted with the claims of the Gospel, they hear the Gospel presented to them, and it just means nothing to them. They're indifferent to it. They're not necessarily angry about it or mad at the preacher or at the church, but they're just not interested. And there are few that respond to that Gospel call. And those are the ones who are chosen. They've been given eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus talks about that in John 3 where some are born again by the Holy Spirit so that they see spiritual things that they wouldn't be able to see otherwise.

Dr. Thomas: And the fourth stanza, then, elaborates on that, that it is the Lord who “sweetly drew us in; else we had still refused to taste, and perished in our sin.”

Dr. Duncan: Yeah, and he roots the invitation and our response to the invitation in the love of God, to get back to your point of how this song celebrates the fact that contrary to the way, I think especially that the natural heart thinks about the love of God -that it's stingy, it divides between the people, it's not given, it's not fair, it's not generous - that in contrast to that, the heart that has tasted of God's goodness and grace knows that both the reason why we've been invited and the reason why we've accepted the invitation has to be rooted in the love of God working in us. To use the language of John, “We love because He first loved us.”

Dr. Thomas: Now some people will say that if you really believe that your salvation, from beginning to end, is of the Lord — that you don't have free will; it's not ultimately your choice but God's choice — that that is the death of evangelism and it's the death of missions. So explain how he segues from verse four to stanza five which is about missions.

Dr. Duncan: Yeah, well I mean read the verse first because it's a beautiful juxtaposition of something that we'll find juxtaposed in the Bible in just a minute. But go ahead and read stanza five.

Dr. Thomas: “Pity the nations, O our God, constrain the earth to come; send Your victorious Word abroad, and bring the strangers home.”

Dr. Duncan: So immediately there is a prayer for world missions! You know, the only reason we're here is because of the love of God, so Lord, bring the nations in. I mean, it's the exact flow of logic that goes in the song, which to some people is contradictory.

Dr. Thomas: At the Ligonier Conference last Saturday, somebody asked a question in a Q & A session that Thabiti Anyabwile answered just marvelously and without a second's hesitation. The question was, “If we really believe in election and effectual calling, what is the motivation for missions?” And you know I'm trying to think of something really clever and Thabiti Anyabwile said,

“Guaranteed success,” just like that, “guaranteed success.” So this is the segue that if missions at the end of the day is about God's sovereignty, then why not pray that God would use that means?

Dr. Duncan: And our friend Elias Medeiros loves to say that as well, that the sovereignty of God in election is his great motivation for missions work. I think the place where people get hung up is on the issue of means. They assume that if God has chosen something that the means don't matter, and of course that's never biblical logic. The logic is always - because God has chosen, the means do matter.

Dr. Thomas: And that's what I think is being said here — “Send Your victorious Word abroad.” Now how does God do that? Through preachers, missionaries, evangelists.

Dr. Duncan: Yeah. How shall they hear if there is not a preacher? Yeah, and so there's the logic — because it's the love of God that has sent the invitation and enabled us to respond to the invitation, therefore we must approach boldly the throne of grace and ask God to go to the nations with that invitation of love and to draw from the nations a multitude that no man can number of every tribe, tongue, and people who will come to the feast and who will respond to the invitation. Because if that's how we came, that's how they're going to come. And does that mean that we don't have to go?

Heavens no; we have the joy of being His emissaries, but it also means, as you say, guaranteed success, because He's not going to lose one of those who His love has set His heart upon.

And then the prayer continues in stanza six. How does it go, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: “We long to see Your churches full, that all the chosen race may, with one voice and heart and soul, sing Your redeeming grace.”

Dr. Duncan: Now that's almost a John Piper line, don't you think? I mean, it gets to John's statement about the - missions is not the chief end of the church, worship is; missions exists because worship doesn't. When the end of the age comes and the multitude from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation is gathered around the throne, missions will be no more but worship will go on forever. Missions exist to bring in a multitude that no man can number into the enjoyment of the white-hot worship and glory of God. So it's almost the picture, isn't it, in stanza six?

Dr. Thomas: And it's Jesus' last prayer in John 17, that all those whom the Father has given to Him may be with Him and that we may be one. And to pray that prayer in that final stanza of the hymn is to be most Jesus like in our worship. It's a beautiful hymn.

Dr. Duncan: Watts was from what sort of a church background, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Independence Congregationalist in a distinctively 17th, 18th century understanding of Congregationalism that that very Calvinistic - what is the Congregational Confession of Faith? *The Savoy Declaration*.

Dr. Duncan: The John Owen version of *The Westminster Confession*. Now that means he would have been self-educated? He wouldn't have been able to go to the major universities because he was not an Anglican, so —

Dr. Thomas: That's right. And author of thousands of hymns that we sing, many of which we sing in our hymnbook of course.

Dr. Duncan: Well Bill, let's listen to this wonderful hymn, *How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place*.

How sweet and awful is the place
With Christ within the doors,
While everlasting love displays
The choicest of her stores.

While all our hearts and all our songs
Join to admire the feast,
Each of us cry, with thankful tongues,
"Lord, why was I a guest?"

"Why was I made to hear thy voice,
And enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?"

'Twas the same love that spread the feast
That sweetly drew us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.

Pity the nations, O our God,
Constrain the earth to come;
Send thy victorious Word abroad,
And bring the strangers home.

We long to see thy churches full,
That all the chosen race
May, with one voice and heart and soul,
Sing thy redeeming grace.

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