

## Hymns of the Faith: “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

Psalm 103, Psalm 150

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” with Ligon Duncan, Derek Thomas, and Bill Wymond. And we now go to our moderator, Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill. This is Ligon Duncan, and this is “Hymns of the Faith.” This is a new program of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi. It is a gift to you from our elders and congregation, and every Sunday morning we’ll be here on 1180, WJNT, to talk with you about the devotional treasures of the ages that have been bequeathed to us in the hymnal.

All around us we are seeing young people today become interested again in the old hymns. They are looking for something solid, substantial, lasting, substantive; and they’re finding them in the great texts that the church has been singing for two thousand years. Sadly, however, in our time all around us they have been so forgotten that we’ve forgotten the stories of their authors, the composers, and we haven’t even paid attention to their texts. And so Derek Thomas and Bill Wymond and I are going to be talking about some of these great songs of the faith, because Christianity is a singing faith. We live and die singing, because the Lord’s put a new song in our hearts, and we’re going to be talking about some of the great hymns and songs of the Christian church here on “Hymns of the Faith” every Sunday morning.

We’re starting out with one of the very best hymns written in the last 350 years, *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*. For those of you who are older, you may remember growing up singing “Praise ye the Lord, the Almighty...” and that’s indeed how it was sung many years ago. But in most of the hymnals today the “praise ye” has been changed to “praise to.” It’s a translation, after all! It’s translated out of the German. Catherine Winkworth found it a number of years ago when she went to Germany to recover some of the great hymns of that part of the world, and she brought it back to England and it’s been a favorite ever since.

We want to talk with you about the author, we want to talk about the composer, we want to talk about the music, and we want to talk about the text — the lyric, the poetry of this great song. And we want you to have a chance to hear it after we've talked about it, so that you can enjoy more deeply the significance of this great hymn.

So, Derek, I'm excited to launch into this new project with you and Bill this morning! Good morning! How are you doing?

**Dr. Thomas:** I'm doing very well, thank you.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thanks for being with us today, Derek. You've been doing some study about the author of *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*. Tell us a little bit about this great man.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, this is the hymn, of course, "*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation! O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy help and salvation!*" was written by Joachim Neander. He lived in the seventeenth century, born in 1650. If we want to put that in a sort of context, in British history, for example, it's just after the period of the Westminster Assembly that produced the great Confessions and Catechisms.

**Dr. Duncan:** And in American historical terms, it's about thirty years after the Pilgrims had landed at Plymouth Rock, so this is very early in the Colonial Period of American history, while this young man is in Germany.

**Dr. Thomas:** Joachim Neander was born in 1650, and died just thirty years later, in 1680, of tuberculosis. He was out of the German Reformed Church, a strong tradition of singing German chorale music, and Bill Wymond I'm sure will help us understand what that means in a few minutes. He wrote about sixty hymns, and provided tunes for many of them. He's considered by many to be the first important German hymn writer after the Reformation, and is regarded as the outstanding hymn writer of the German Reformed Church.

Joachim Neander was born in Bremen, the son of a Latin teacher. His grandfather had changed their surname from Neumann (new man, in English) to the Greek Neander, following a fashion of the time. After the death of his father he couldn't afford to study at any prestigious university, and therefore he studied theology in his hometown between the years 1666 and 1670. We understand that at first his heart wasn't really in it. It was only when he heard a sermon by a man by the name of Theodore Undereyk shortly before the end of his studies that his beliefs became serious.

In 1671, he became a private tutor in Heidelberg, and three years later, in 1674, he became a Latin teacher in a school in Dusseldorf, one step before becoming a

minister. He actually only became a minister the year before he died. He was in the ministry just for one year, and contracted tuberculosis, which was very common then, and died at the young age of 30.

Our listeners just might be interested that a valley (German *thal* modernized to *tal*) was renamed in his honor in the early nineteenth century, and later became very famous in 1856 because of the discovery of the remains of *Homo neanderthalensis*, or the Neanderthal discovered in that valley.

**Dr. Duncan:** I read one hymnologist that said that he's the only hymn writer to have a *hominid* fossil named after him!

**Dr. Thomas:** We know the hymn...I suppose it would be *Lobe den Herren* in German... "Praise to the Lord." We know it because this extraordinary woman, Catherine Winkworth, a nineteenth century lady who lived most of her life in Manchester in England, spent a year in Germany uncovering these great hymns and translated (I gather somewhat freely) the German of the original. Some hymnbooks today will have extra verses, stanzas, of the hymn that bear no relation to the original at all.

**Dr. Duncan:** I was reading a book by an English hymnologist who said that he had catalogued this hymn's publication in maybe seventy or eighty different hymnals, and that there were textual variations in it in almost all of the hymnals and that it was his goal to actually record all of those textual variations, but he hasn't done it completely yet.

**Dr. Thomas:** The hymn of course is based on two great Psalms, Psalm 103 and Psalm 150. But *Julian's Dictionary of Hymnology*, regarded as a classic, describes this hymn as "...a magnificent hymn of praise to God; perhaps the finest production of its author, and of the first rank in its class." And it goes on to say that it was the favorite hymn of Kaiser Friedrich, Wilhelm III, of Prussia. He had heard it sung while visiting the mines at Wallenberg in 1800.

**Dr. Duncan:** Fascinating! Well, Bill Wymond, obviously the music behind *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty* is very special. I was reading somewhere that it had always been associated with that text...that this text has not been sung to another tune. I may be wrong about that, but I think I did read that somewhere. Could you tell us something about the music of this great hymn?

**Dr. Wymond:** We don't know who wrote the music. It just came from a popular hymnal of the time called *The Straussens Singing Book*, and it's found there about 1665.

The mention that you all just made about that being heard by Kaiser Wilhelm, Friedrich III, in the mines, just points out that this tune was rooted in the common folksong tradition of the people, and you can tell that as you listen to the tune. It

has a sort of a dance feel. It's written in 3/4 time, which is the waltz rhythm that we know so well, and anything in this time signature is going to be upbeat and happy and energetic. And so we know that it's probably influenced by the secular dance music of the time, as so many of the melodies were. So it's very much rooted in the folk song of the people, and that's probably why it became so popular—and that's probably why miners would be singing this as they're going about their work, or on their way to work.

Something that I think is interesting about the phrases of this hymn is that they are not short and staccato like a lot of the other phrases of German hymnody. In German hymnody the phrases are influenced by the text, and so many of the texts are declarative preaching kind of texts, making definitive statements about truths about God, and so they would be short — such as *Now Thank We All Our God*, a very straightforward phrase. But these phrases in this hymn are long and sweeping kinds of phrases, and they just sort of fit in with the waltz feel of the phrase of the hymn.

The thing that's interesting about the melody of the hymn is that it starts off with a sort of joyful burst: it goes "Praise to the Lord!" which is a very happy, upbeat kind of feel, and then it settles down into long graceful melodic curves. As with so many of the hymns of this time, the movement of the melody line is in step by step fashion. There aren't any odd jumps that you find in the melody, so that the hymn is easy to sing right from the beginning.

And this sort of step by step melodic direction probably suggests the Gregorian chant which was heard in the churches in the early days of the Reformation, because they retained the Gregorian chant melodies. These Gregorian chant melodies were also step by step melodies, and so the people were influenced by what they heard in church and took that into their folksongs.

The tune of this, like many folk tunes, is a very simple, easy to learn tune. It has what you would call an "A-A-B pattern." The tune starts off with a phrase, and then it repeats that phrase. And then it goes on to a different second phrase. But that's all that there is to the hymn, so that it's very easy to learn. People could pick it up quickly. That's also typical of folk songs.

The tune, as with any good tune, is an ageless tune. That means that this tune is just as powerful today as it was back in the seventeenth century. For three hundred years, people have been singing the tune and have not found it to be an odd thing. It's sort of like the tune to *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. That tune really does hit people with a powerful sense of energy today, and I don't think they have a sense that they're singing something very old. They just have a sense that they're singing something very powerful...so it can move our hearts here in the twenty-first century just as it did back three hundred years ago.

I'm an advocate of teaching congregations good and lasting tunes, because

people can only learn so many tunes! It's inevitable that we're going to teach people some tunes that we will toss out in a few years. We have to do that if we're going to use any kind of new or contemporary tunes. They haven't been tested by time; we can't tell for sure whether they're a good, lasting tune, but we ought to do it—we ought to use contemporary tunes, but we ought to try to discern if they have qualities about them that would not be time-bound. And we ought to be careful not to use too many of them, because we're going to find ourselves throwing away our hymnal every few years and recycling new tunes in. So it's always good to have a mix of these great old tunes along with some of the new tunes that are popular in our day.

**Dr. Thomas:** Can I ask you just a brief question, Bill? How important is it for you, as somebody who teaches music in the church and leads music in the church, that a hymn is associated with a tune, or a tune is associated with a hymn? When I hear these notes, I immediately think of those words, "Praise to the Lord."

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, I think it is good, and it's powerful. Sometimes we will take a tune that's really good and put other words to it so that the congregation can sing those words right away without any difficulty. But there are some tunes that are so well connected to a certain set of words that it's really difficult to put any other set of words to that. And sometimes those words work so well with that tune that it would just be a crime to rob them of their power by putting them to any other tune.

**Dr. Duncan:** The text of this hymn is extraordinary, as well. I think the combination of the tune that Bill has just been talking about and the text is one of the things that makes this one of the very best hymns in the last three or four hundred years, because the text is truly remarkable.

Every stanza begins with the words, "Praise to the Lord," and it's taken out of Psalm 103. In most of your English translations you're thinking "Bless the Lord, O my soul," out of Psalm 103, and that's of course right. But to *bless* and to *praise* has a very, very close connection. And so this is rendered "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty."

Stanza one is praising the Almighty Lord who is the Creator God for His blessings of both health and salvation. And the interesting thing about this whole hymn is that it is a self-exhortation — where we are speaking to our own souls as we sing, and sort of encouraging ourselves to bless the Lord and to sing to the Lord, just like the psalmist is saying in Psalm 103, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." He's speaking to his own soul and encouraging himself to praise the Lord. So also in the song we say "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty...O my soul, praise Him..." and it's echoing Psalm 103:1, 2 exhorting our own selves to praise the Lord.

And then the exhortation turns to everyone else who is within earshot: "All ye

who hear, now to His temple draw near!” And so it's a call to everyone else; it's an exhortation to everyone else in the congregation to draw near to God with joyful adoration. And so the song throughout both exhorts the singer and those who are singing with the singer to sing.

**Dr. Wymond:** Let me just say something about that. I think that is so in line with what we are told in Ephesians in the fifth chapter, and Colossians in the third chapter, where we are singing to God, but we're exhorting one another through our hymn singing. That's why it's so important that everybody in the congregation, singer or non-singer, be singing...be participating. Because we're involved in a mutual encouragement and exhortation as we are singing our praises to God.

**Dr. Duncan:** I think that's vital, and especially for those of us who are constantly calling our congregations to be God-centered in their worship and God-centered in their singing. By saying that we're not saying that there is not a very important mutual fellowship exhortation and encouragement that comes from corporate worship, when we're all gathered together and we're singing. Because the singing of others is designed to stir up each of our individual souls in lifting up praise to God, and our own individual singing is designed to bring encouragement to others. And this song just beautifully brings that point out. I thought the same thing — about the Colossians passage and the Ephesians passage — as I was looking at this song.

**Dr. Wymond:** That's what is so ironic about the way we are doing our churches these days. We are building acoustically poor churches, so that when you go in and you start singing you can't hear anybody but yourself. We've carpeted the places to death, with the idea that everybody's going to have a microphone in hand; and unfortunately not everybody in the congregation has a microphone, so we don't hear each other. We don't hear the sound bouncing off the floor, off ourselves and other people, to encourage us in that sense of singing in community.

**Dr. Duncan:** Or you just hear the people on the platform who are mic'ed and have amplifiers and things of that nature, and so there's none of that mutual encouragement in singing. We've just had that experience because we're now in a wonderfully acoustically helpful room, and we had been in a room that wasn't as acoustically conducive, and suddenly being able to hear one another again has been a huge encouragement to the congregation.

Well, stanza two of this hymn opens gladly and unapologetically acknowledging God as sovereign over all things. And in light of the fact that this is a German Reformed hymn writer at twenty years old writing this song, maybe we're not surprised by that. But there are beautiful images of God's protective care over us in stanza two: “He shelters thee under His wings...He gently sustains us.” And notice again how the song asks you to talk to yourselves: “He shelters *you*...”

Who's the *you*? It's you! You're talking to yourself! He's sheltering you, *you* being you, talking to your own soul. It sort of reminds you of Martyn Lloyd-Jones' suggestion that Christians ought not to talk to themselves, but they ought to argue and preach to themselves! So that we're deliberately exhorting ourselves to believe the words of Scripture and what they say about God. The second stanza concludes with a beautiful reminder that God has often granted our hearts' desires in His providential unfolding of His plan in our lives. And in light of the biography that you shared about Neander, that's very significant. His father dies, he's not able to go to a prestigious university, but he accepts what God has for him.

Stanza three is beautiful again. It speaks of the Lord prospering the work of our hands. It reminds you of Psalm 90:17. And one of the things that hit me, working through this song, is that it not only echoes Psalm 103 and Psalm 150, but you find echoes of all sorts of Scripture throughout the text of this song.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, there are echoes, aren't there, of Deuteronomy in "...shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth"?

**Dr. Duncan:** And even of Lamentations 3:22, 23. We think of that when we sing *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. But in the phrase "...His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee", you can almost hear that "His mercies are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness" out of Lamentations 3. And I think, isn't that an element of great hymn writing, that it draws on the language and thought of Scripture everywhere? And I love the way that this stanza ends. It says: "Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, if with His love He befriend thee." In other words, just think of what God can do if He pours out His saving love on you!

Stanza four acknowledges that God is our Maker, the giver of our health, the loving providential guide and support of our life. And its powerful language crescendos with this bold and believing declaration: "How oft in grief hath not He brought thee relief, spreading His wings to o'er shade thee?" And I love to look at our congregation when we're singing this song, because I've seen so many saints sing through tears of trust, in bonds of suffering, in confident peace as they've sung that line.

And then the song ends with this beautiful stanza five, once more asking us to give God all our praise: "O let all that is in me adore Him!" And then it transitions to the words and exhortations of Psalm 150:6 — "All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before Him." Concluding with the call to God's people to add their "so be it," their "amen" to the praise and to continue this happy adoration forever.

Well, maybe, Bill Wymond, you could let us all hear the song, *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*.

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!  
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!  
All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near,  
Join me in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,  
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!  
Hast thou not seen how thy desires e'er have been  
Granted in what He ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee!  
Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee;  
Ponder anew what the Almighty will do,  
If with His love He befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, who with marvelous wisdom hath made thee,  
Decked thee with health, and with loving hand guided and stayed thee.  
How oft in grief hath not He brought thee relief,  
Spreading His wings to o'ershade thee!

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore Him!  
All that hath life and breath, come now with praise before him!  
Let the amen sound from His people again;  
Gladly fore'er we adore Him. Amen.

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