

Hymns of the Faith: “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”

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 is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. And it's a joy to be here again for “Hymns of the Faith” with Bill, and Derek Thomas. Good morning.

Dr. Duncan: We are continuing to look at favorite Christmas carols... and, you know, we just don't have enough Sundays in the month to do all of them! I think I start listening to Christmas carols sometime in October and continue right on through to the end of the year!

And today we are actually looking at one of the favorite Christmas carols of all time. And it's interesting that just as Charles Wesley gave us *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, which is still one of the favorite Easter hymns, so also he gave us *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*.

I want to talk a little bit about the history of the text of this song as well as its background. We were talking off-air, that in his original version, which was actually changed in the hymnal that George Whitefield produced, that he didn't say, “Hark! the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King.’” What did he say, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: “Hark! How all the welkin rings, glory to the King of Kings.” W-e-l-k-i-n.

Dr. Duncan: Now, is *welkin*...is that Middle English, or is ...? Tell us a little bit about that, because the Oxford English Dictionary tells us a little bit about that word.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, it describes the “welkin” as not only the sky, but also the abode of the Deity — the celestial regions, or what we might call heaven.

Dr. Duncan: From Greek times, the term *heaven* or *heavens* has been used to describe various things. The first heaven was referred to by the Greeks and the Romans after them as the *sky*; the second heavens were *outer space*; and the third heavens were *the abode of the gods* — or, in the case of the Apostle Paul, speaking in Corinthians, the abode of the one true God. And he spoke of having been caught up into the third heavens (although he did it modestly, by saying a man he knew had been caught up into the third heavens).

And the welkin, then, refers to the first and the third heavens in that sort of scheme of things...not only the sky, but the abode of Deity. It is a word that perhaps even in Wesley's time was...I mean, obviously some people thought fairly soon after the writing of the hymn that it would be better to describe this with different language. And so by the time Whitefield, who is a contemporary of Wesley, is crafting his hymnbook, he's ready to change that language.

And there's another phrase that's changed, as well. I'm trying to think of the minister...whose name was Madan, changes another line in the hymn. But it's pretty well intact, although we end up only with three stanzas. And as Bill Wymond was reminding us last week, Charles Wesley's hymns sometimes would have eighteen stanzas! And I have no idea how many of them they would have commonly sung, Bill, in the course of a worship service. But typically we have three stanzas of *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*.

Dr. Thomas: It first appeared in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* in 1739. That's right smack in the middle of the Great Awakening, so the period of Jonathon Edwards here in...well, it was still Britain then...but...or at least a colony... [*Laughter*] ...but let's say 'the United States!' And of course the period of George Whitefield in England. And I think Whitefield published his volume about 1755 or so, about fifteen years after the publication of this hymn by Wesley.

Now, Charles Wesley... Some people would say, Bill, that Charles Wesley is perhaps the greatest hymn writer of all time. I suppose he vies with Isaac Watts, but in terms of quality and quantity and survivability, perhaps, Charles Wesley's hymns are...

Dr. Duncan: He wrote, Bill, around 7,000 hymns? Is that right?

Dr. Wymond: You've caught me off guard here, but I think it was 5,000 hymns or something like that.

Dr. Thomas: Six thousand five hundred, according to this account I have.

Dr. Duncan: And tell us about, Bill... Did he collaborate with people on tunes? Did he use his own tunes? I want you to tell us more about this tune, because there's a wonderful history to it. But in general, did Wesley collaborate with

someone on tunes, or did he just sort of pick up what was in common use?

Dr. Wymond: I think it was a bit of both, but he ranged far and wide for tunes. And one thing that he did that I think helps so much with his tunes is to choose good tunes — tunes that really did match the words well, tunes that had quality to them. And so a lot of tunes that otherwise probably would have passed out of memory because they didn't have a good text took on a great life because of that.

Dr. Duncan: Well, this particular hymn probably has attained the universal popularity that it enjoys, not only in the English-speaking world but all over the world, because of a tune that later became associated with it. Presumably this tune that we sing the carol to now was never sung in the time of Wesley, because it was a tune that basically was borrowed from Felix Mendelssohn, who would have written maybe a hundred years after the text was originally penned. And it's a great tune. It is one of the most memorable tunes of all of hymnody. Bill?

Dr. Wymond: This tune comes from a collection of anthems of praise that Mendelssohn did. There were three that were grouped together in a collection called *Festesang*, which means *hymns of praise*. And these hymns of praise are very exalted. I don't know what the occasion was for this, but they are centering on the concept of the light that the word of God brought, praising God for the way that the appearance of His word through prophets and written word and so on like that changed society.

And this particular tune in its original setting started off with these words: "Let our theme of praise ascending blend in music's lofty strain, soaring through the starry main, peal in echoes never ending." And then it says, "learning dawn." And *learning* here alludes to the actual teaching of the Scriptures, and so on like that. But it's a very bold and assertive text right there in the beginning, and so is the hymn tune.

The hymn tune is one of my very favorite of the carol tunes because it is so well-conceived, so singable, so well-matching the text...just a wonderful joyful tune, as is the text. And Mendelssohn's music is fun for choirs to sing, because he just had a gift for giving everybody an important part. If you sing Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, you do not miss out because even if you are an alto or a bass, or something like that, the theme will come to you somewhere along the way in the song that you're doing.

This particular song — I'm probably going to tell you more than you want to hear!
—

Dr. Duncan: I doubt it!

Dr. Wymond: This particular song is in unison a lot — everybody doing the melody [*plays first phrase*], so it has a lot of strength because of that. And most of the anthem is in unison there. It does have, though, the parts that are used straight into the carol where it goes [*plays*].

And then later it has more tune and text than were found in the carol, and it talks about one sort of negative thing. It says, “Mortals roamed without a guide; darkness clouded every nation, not a ray could be described. All was gloom and desolation...” and so on like that. And so Mendelssohn goes with his tune into a minor key [*plays*]—sounds like doom and gloom and like that right there with the augmented fourth, especially. And so Mendelssohn was so good at matching tune to text and so on, and so I think that's just a good illustration of that. But I do like this tune!

Dr. Duncan: And this tune was arranged by someone named Cummings... to be used with this carol, Bill, or was it just used and associated by somebody else with the carol?

Dr. Wymond: That's my understanding, yes.

Dr. Duncan: And Derek, you are my friend who has been reading the British classical magazine longer than anybody else I know. Catch people up on who Mendelssohn was, because actually some of this “darkness to light” poetry that he's chosen for these songs actually fits into his own story. Tell us just a little bit about him.

Dr. Thomas: Well, Mendelssohn ... Of course, I first encountered Mendelssohn as a teenager. I remember purchasing a copy of his Fourth Symphony, *The Italian Symphony*, and the overture... *The New Hebrides*. Perhaps in our context here his Third Symphony — the so-called Reformation Symphony, set to ...

Dr. Duncan: You'll hear *A Mighty Fortress* sort of woven through that symphony...

Dr. Thomas: ...coming through very clearly at the end of that symphony. And I've always loved Mendelssohn, not perhaps with the same intense musical analysis that my friend Bill has, but I've always loved Mendelssohn.

I was just always intrigued by Charles Wesley. You know he's the eighteenth son of Samuel and Susannah Wesley. If you go to London today and go to Bunhill Fields opposite Wesley's headquarters there in London, there's a graveyard called Bunhill Fields where Daniel Defoe and John Owen and John Bunyan...but also Susannah Wesley is buried there — the mother of these eighteen children.

And Charles went with John Wesley to Georgia. It was an ill-fated mission. He was only there for a few months, basically because even though he'd been

ordained as an Anglican minister, priest...he wasn't converted. And like his brother, John, when he comes back...he is 31 years old when his heart was strangely warmed. And Charles had a similar experience. And this hymn is written the year after. So it's one year after his conversion. And I've always loved this hymn because of the way it closes with the reference to the second birth:

“Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.”

An allusion, of course, to John 3 and Jesus' words to Nicodemus: “Unless a man is born again...” I always wonder if Charles Wesley is actually recalling what had happened to him the previous year, having come to faith in Christ.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, you just played for us some of the music from which the melody that we sing this hymn to is drawn. Play us a stanza of the hymn as we know it now. You've got in your mind both the major and the minor that Mendelssohn... Now Cummings takes that and puts it together like this. [*Dr. Wymond plays “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”.*] OK. Now, Derek and Bill, my armchair musicologist/psychologist friends, explain to me why is it that Mendelssohn soothes me? And why is it that that tune is so...I mean, I just love that tune! Why is it just every fiber of my being just likes that tune? What's happening to me in that tune, Bill?

Dr. Wymond: Well, the tune is a positive tune, I think partly because of the intervals. I think that the interval of a fourth [plays] is a very bright and happy kind of interval, and Mendelssohn used it in other places. Brides love this one because... [*plays first two chords as “Here Comes the Bride”.*]

Dr. Duncan: That's true! Dum-dum-da-dum!

Dr. Wymond: And then, there are a lot of thirds in this [plays to illustrate], and as those intervals walk up the scale, it's just a combination of joyful, energetic intervals. So I think that's one thing that makes this tune really happy.

And then, it has some of the vigor of some of the German folk songs and choruses, too. I think in the third line where it goes “joyful all ye nations, rise” — that's just a very assertive and happy...and you can just see the folks walking along the meadows and the hills, almost like *The Sound of Music*.

Dr. Duncan: It's very proclamatory. It's very...you're declaring this. It's soothing at the same time that it's bold, and the music supplies you the kind of energy that you need in order to make this grand declaration.

Derek, you've already drawn our attention to a few of the lines, but the images that are piled up by Wesley and the statements of declaration about what God is doing in Christ are beautiful:

“Hark! the herald angels sing,
‘Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”

And by the way, that parallels that beautiful statement about the second birth. You know Wesley can't get out of the first declaration without saying the very heart of the glory of Christmas is the glory of reconciliation of God and sinners, which is so healthy for us today.

Dr. Thomas: Well, I have a mission to reinstate some of the original text, which Whitefield dropped. Wesley wanted to put incarnation in the context of the fall, and there are some extraordinary lines that come after the text as we know it. There were verses seven to ten:

Come, desire of nations, come;
Fix in us Thy humble home.
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
Now display Thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore,
Now in mystic union join,
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.

Dr. Duncan: I have a feeling that these are going to show up somewhere in the Morning Guide to Worship to be sung at First Pres!

Dr. Thomas: Well, it gets better!

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.”

Let us Thee, though lost, regain;
Vive the life, the inner man.
Oh, to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.

(Well, not so good right at the end there!) [*Laughter*] The theology, of course, of Romans 5 — “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive”....Wesley's very, very strong Adam/Christ dynamic there.

Dr. Duncan: These strong simple intervals progressing up and then coming back down also help him say in the second stanza:

“Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ the everlasting Lord!”

[I love this line...]

“Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of the Virgin's womb.”

I think that's maybe special to me because in the era of the early church, one of the charges of the skeptics against Christianity was why, if your religion is true, did it take so long for the Christ to come into the world? And of course the church fathers responded by pointing out that God had been at work for the redemption of mankind from the very beginning of our history; that there was a reason and a logic for Christ to come into the world when He did. And so that line, “Late in time behold him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.”

“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.”

Amazing poetry!

Dr. Wymond: Well, I am amazed at the amount of theology, frankly, that is in here. As Derek was reading each phrase, I thought, “There's a whole theological discussion on every one of those.” And so, as I think with other teaching songs such as *A Mighty Fortress* and so on like that, when there's declaration being made, you keep hearing this repeat of the music, the same note [*plays to illustrate*]...and then... [*plays to illustrate*]...and so when they're trying to really underscore what they're saying, they repeat the note over and over again.

That's, I think, a musical device to emphasize and to add punch. And I will tell you that when I am in the malls or shopping and Christmas music is playing and I hear this carol come on, I don't resent it even though it's being used for commercial reasons because it is just pouring theology, and people are learning and hearing these words perhaps not even realizing what's happening. But it's what I would think is a kind of pre-evangelism.

Dr. Duncan: The text of this carol actually picks up a number of the themes in Philippians 2, some parts of the Christ-song that we were studying earlier this year at First Presbyterian Church, as it celebrates the self-emptying, the willingness to make himself nothing of Christ. “Mild He lays His glory by...” — what a beautiful rendering of Philippians 2:5-11, in which Christ makes himself of no reputation.

“Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die”

[...beautifully stating the redemptive purposes of His enfleshment, of His incarnation. And then there's, as you said, Derek...]

“Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.”

He gets regeneration, he gets the vital importance of conversion; and that again, in the first Great Awakening, though there would have been theological differences between Calvinist Presbyterians and Calvinist Methodists, that would have been something that we would have all shared a great concern for, to see divine Holy Spirit regeneration. And it's something that we still care about today, and so even as we sing about something very precious to us, the coming of Christ in the world, we see the work of Christ tied to that regenerating work.

Are there other stanzas that come to mind in the same way, as you look through parts of the hymn that have been left out to us today, Derek? Are there background things that you would think it would be helpful for people to know about Wesley or about the hymn?

Dr. Thomas: Well, this particular hymn I think for us signals Christmas. I'm not so sure that that's the first intention of Wesley when he writes this hymn, to write a Christmas hymn. It's a hymn about the incarnation, to be sure. And what is fascinating for me...some of Wesley's great hymns — *And Can It Be That I Should Gain?*; *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*; *Come, Thou Long-expected Jesus*; *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*; *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*; *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*; *Soldiers of Christ, Arise!* — and we could go on. Those are all very familiar hymns by Charles Wesley. But the quality of Charles Wesley's hymns is that theological content.

Dr. Duncan: And they almost always get to the second birth, the new birth, somewhere in there. You know, even in the ones you just listed — *And Can It Be?* — this beautiful picture of the Holy Spirit breaking in and quickening us, bringing us alive from the dead — finds its way into his hymns.

Dr. Thomas: And the way in which this particular hymn is so thoroughly Christ-centered. You might say how could it not be, since it's about the incarnation, but every line of it is examining and turning over a variation on the enfleshment of Christ and what it means for God, where (in another of Wesley's hymns) “God contracted to a span” — from the elbow to the tip of your finger.

Dr. Wymond: But you know, in that connection there has sometimes been a misunderstanding, I think, of Wesley when they were talking about the incarnation and His setting aside His glory. Some people thought that He had set

aside a lot more than just His glory, and really had lost aspects of His divinity and so on.

Dr. Duncan: Which Wesley clearly didn't mean, but people in the nineteenth century took him to mean. Let's listen to this carol together, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: The version that we will be listening to of *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* is sung by the Philadelphia Chorus and Orchestra, with Eugene Ormandy conducting. This is a very nice arrangement done some years ago by Arthur Harris.

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th'angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King."

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of the Virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King."

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King."

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).