

Hymns of the Faith: "Now Thank We All Our God"

I Chronicles 29:13

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 First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for "Hymns of the Faith."

Dr. Duncan: Thank, you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan. Derek and Bill and I have been looking at hymns the last few weeks together, and thoroughly enjoying that. "Hymns of the Faith" is our theme because Christianity is a singing faith. The Lord has put a song in our hearts, and so Christians live and die singing.

We want to spend time hearing and learning about the songs we sing together with you on "Hymns of the Faith." One of the things you'll hear is the great hymns of the church just played for you to listen to, but before you hear them we want to tell you a little bit about who wrote them and who composed the beautiful tunes and melodies and the arrangements, and explore a little bit of the meaning of their beautiful and beloved poetry. So thanks for joining us here on WJNT.

Good morning, Derek! How are you?

Dr. Thomas: Good morning, Ligon. I'm very well, thanks.

Dr. Duncan: This morning we are looking at *Now Thank We All Our God*. This hymn was written in the seventeenth century, and in fact it was written in 1636. The last few hymns that we've listened to are from in this era, from 1641, a hymn from 1680, and now this hymn from 1636. And all of these tunes and hymns have come from Germany so far, and they are great tunes. The tunes, as wonderful as they are, have some really different features to them, but we'll talk about that in just a few minutes.

Bill Wymond's going to help us walk through a little bit about the tune itself, but the story behind this hymn, *Now Thank We All Our God*.... I hope that as I speak

about this there will be at least a few people who maybe have fond memories of Thanksgiving Days as children when this children was sung, or around harvest season in their church singing *Now Thank We All Our God*. So I hope that the tune is just around somewhere in the back of their mind going over and over.

The story behind this hymn is one of my favorite hymn stories. Tell us just a little bit about the author and the composer of this hymn.

Dr. Thomas: Yes! The audience can't see me smiling! I don't personally immediately associate this with Thanksgiving. Of course Americans do; this is your Thanksgiving hymn. But it is a wonderful, wonderful hymn, NUN DANKET ALLE GOTT, *Now Thank We All Our God*, and written by Martin Rinkart, who was born in 1586 and died in 1649. And again we've been trying to put this in some kind of setting. Presbyterians of course will associate *The Westminster Confession* and the Westminster Assembly with 1645, and the Pilgrim Fathers. So right at that era Rinkart dies, in 1636, or some say even earlier, 1630, was when this hymn was composed.

Dr. Duncan: For our Lutheran friends, of course, if they're putting it in their time frame, Martin Luther is born in 1483. Rinkart is born in 1586, just almost a hundred years later after the birth of Martin Luther.

Dr. Thomas: Or about twenty years after the death of John Calvin in Geneva. Well, that puts him in a setting.

He was a pastor in the very famous, and wonderfully named, church of St. Thomas in Leipzig. Johann Sebastian Bach was the musical director...leader. He was a graduate of Leipzig University. He became a schoolmaster in what was then called the *Gymnasium*, which I think we would call a high school, in Eisleben and a cantor in the local church, and rose through deacon, pastor, to archdeacon or even bishop in Eilenburg. His life in that last location was contemporaneous with what we call The Thirty Years War.

Now, you're the historian here, Ligon, help me. The Thirty Years War is from about 1620 to 1648 or somewhere in there, roughly? Maybe 1649, if my memory serves me right, it ends; so, this horrendous period in European history. Largely, if you think of Germany today, that's really where the war took place. It's confusing as to who was on which side: the French Catholic king was on the Protestant side because he was eager to overthrow the Hapsburg dynasty. It's all very complicated, but for our purposes it was just horrendous in terms of the loss of life, in terms of starvation, the cruelty.... War is always cruel, but The Thirty Years War was a very cruel war, and there are some dreadful statistics of thousands of people in certain towns being decimated. Some of the famous cities of Germany that we think of — Brandenburg and so on — lost upwards of forty or fifty percent of their population during The Thirty Years War, including Martin Rinkart's wife. She died of starvation and disease. Towns would be surrounded,

they'd be starved...disease would spread and so on...plague....

And just like the Puritans during the plague in a later period, slightly later period in the 1660's in London, the Puritan ministers stayed in the city when all the other ministers left the city. Rinkart stayed and ministered to the people. It was a horrendous time, and some think — although there's no evidence — that this hymn had been composed in its final form in the peace treaty that ended... the Peace of Westphalia, I think it was called, that ended The Thirty Years War. So “*Now Thank We All Our God*, with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices....” And there's an air of tremendous gratitude to God through what was an enormously difficult period in his life and the life of his country.

Dr. Duncan: When Rinkart was ministering in the city of Eilenburg they were actually surrounded and besieged by the Swedish army, and starvation was rife. And it is said that eventually one by one the pastors in the city died, leaving Rinkart as the only pastor. I've read sources that said towards the end of the time of the siege—and I think he was actually used to help lift the siege...I think he was actually sent out by the leaders of the city to meet with the Swedes, who respected him in their negotiations—but it is said that towards the end of the siege he was doing fifty funerals a day. It's hard to conceive of what it would have been like in a situation like that.

Dr. Thomas: And we're talking about 1637 here! And there's one account that says that he conducted 4,480 funerals in all during that period.

Dr. Duncan: It's mind boggling. I can't even conceive of how a person could hold up. The conditions would have been difficult enough, but to think of the emotional and physical strain of all that — it's hard to imagine.

But in spite of that, as you say there is just such an exuberant praise of God throughout this song:

“*Now Thank We All Our God*, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms, has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”

The theme is very clear and straightforward. It's an exhortation to us, to one another, to thank our God with everything we are — with our heart, with our hands, with our voices. It's an acknowledgement that God has worked wonders. I ran a search on that this morning, and probably 25 times in the Old Testament God is described as one who does “wondrous things.” He works wonders. And the second line of the first stanza celebrates that truth and then says that the whole world rejoices in Him. And it reminds us too of that line where the Lord Jesus says that if the people will not praise Him, that even the stones will cry out.

And then, "...who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way." I think that may be my favorite line in this hymn. He's shown us favor. God has shown us favor from the very first time we were held in our mothers' arms and all along the way, and He's blessed us with innumerable gifts flowing from His love, and still is ours today.

The very first line of the hymn reminds you of Romans 12:1 where Paul exhorts us to present our bodies — the whole of ourselves — to God as our living sacrifice, as our act of reasonable worship. And so when the phrase "...thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices" is uttered, it reminds you of Romans 12:1. And the whole of the first stanza is thanks and praise, gratitude to God and adoration to God.

Very interestingly, the text gives you reasons to praise God, and one thing I like about that is very often today there will be praise choruses that are directed to God, but which supply no reason to the worshiper for why God ought to be praised in the first place, so there will be almost mantra-like repetition of "I praise You, O God" or "I love You, O God" or "I adore You, O God" with no reason supplied for why we ought to do that.

And I'm struck by how often the psalms and good hymns supply the singer with reasons that we ought to praise God. We've seen this in every hymn that we've looked at so far. And this one, notice...at least five reasons are given in just the first stanza for why we ought to praise God: He's done wondrous things; the world rejoices in Him; He's blessed us from the time we were in our mothers' arms; He's given us unnumbered gifts of love; and, He is still our God today. So five reasons in just the first stanza for why we ought to praise and give thanks to God. Any thoughts on that?

Dr. Thomas: Just how Pauline all this is.

Dr. Duncan: It's true. Paul will do the same thing. He'll pile up reasons not only why we ought to live the Christian life, but he will pile up reasons for why we ought to give gratitude to God.

Dr. Thomas: It also helps explain, as Bill was referring to I think in the last one we did on the show, when in Colossians and Ephesians we are to sing to each other and preach to each other, and proclaim to each other. That's what we're doing here.

Dr. Duncan: That has struck me again and again. And you know, some of the songs that we've been looking at have testimonial elements in them where we're testifying to how God has shown His grace to us. But it has struck me that both in giving testimony of our experience and in exhorting one another to sing, these hymns are still very God-centered. And it strikes me today that many of the

testimonial-type songs are very self-centered. They're not God-centered. But how these people were able to give testimony and exhort one another, and yet still be God-centered is really a very interesting thing.

Tell us a little bit about this hymn, the tune, and what to look for.

Dr. Wymond: Well, the thing that strikes me about this particular tune, as with so many of the other tunes from this era, is the simplicity of it. The whole hymn only has seven notes in it, and yet when you hear the tune, even when it starts, if you've ever heard this hymn before you don't confuse it with any other. It just starts off with two notes [demonstrates]. I'm going to use a simple instrument here to illustrate that. Just these two notes...two notes! But you know, a lot can be done with just two notes. For instance, you may recognize these two notes from the symphony of Beethoven [demonstrates]. It's all how they're used and the rhythmic emphasis and so on like that.

Now the effectiveness of this very first phrase that I just played for you is that there is a repetition of the first note. There are three of them. And that is a strong statement. And the very first part of the hymn is an exhortation, as you were saying, to people: Let's sing to God; let's all of us sing to God. And so by having that repetition of notes you get a sense of strength. It's the same thing with *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. Three notes in the beginning, and then on to the melody. So there's something strong about that. Something in our psyche responds to that particular effect.

And in the first part you have this phrase that is broken down into two sections. The first part is saying "Now thank we all our God" in this command form of melody, if I can call it that. And then you get a response to that. It tells you how, you know: with heart and hand and voice. And that is so like the Psalms. I think this hymn is rooted of course in the folk songs of the day, the simplicity of the German folk songs, but also its style is very much like the Psalms. It could easily be sung by two groups as the Psalms were, in an antiphonal way, with the first group singing this first half of the phrase and then the other group responding "with heart and hand and voices" and so on like that.

The thing also interesting in the simplicity of this hymn is that it has what we call the A-A here, and then B-C form. So you get a repetition of that first phrase. You don't have to learn a lot in order to be able to do this hymn. And so you get in the first phrase this melody which I've already done, and then the response goes like this [plays notes]...a descending phrase like that, the explanation of why you should praise God.

And then you go on with the second phrase, the very same thing [plays notes] and so on like that. Now that's the second line of the hymn. But what is kind of intriguing to me about this is that the third line of the hymn is really a repetition of the first line melodically. It just goes down (as we'd say in musical terms) about a

fourth. The same thing again. So people could pick this up so easily, as it is with folk songs. There are no problems at all as far as melody is concerned.

And then the last line is just sort of a conclusion that goes up and then down the scale [plays notes]. Now that's four notes. Notice the pattern [plays], and then you just go down the scale and do something similar with four other notes [plays]. Utter simplicity! That intrigues me, and if you're musical it may intrigue you, too!

Just a word about the use of this hymn. This hymn was probably, they say, the second-favorite hymn in Germany, probably because of its associations with the rejoicing over the end of the war and the plague, and so on like that. And so the Germans used this on a couple of other very important occasions in their life in the nineteenth century. When Cologne Cathedral was finally finished and they had a great celebration in 1887, they sang the hymn. And then when they completed their *Reichstag*, their capital building, they sang this hymn. Sort of like Wales, isn't it? They'll use a hymn even though it may be on a secular occasion. They sang it for the completion of the Reichstag. And also, Derek, since you're a Brit, they sang this at the Diamond Jubilee for Queen Victoria in 1897, because Catherine Winkworth had translated it and it had become a part of the praise language of the British nation.

Dr. Duncan: I would love to look at it in comparison to what Winkworth does with it. You can hear just from the hymn title that she's pretty literal in the first line. I'd love to know how that holds up throughout the hymn.

Dr. Thomas: May I say something, Ligon? It looks as if there's a reference to the *Gloria Patri* in the last stanza.

Dr. Duncan: Absolutely! Let me just comment on both of the second two stanzas before we listen to the hymn.

The second stanza is:

“O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills in this world and the next.”

And that may be my second-favorite line from the song. Again, notice how the second stanza exhorts one another to worship in the prayer. It's God-centered, but it's actually speaking to one another: “O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us....” It's a petition. The second stanza is a petition to God, but it's an interesting petition. It's exhorting one another to pray this way to God, and so it's basically saying: “May our generous God always be near us, all life long. May we always have joyful hearts and God-given peace to cheer us on the way. May God keep us, preserve us in His grace, give us guidance when we're

baffled. May God deliver us from evil now, here, and forevermore in the world to come.”

So the second stanza is a petition. And one of the things that it prays for is God's constant presence and nearness. You know we've been talking the last few weeks about this very, very sad story that has come out of the diaries of Mother Teresa, who indicates...though all of the wonderful things that she did in Calcutta...records fifty years of never feeling the presence of God. And this song is a prayer that every believer who's singing it would know the presence of God every hour of the day, constantly, and also to have joyful hearts and to experience God's peace. And then of course the petition goes on to pray that we would persevere in grace, that we would be guided in those perplexing times that we face, and that we would be delivered from evil. Just like in The Lord's Prayer, "...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

And then, Derek, as you said, the final stanza is just the *Gloria Patri*. It's one of the oldest songs sung by Christians. By the very beginnings of the second century, Christians were using the *Gloria Patri* after every Psalm reading or singing in the church in order to indicate that the God of the Psalms was the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And I love this beautiful rendition that Winkworth gives of the German:

“All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son, and Him who reigns with them in highest heaven—”
which may be one of the most beautiful ways of denominating the Holy Spirit —

“...Him who reigns with them in highest heaven—
The one eternal God, whom earth and heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.”

And so the stanza goes back to praise again.

The third stanza is adoration given to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In beautiful English verse, this God is three but He's one; and just like the *Gloria Patri*, the Trinity is referred to as “it” here.

In the *Gloria Patri* you sing “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen, Amen” —the *it* being the Trinity... as the Trinity was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.

Well, same thing here in the final stanza: “For thus *it* was, is now, and shall be evermore.” It's a reference to the Triune God. The Trinity was, is now, and shall be evermore. So it's a beautiful way of rendering praise to the Triune God.

Let's listen to the hymn now.

Dr. Wymond: This is a recording of *Now Thank We All Our God*, by the choir of St. Paul's Cathedral in London:

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever-joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son, and Him who reigns with Them in highest heaven—
The one eternal God, whom earth and heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore. Amen

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