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Hymns of the Faith: “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”

Psalm 90

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.”

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas for “Hymns of the Faith.” We’re delighted that you've joined us this Sunday morning as we continue to work our way through the greatest songs of Christianity of the last two thousand years.

The hymnal, you know, is a repository of the devotional treasures of the ages, and yet all around us we see a people who have grown up, even in the churches, who don't have a knowledge of some of the rich hymns of the Christian tradition. And we also see young people everywhere waking up to a yearning for the old songs, the great texts of the church, and wanting to recover the singing heritage of Christianity, so we are delighted to go over some of these great hymns of the faith, to learn more about them, to learn about who wrote them, who composed the beautiful music, and to look at the texts and to consider the poetry and explore the beautiful and powerful meaning of its substance.

And today we are coming to one of without doubt the greatest hymns ever written in the English language. It's a paraphrase of Psalm 90, by one of the most famous hymn writers ever in English. And it's one of the best tunes, I think, in all of English hymnody. It's been interesting. Over the last few weeks we have been in Germany with these great German tunes, and in fact German tunes that were translated into English. This is an indigenous English hymn–English author, English composer–written at a significant time in English history…a great rendering of Psalm 90. And Derek, I'm wondering if you’d tell us just a little bit about Isaac Watts and about the background to this great hymn.

Dr. Thomas: Yes! I've been excited about doing this one because I think it would be true to say this is (next to “God Save the Queen”) probably the spiritual national anthem of Britain, at least in a bygone era. And at national events of any

importance this is probably the hymn that they're going to sing–written, as you've said, by Isaac Watts.

And Isaac Watts was a phenomenal hymn writer, perhaps next to Wesley the most well-known in the English language and England, and still being sung today. Every hymnbook…just open any hymnbook at random and just look for Isaac Watts, and there're probably dozens and dozens of hymns in there by Isaac Watts.

Isaac Watts was born in 1674, and this hymn is written in 1714, so we've moved ahead a good bit now from the previous ones we've been looking at. Watts was perhaps one of the most famous Non-Conformists of that period, and lived in Southampton on the south coast of England. He was given a very classical education, taught Greek and Latin and Hebrew by a Mr. Pinhorn, the rector of All Saints and Headmaster of the grammar school in Southampton. He was gifted and set apart really from his earliest childhood. He was destined for ordination in the Church of England. That's where he was heading, but he refused it and entered a Non-Conformist academy in Stoke Newington in 1690, and came under the influence of a pastor of an independent congregation there. He became a member of that congregation in 1693. He left the academy at the age of about twenty and spent three years at home, and it was then that the bulk of the hymns that we know of were written and sung there in Southampton Chapel. Spending really the vast majority of his life in composing hymns, he wrote some important theological texts. He is sometimes criticized in his doctrine of Christ; he held to a somewhat peculiar view in at least one area….but I've never seen evidence of it in the hymns themselves, although it is sometimes pointed out.

Dr. Duncan: I've wondered, and I've not done research on this… because the only time I've read criticism of Watts in that area, it's been from my Psalm-singing friends, and I have wondered whether that was an ax to grind because of Watts' role in developing the paraphrases, in inserting the Christological names into the text of the Psalm paraphrases that he did.

Dr. Thomas: Well, it's an interesting question which Watts actually addressed, that if we are on the other side of Malachi, on this side of Pentecost, then do we not sing the Psalms with the rest of the Bible in mind? Namely, their fulfillment in mind? Because if all you do is sing the Psalms — and I believe we ought to sing all of the Psalms…150 Psalms — but if all you do is sing the Psalms as they were given in Hebrew, translated into English, then you never sing Christ. You sing about Him, and you sing some Old Testament references to Him, but you can never say the words, "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear." And that to me — I mean, you can preach about Jesus and you can pray to Jesus, and you can read about Jesus in the New Testament, and you can read about Him in the Old Testament, but you can never use His name…not the name that was given to Him. And that to me is important, and I think that's part of the reason Watts decided to Christianize the Psalms.

Dr. Duncan: He also thought that many of the metrical Psalm texts were just bad! And you know, I think that's a correct assessment!

Dr. Thomas: Many of our friends who believe in exclusive Psalm-singing (and I have family members now who are exclusive Psalm-singers! My own daughter and son-in-law!) But as I've had this conversation with them — gently! — if you try to force the original Psalm into meter but try to retain as much as you can of the original cadence of the Hebrew text, you're going to be forced into some pretty odd translations.

Dr. Duncan: I was writing a little doggerel myself just this last week, trying to follow the logic of Philippians 1:2, 3 and sticking as close as I could to the text, and not only did I come out with doggerel in terms of my poetry, but you end up having to insert for the sake of rhyme and rhythm language that's not there. I mean, you just have to do it. And it's interesting to see how Watts does that in a hymn like *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,* which again is paraphrased from Psalm 90. For those of you who don't remember Psalm 90… maybe some of you remember it from either the King James or from the beautiful old Miles Coverdale version of Psalm 90 that is in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

"Lord, Thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, Thou art God from everlasting."

And Watts takes that language and gives you,

"Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."

And he gets that out of "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations." So it's poetic, but it's reflecting ideas that are pulled out of the Psalm itself.

Dr. Thomas: The date of this hymn, the rendition of Psalm 90, is 1719, and historians will point out that in 1714 there was a fairly important event that took place in monarchy in England. Queen Anne…in August of 1714. Queen Anne was the daughter of the Catholic King James II, although she was a Protestant. But it was understood that at her demise her Catholic brother would take the throne, and there was an attempt through Parliament to enact something called "The Schism Act" which would insure the Catholic succession. And then all of a sudden Queen Anne — now this act didn't get through Parliament in time, and all of a sudden she dies. There was a very famous preacher in London by the name of Thomas Bradbury who took as his text that Sunday morning that colorful passage from II Kings 9 where Jehu is coming into the courtyard, and Jezebel is up on the second or third floor. And he calls out, "Who's on my side?" And some

eunuchs apparently appear on the balcony, and he says, “Throw the woman down!” and they do. And there's a gory description. And the text is from that passage:

“Go, see now this cursed woman and bury her, for she is a king's daughter.”

Dr. Duncan: So that's a biblical reference in support of defenestration!

Dr. Thomas: You can imagine in 1719 perhaps some of the connotations of “*Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,* our hope for years to come” in a moment of national crisis and importance — at least for some. And just like many of the hymns — in fact, the hymn we were looking at last week — have this connotation of being delivered from war or pestilence.

Dr. Duncan: Oh, there was tremendous fear in England about what this would mean. Would it mean the loss of the liberties that had been gained at the price of much blood?

Dr. Thomas: …and the return to persecution, and perhaps some martyrdom, even.

Dr. Duncan: And so again there was a tremendous sense… Isn't it interesting how just as we were looking at *Now Thank We All Our God*, and Bill Wymond reminded us that this song, perhaps through its associations with the end of The Thirty Years War, had won a special place in the hearts of Germans, so that it was a hymn ranked up towards the very top of their national experience and used on significant national occasions. This hymn too was associated with tremendous national deliverance. And perhaps this is one of the reasons that here, three hundred years on, it's still used at significant national events. I'm trying to think…was this one of the hymns that was used in the Diana celebration? I think in looking at the bulletin it may have been one of the hymns used at the recent Diana remembrance.

Dr. Wymond: Yes, I was just going to say that it was used at the burial of The Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey, which occurred in the early 1920's. That was a huge event in the life of the British, and they prepared for that in a very special and meticulous way. And so I thought it was interesting that they very purposefully chose this hymn for that occasion, which showed that it was ranked right at the top as far as their national experience.

Dr. Duncan: Well, it was also used for Winston Churchill's funeral in 1965. So I know on a number of major events in relatively recent British history it's been a hymn that they have utilized.

Bill, tell us a little bit about the… it's an incredible tune. It's a William Croft tune.

Dr. Wymond: That's right. And this is another one of those tremendously simple and strong tunes. As with the tune that we looked at last week, *Now Thank We All Our God,* this tune only uses seven notes, and yet because this has such a firm, fixed place in the hearts and the minds of Christians who have been in traditional worship settings, there's no mistake just with the first phrase of this hymn as to what this hymn is. I'll play it on a simple instrument here [plays].

That tune is so well known that you only have to sound probably the first two or three notes of it, and everybody immediately will know what it is, which just shows how fixed it is in our hearts.

The thing about this tune that interests me is that it has such strength. It's like the tune last week, also, *Now Thank We All Our God*. This hymn has a real masculine sense of strength about it (no offense to the ladies at all). A lot of the tunes used for hymns in Germany and in England either had their source in the Gregorian chant or in folk songs, and this one I think has more of a folk song background to it.

If it were Gregorian chant, it would go up and down the scale as a Gregorian chant. Gregorian chant makes very few skips. It just goes right up and down [plays example, *Of the Father's Love Begotten*]. But these hymns that have more of a folk song background make step-wise motions, but the steps are small, which in and of themselves conveys a certain strength to them.

And this particular melody steps back and forth, but in an ascending way, which just emotionally for us — since we're constituted to respond to music emotionally — gives a feeling of building, of building strength. Let me just do the steps. [Plays tune.] So it moves up and down the scale and makes these steps back, and then it jumps farther up the scale and so on. But it never does go more than what we call a fourth in music, and I'm going to play that interval for you [plays]. A fourth in music is a very strong interval, when you move up a fourth. All women would agree with that, I'm sure, because of this melody [plays] — that wonderful *Here Comes the Bride*! It has a step that is strong.

The strength that we hear in this melody goes all the way throughout the melody, and so well conveys the strength of the text. You can hear this Psalm…as we were saying about one last week, you can hear this Psalm being sung by the Jews as they are in the synagogue and they're divided into two parts. And the first part sings the first line, and then the other group sings the second line. So this hymn works really well that particular way.

The strength of this Psalm tune helps to put forth this kind of propositional truth. You were saying about another song about how there's such content. We're not just praising God over and over with a mantra-like phrase, but we're saying things about God. We're saying propositional truths, strong things about God.

And so this melody helps you to say strong things about God because of the simple steps that it has in it. And yet, as I said, these are powerful steps; so much so that composers adapted this tune for great works. Bach knew this tune over there in Germany, and he used it as the theme for probably one of his greatest fugues, part of the *Prelude and Fugue in E Flat,* which is called *The St. Anne Fugue*, because that's the name of this tune. And that's probably one of his greatest organ compositions. And right in the fugue he starts right off with this phrase like this…and then as the fugue builds, then the melody is brought in at the last on these booming resounding low pedal notes, and you get that theme coming back again. And there's not a stronger statement, and it fits so well this particular text, I think.

Dr. Duncan: Vaughan Williams incorporates this hymn into his *Lord, Thou Hast Been Our Refuge*, his setting of the Miles Coverdale English *Book of Common Prayer* rendering of Psalm 90, and sort of juxtaposes the two. You know, he'll have one going and then he'll have the small chorus echo back and forth. So it's a beautiful, powerful tune. And you know, it keeps that… you were pointing out that sort of step up, step back…it keeps that sort of one-two, one-two thing going throughout the whole of the tune.

Dr. Wymond: It creates a tension actually by doing that. There are different ways of conveying strength. One of them we talked about before is just staying on the same note, as with the *A Mighty Fortress*. But by making these strides stepping back and forth and so on like that, but within a narrow range, you get this great sense of some colossus striding over. You could use it in a cartoon, almost, for effect, if you wanted to.

Dr. Thomas: Is there a sense in the opening line….? It begins falling…but then it goes up — "Our hope…" and I always think that that, especially in the first stanza, of hope, is going up. It would make no sense if it was going down.

Dr. Wymond: In music, a good tune will do the right thing. And this good tune goes up that fourth, as we were saying, which is a very strong interval, and is used in a lot of hymns to convey hope, to convey confidence, and so on like that.

Dr. Thomas: There are certain first lines that are so familiar, and Watts was such a prolific hymn writer. If I just give you the first line of some of his famous hymns… "Before Jehovah's awful throne"; "Come, Dearest Lord, descend and dwell"; Come, let us join our cheerful songs"; "Come, we that love the Lord"; "From all that dwell below the skies"; "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun"; "Join all the glorious names"; "There is a land of pure delight"; "When I survey the wondrous cross"–these are all very, very familiar lines. And *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past* is one of those. Our literary friends will remember a very famous reference to it in Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley*, perhaps.

Dr. Duncan: The famous Methodist hymnologist, Albert Edwards Bailey, says of

this hymn:

“By universal consent, this hymn is one of the grandest in the whole realm of English hymnody. It is found in practically every hymnal. No other embraces in such moving language the whole scope of history, faith in a God who realizes His purposes through history, and the solidarity of a nation which in times of crisis places its hope in the eternal.”

That's almost a poetic description of the song itself. And again, if you go and read the hymn, or go and read in the Psalms, Psalm 90, in your Bible translation, and then look at how poetically and yet theologically faithfully, Watts has rendered the text of this hymn, this Psalm paraphrase, you’ll be struck at how he has been careful to lift every idea in his text out of the Psalm, and yet he puts them together in some interesting combinations.

In the first stanza, that you've already mentioned, “Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,” that idea clearly comes out of the first verse of the Psalm. But the idea of “our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home” is actually picked up from elsewhere in the Psalm. But he has to do that for the balance of the text of the poem itself. And there are very, very memorable and picturesque lines in the text of this hymn, like:

A thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.

The busy tribes of flesh and blood, with all their lives and cares,
Are carried downwards by Your flood, and lost in following years.

But let's listen to this hymn together.

> Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
> Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home:
>
> Under the shadow of Your throne, Your saints have dwelt secure;
> Sufficient is Your arm alone, and our defense is sure.
>
> Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,
> From everlasting You are God, to endless years the same.
>
> A thousand ages in your sight are like an evening gone;
> Short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.
>
> The busy tribes of flesh and blood, with tall their lives and cares,
> Are carried downward by Your flood, and lost in following years.
>
> Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away;

They fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.

Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come:
O be our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.

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