

## Hymns of the Faith: "God Moves in a Mysterious Way"

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." ... Here now with "Hymns of the Faith" is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thanks, Bill Wymond. It's good to be talking with you and Derek Thomas this morning about hymns, on "Hymns of the Faith."

We have been enjoying our study of some of the great hymns of the Christian tradition. Christianity is a faith that sings, because we have a Savior who has saved us at the cost of His own blood; and it is our joy to worship Him with heart, soul, and song, and to do so with fifty generations and two thousand years of believers. And one of the joys of our studies on "Hymns of the Faith" has been to go from era to era, from time to time, from country to country, from culture to culture, and to sing with those saints the songs of old. And not only to enjoy singing the very word that they lifted up to God, but to enjoy singing the very words lifted up to God to the very tunes that they lifted those words up to God with. And having gone from the sixteenth century to the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, we're jumping back now to a tune that comes from the early part of the seventeenth century — maybe 1600 or so.

This tune shows up in the Scottish Psalter by 1615, and William Cowper, the author of this wonderful hymn text, is from the late eighteenth century. He's from the sort of 1770's, right in that era. He was a contemporary, Derek, of John Newton, and they collaborated on hymnals. They were involved in the production of the *Olney Hymnbook*, which is a very famous hymnbook from that time.

**Dr. Thomas:** For about a period of twenty or thirty years or so, Cowper (who was wholly dependent, I think, on Newton for the latter half of his life in an unusual way)...they collaborated together on producing some of the great hymns that we still sing.

**Dr. Duncan:** And the hymn that we're going to look at today is *God Moves in a*

*Mysterious Way*. It has long been one of my favorite hymns, but you told me this morning before we started taping that it is your favorite hymn. That's extraordinary. Tell us about that.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, because, I think, I've done so much thinking on the doctrine of providence, writing my dissertation on providence, or aspects of providence, that this hymn...my wife has to warn me not to quote this hymn too often in the sermon, because it automatically triggers some thoughts that, once they begin, the rest of the sermon's over because it's going to go downhill... [laughter]. And you know how you have triggers in your head. They're like little doors, and once you open them, it's hard to close them.

“God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.”

We're not sure just the exact circumstances behind the hymn; there could be many, of course, in Cowper's extraordinary life. And it's an example of how God uses broken vessels, and Cowper was a very broken vessel.

**Dr. Duncan:** Cowper was suicidal; he struggled with deep, deep depression. They would have called it *melancholia*. We would have no doubt diagnosed it as some form of depression today and he would have been medicated, no doubt. But he went through swings on several occasions; attempted to take his own life, unsuccessfully; struggled with doubts about his own salvation from time to time; and yet, in his bright periods...the poetry of this hymn is exceedingly powerful. It is simple, it is beautiful, but it is crystal clear in its declarations. And Cowper...we just looked at a hymn recently that probably out of the 1200 things that he wrote this is the only one that we'll ever remember, but Cowper wrote a number of outstanding texts, and this one is typical of the quality that he was able to produce. Walk us through just a little bit about Cowper's life, because I think it will be interesting to the listeners.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, Cowper, of course, was a poet and is known as a poet, and is studied by English literature majors as a poet.

**Dr. Duncan:** We should mention that his name is spelled C-o-w-p-e-r. Americans would think of “cooper” as C-o-o-p-e-r. But this is apparently a common spelling of that name in his own day. It looks like Cow-per, but is pronounced Coo-per.

**Dr. Thomas:** He was...I suppose a “PK” is what we'd call him today! He was born in the manse, or the rectory, in Berkhamsted, in November of 1731. That's just before the outbreak of the so-called Great Awakening. One thinks of the ministries of George Whitefield (and here, Jonathan Edwards) as beginning a few years after he was born.

He was a lawyer — a solicitor is what we would call him in Britain. He was called to the bar in 1754. By the age of 27 or so, maybe a little more than that...by the age of 30, he was declared to be...in the terms of the eighteenth century, he was declared to be mad. It was not a good time to suffer from depression, and I think all of your worst sort of thoughts about treating folk in that condition.

He had a wretched school experience in his early life. His experience at school was awful. I had a tinge of it in my own experience; not much, but I remember just dreading going to school, and bullied. I think he was always a very fragile...I'm inclined to say effeminate, but he was a poet, and given to less...although in school apparently he excelled for a period in cricket and football (what we would call soccer) just for a short time. But I don't think of William Cowper as athletic. He was always a fragile creature.

And then he fell in love with his cousin, whose name was Theodora Cowper. And although it was within the rules of consanguinity, as we say, technically speaking, it was still borderline to marry your first cousin. And in any case, her father forbade the marriage. And I think that was probably the beginning...most of his biographers seem to think that was the beginning of the slide into melancholy. He was probably predisposed to it. I wonder if today...you know, he might be bipolar or something like that. But he never recovered from it. And she, I believe, never married, and secretly attended to him in his latter years when he needed some nursing care. But he fell headlong — as you can imagine someone with a poetic disposition — fell headlong into love with this girl, and the marriage forbidden. And from there, by the time he was thirty, he was declared to be mad.

He attempted to take his life on at least three — and some biographers recount, I think, four or five incidents. The most famous one was on the River Thames. He hired a cab (horse and buggy, I might imagine) and was about three or four miles away. And he went to the river...it was night, it was dark. And he jumped into the river with the intention of killing himself, and the river was only a foot or so deep at that point. And he stood there weeping, just with the waters around his ankles. Then he...we won't go into all the details now, but he tried an overdose on several occasions, at least two occasions we know of. And how these things can live in the life and heart of somebody who was truly a believer, and a fragile broken believer...and it was in God's providence that John Newton.... You could not imagine a greater contrast between Cowper and this very masculine figure of John Newton. And they struck up an incredible friendship.

**Dr. Duncan:** And yet, don't you think that Newton's own recognition of his sin in his past made him such the perfect friend and pastor to this man, who was struggling with his own inner demons?

**Dr. Thomas:** And I think...let me be controversial here. Cowper and Newton were Calvinists, and I mean Calvinists with a capital "C"! And I think for Cowper,

part of his melancholia — I don't want to psychoanalyze him, but part of it was this enormous sense of sin. He was a sensitive soul and felt sin deeply. And it would take a Calvinistic view of a sovereign God who is yet gracious and effectual in His grace, I think, to meet Cowper's need for assurance. And I think Newton was exactly the man for him.

**Dr. Duncan:** The tune is just a tremendous tune used with lots of different Scottish songs. Bill, tell us a little bit about DUNDEE, because it's a great tune.

**Dr. Wymond:** I have always appreciated that tune DUNDEE because it is so easy to sing, and yet like other good tunes, it's different enough that you never confuse it with another tune. And as with easy-to-sing tunes, it just goes up and down the scale in a predictable way [*plays tune on piano*]. Anybody can sing that. And then at the high point of the poetry, the tune skips up and has an emotional high, as it were, because it goes [*plays phrase*]...and then the resolution of the poetry and the tune come easily at the end [*plays phrase*]. Now I didn't play any harmony because the Scots would have sung this without any harmony, probably—or at least, certainly without any instruments. But it's a wonderful tune: and, again, it has those characteristics of being simple, yet distinct and creative, and suitable to the words for which it's being used. And as you say, it's used for a lot of different texts, but it's just one of the most serviceable tunes, I think, in the Psalter.

I did want to ask Derek something — and this is a skip from talking about the tune.

Talking about Olney, I think it's remarkable that this great work on so many good hymns was done in a place like Olney. Can you tell us about that situation, that place?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, I think it's a bit like the small farm in Kentucky that we were thinking of! [*Laughter*] But it's small, it's country. Newton had a parish church there, but it was very rural and very English, if that's what you mean.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, what I was thinking was, because we revere John Newton so much, and because such creative work went on between Cowper and Newton in getting these hymns for the Olney congregation, one would have thought that it would have been a very large prestigious parish — one of the “top jobs” as it were — in the church at the time. And it wasn't at all. But these men regarded that congregation as just as important as though they were at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and they provided all of these original tunes and texts for the feeding of the souls there at that church. And I always think that that points us to the way that we should regard smaller churches. The people in those churches are just as important as the people in any pews, and deserve just as much energy out of their pastor, and creativity, as he can muster.

**Dr. Thomas:** And of course, John Owen wrote in one of his little treatises that the best size for a congregation was around 300, and he said anything more and you couldn't pastor them properly. And I think that's probably in God's providence, you know, why we have so much of Newton and Cowper, but especially Newton's works. I mean, he had time to devote to that.

**Dr. Duncan:** You know, another thing that strikes me as you mention that, Bill, is that if you look over the course of Christianity since the Reformation in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland...over and over amongst Presbyterians, amongst Congregationalists, amongst Church of England folk, amongst Baptists...some of the most remarkable ministries and some of the most remarkable products of ministry, whether it be in terms of sermons that are in print or hymns that have been written or other written products, have been created precisely in this kind of environment in what is a relatively obscure parish. You think of Thomas Boston in Ettrick, south of Edinburgh. Even today if you go through Ettrick, there is nothing there! It's just a tiny little village. That's where he did his work, and he had a tremendous effect on the whole of the nation and subsequent history. But, being faithful in what was not a prominent, prestigious, large, affluent, "important" congregational situation....

**Dr. Wymond:** And also — and I would like to be corrected on this — someone told me that a lot of these works that they put together were done for mid-week services, not for Sunday. So that's even more interesting to me, that it was not the most important (as many would think) service of the church, but it was for mid-week services.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, I know Newton was given to writing texts to be sung to go along with the sermons or messages that he was preaching. And this presumably would have been a relatively common practice amongst those ministers so gifted in that kind of poetic composition. And I think that's good for us to remember, because these people were...they themselves were not sort of stuck in the past one hundred years with a set of texts that had been handed down from time immemorial; they were themselves creatively composing material for the sung praise of the church all along. And I think a lot of people today who are reacting against traditional worship and traditional hymns think that there's always been this static core of material that people were singing; but, no, they were very creative, and we've just sifted through and have sort of the best of the best that we have carried on in our own time frame.

**Dr. Wymond:** That is an interesting thought to me because the tunes, as you say, and the texts that we now revere the most were sifted out of literally thousands upon thousands of hymns, and so we think that we have the cream of the crop in them; not that we don't want to continue to write, but only time and the church working through new creations can decide what should remain and what should be tossed.

**Dr. Duncan:** And it really...it's taken generations to get to this particular collection of hymns that have survived out of even these great writers, and you just don't know...there may be a song that's written five years ago that people really, really like to sing, and it will be fifty years before we know whether it's really going to hang on and have a life after that.

**Dr. Wymond:** We do have a problem in putting together hymnals, because people say 'Let's put the contemporary songs in there, the ones that the young people will like,' or something like that. And the minute you do that, you have dated the hymnal.

**Dr. Duncan:** That's so true.

**Dr. Wymond:** That comes from personal experience, I can tell you!

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, you know, because you've worked on hymnals. Better to stick those in your bulletin or use some other mechanism.. There were a couple of hymn texts and tunes that some people wanted to have included in a hymnal that you worked on, because they were popular at the time, and almost no one — and I'm talking about the young people — almost no young people sing those particular songs any more. In fact, they probably wouldn't even know them if you mentioned them to them. So it really is one of the challenges to try and figure out the balance between new material that's being written as opposed to the things that are contested.

But looking at the text of this hymn, Derek, it really is extraordinary. It's a confession of faith in God's mysterious providence.

“God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.”

If that is not a graphic image...I mean, that pulls up so many things in your mind and your heart when you hear it. Then the metaphor changes. Go ahead.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, the point of course of planting your footsteps in the sea is you can't see them. And riding in the storm, you can't see Him for the storm. And it's part of Cowper's experience. You know, right at the very end of his life, he lost the lady who had cared for him, and he plunged once again into deep melancholy, wasn't sure that God loved him, and lacked all assurance.

And then there's this marvelous description of him when he died. Someone is looking at him. He has just died, and there is this look ... and the quotation is, “There was this look of holy surprise on his face.” And just before he had died, he had uttered some words: “I am not shut out of heaven after all.” There is that

extraordinary sense, that right at the gates of heaven Satan gets hold of him once again and robs him of his assurance, and then as the gates open, this look of holy surprise on his face.

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes. The image, the metaphor changes in the second stanza from this stormy scene of invisible footsteps; now we're down in a mine. [That should strike at a Welshman's heart!]

“Deep in unfathomable mines  
of never failing skill  
He treasures up his bright designs,  
And works his sovereign will.”

**Dr. Thomas:** I think he's alluding to Job 38 — you know, when God hasn't spoken to Job in his trial and tribulation. And eventually when God does speak, “Prepare for action like a man...where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?”—and then it plunges into the depths of the sea and into the mines where no man had ever been. But God had been there, is the point. And I imagine this is probably the source for “deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill.”

**Dr. Duncan:** Then from these two images there comes this exhortation. And it's an exhortation to fellow saints, but you can also tell that for Cowper it's a self-exhortation, pointed in on himself: “Ye fearful saints... “ [Ya'!!!]

“Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.”

So there again another picture. Now we've gone from storm to mines to rain clouds, and this is his way of saying so much of a profounder thing than “behind every cloud there is a silver lining.” Much better than that, these clouds which look like storm clouds of judgment are actually going to break big with mercy and blessings.

And then the exhortation continues:

“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.”

That may be one of the most famous lines from the hymn: “...behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.” The fifth stanza is very famous as well, but I love the sixth stanza:

“Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter,  
And he will make it plain.”

And there again, resigning yourself to awaiting God's own interpretation, which may not come, Derek, in this life.

**Dr. Thomas:** And may never come. We will always be finite, even in glory. It's a matter in this life of faith, isn't it? We have to trust Him, that's the point. And God isn't obligated to give us the reasons. We must trust Him that the reasons are good ones.

**Dr. Duncan:** God moves in a mysterious way. Bill Wymond, let's listen to this hymn.

**Dr. Wymond:** Dr. Duncan, singing this hymn this morning will be Ben Roberson...*God Moves in a Mysterious Way*.

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill  
He treasures up his bright designs,  
And works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,



And scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter,  
And he will make it plain.

**Dr. Wymond:** This has been “Hymns of the Faith”, brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The First Presbyterian Church is located on North State Street, just a block north of the Mississippi Baptist Medical Center. Our worship services are at 8:30, 11:00, and 6:00 p.m. We'd invite you to come and worship with us today.

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