

## Hymns of the Faith: “Whate'er My God Ordains is Right”

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 with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill and Derek. This is Ligon Duncan, and we are here today to talk about hymns of the faith, and this morning we are going to be talking about one of my very favorite hymns.

It's yet another of these great German hymns, and it is a powerful affirmation of God's care for us even in the midst of our troubles, and the wisdom of what God appoints for our lives. And that is something that is so rare, sadly so, in so much of modern Christian spirituality, especially here in the United States.

And the substance of the assertion of this song just is mind-bogglingly powerful, and I think pastorally comforting, when Christians understand it. Let me just give you a taste of it, and then I want you to tell us a little bit about the author and Catherine Winkworth, who came along and found this beautiful hymn and gave it to us in English. And then we'll talk about the tune, too, but here's the central assertion of this song: “Whatever my God ordains is right.” And it's an assertion that God has ordained everything in our lives, and that it is right. And so it goes on:

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
His holy will abideth;  
I will be still whate'er he doth,  
And follow where he guideth.  
He is my God; though dark my road,  
He holds me that I shall not fall:  
Wherefore to him I leave it all.

This is an extraordinarily comprehensive, sweeping assertion of trust in God when all the lights have gone out. And there's a background to that great text in

the history surrounding it, and so let's talk just a little bit about Samuel Rodigast, the composer. Derek, tell us a little bit about that composer of the hymn itself...the author of the hymn.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, Samuel Rodigast is a seventeenth century hymn writer, a German born in 1649. That sort of places him just a few years after the Westminster Assembly that brought about *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Shorter Catechisms* in England. He was born in Groben in Germany, and was a pastor there. And later, in 1680, became a teacher at the Gymnasium, the Greyfriars Gymnasium (which must have some Scottish connection, I'd think) at Berlin. This particular hymn first appeared in a hymnbook in 1676, and written it seems for the composer of the tune, who was sick, Severus Gastorius.

**Dr. Duncan:** Although there's a debate, I think, amongst hymnologists. Some people will assert that Pachelbel actually wrote the tune, but we're going to let Bill explain that.

**Dr. Thomas:** Now, the hymn, of course is known to us. It was obviously written in German, but the hymn is one of these hymns translated by Catherine Winkworth. We've come across her at least once, and maybe twice before in this little series that we're doing. She translated *If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee*, and *Now Thank We All Our God*...nineteenth century Cheshire, which is in middle England...obviously a German scholar of some kind, and we know her because of these wonderful translations that she did of these German hymns.

**Dr. Wymond:** She's a remarkable person, because she did so many. We talked about them before, but I just admire her. There's nothing dramatic about her life otherwise than that she was a good German scholar; and, I think, went to Germany for about a year, collected all these various excellent songbooks, and just took out of them the cream of the crop. And we are so much better off with that lady's work.

**Dr. Duncan:** We are hugely indebted to her for those labors. Derek, the hymn speaks to a specific context. Rodigast has this friend, Gastorius, who himself is sick. And he writes this word of Christian exhortation and encouragement to him. And if what we think is right, Gastorius ends up writing the tune to go with it. Even if the tune that we most frequently associate with it doesn't end up being Gastorius' tune, but is Pachelbel's tune from a later time, he did write some tune to go with this particular text. But here's a Christian, an educator, just writing a word of biblical exhortation to a friend to trust in God in the midst of his illness and troubles, no matter how severe it is.

Walk with me through the text, and let's start in this first stanza and just talk about the doctrines that he assembles in order to encourage a Christian who's undergoing trials, because it's instructive, I think. So just take the first couple of lines of the first stanza and tell us what he's appealing to, Derek.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, it's on the word in the story of Abraham: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" But in the opening phrase you've got the doctrine of God's foreordination, a strong doctrine of predestination, of God in total, absolute control of everything: "Whate'er my God *ordains* is right" — so that what happens, happens because God wills it to happen, and wills it to happen before it happens, and wills it to happen in the way that it happens. And then you've got, much like Ephesians 1, the sovereignty of God and foreordination, the will of God, so the second phrase is "His holy will abideth." Those are strong, strong statements. And, "I will be still whate'er He doth, and follow where He guideth."

**Dr. Duncan:** So there's the response to recognizing that what God ordains is right, and that His will is holy. There's this personal — not just resignation, but embrace of that will: "I will be still, whate'er He doth, and follow where He guideth," because of this trust in the rightness and the holiness of what God appoints.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, let me ask you something, Derek. We live in an era where everybody is trying to be very sensitive to the Muslim faith, and so often you'll hear someone in that faith say, 'Whatever Allah wills,' you know. And so are we at one with them in doctrine? Is there a difference?

**Dr. Thomas:** There's an enormous difference. Islam is essentially deterministic, in that there is certainly an emphasis on sovereignty...

**Dr. Duncan:** ...even fatalistic, I think...

**Dr. Thomas:** ...fatalistic, yes.

**Dr. Wymond:** So what do you mean by that?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, God has ordained everything that happens, but we are still held accountable, held responsible. There is such a thing as freedom within that ordination, and that freedom is real.

**Dr. Duncan:** If I could break that down in just a very simplistic way, I would say that in those aspects of Islamic theology that press this kind of determinism that the deduction is made because God is sovereign, it doesn't matter what I do; whereas the Christian deduction is always entirely different, 180 degrees different: "Because God is sovereign, it does matter what I do" is the Christian deduction.

If you could summarize the difference between the two views of the way God's sovereignty is deployed, it would be that in the Christian view, God's sovereignty requires and under girds and reinforces our human responsibility, whereas in the Muslim view it often undermines it.

**Dr. Thomas:** I love the way that this hymn is almost antiphonal. There's a statement...actually it keeps on repeating the statement, "Whate'er my God ordains is right." That's the opening phrase of each stanza. But there's a response then: "His holy will abideth. I will be still, whate'er He doth, and follow where He guideth." And again, "He is my God; though dark my road, He holds me that I shall not fall: wherefore to Him I leave it all." It's antiphonal. And it would be interesting as a choral piece if one section stated the doctrine and another section gave the response.

**Dr. Duncan:** That's a good idea, Dr. Wymond!

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, it's just like the Psalms and the way they were sung in the synagogue in the early church. They were the main songs, and they were sung in that antiphonal way.

**Dr. Thomas:** I think for me what is so fundamental about this hymn is that it raises the question that every one of us has asked: "Is it fair? Is what's happening to me, or my friend, or my wife or my son, daughter, mother or father...is it fair? Is providence fair? Is what God is doing fair?"

And here's the opening affirmation: "Whate'er my God ordains is right." God works all things together for the good of those that love him.

**Dr. Duncan:** You know, another thing that I love about it is that you can tell that even as Rodigast is writing this for a friend, and thus as an encouragement and exhortation for him, that there's in the author (and I think especially in the singer of the song) there's preaching to ourselves again, which we've talked about over and over in the hymns. You know — it's "whate'er my God ordains is right." You don't even sit down to write that without knowing the experience of having to preach that to yourself, because you know that even if you do believe that—and we do, all of us in this room this morning believe that fervently—we also know that there are circumstances in our lives where we have had to preach that to ourselves.

And every opportunity that you have to sing this hymn, you have a chance to preach that to yourself again. And that makes those antiphonal parts of it, I think, even more special. Strong affirmations: "Whatever my God ordains is right"; and then later in the song, again one of my favorite lines, "He is my God, though dark my road; He holds me that I shall not fall." And these wonderful words of response, "Wherefore to Him I leave it all." So throughout the hymn the text gives you this kind of preaching to yourself response to God's truth: focus on who God is and what He does; respond to it, and rest in it.

Bill, the tune (whoever wrote it) is wonderful. I love this tune. Tell us a little bit about it.

**Dr. Wymond:** It is a really good tune. It's more of a didactic, or a teaching, tune. I think it's so straightforward without a lot of floweriness to it, but it's easy to get hold of and it's a tune that you do not tire of, even though it is quickly learned.

And let's say that Pachelbel did write this tune. He was a contemporary of Bach, although he was older than Bach, and he was in Nuremburg, which is not far generally from the area where Bach was.

But this hymn was in the hymnal that was used in Weimar. And before Bach went to his last and most important post, which was in Leipzig, Germany, he was at the court of Weimar as the court musician; and so I'm sure that he used that hymnal, that Weimar hymnal, in which this tune was. And he certainly used this tune, we know, because he has written organ pieces on it, and it appears in cantatas.

**Dr. Thomas:** And everybody knows Pachelbel because of the *Canon*....that arrangement that people have at weddings.

**Dr. Wymond:** Oh, yes! And we have totally overused it! I am so tired of that song! Everybody has it now. I'll be glad when we latch on to another one for a while!

But Bach really obviously loved this tune, and loved the words. And I'm thinking about the era in which he lived, where things were so much more difficult for people just in everyday life. Bach had, I think, nineteen children, a number of whom died at birth. That was a very common experience for people back in those days. There were economic hardships; there were political concerns because of the various states in Germany that were having tensions between them. Life was just tough. And I think this may be why this song was so popular. I'm going to play the tune for us. I'm sure that folks know it, but... [plays first phrase on piano]...and then we go again with the same thing [plays]...and the same response [plays]. And then new affirmations: "He is my God..." [plays] "...though dark the road" [plays] "...He holds me that I shall not fall." And then it finally says in conclusion, "Wherefore to Him I leave it all." [Plays.] Just such a strong affirmation.

I must tell you that I have read comments by the English historian whose name was Burney, the eighteenth century historian who knew Bach and knew Handel and so on like that, and he talks about going to Leipzig. Bach was in charge of three church services every Sunday in Leipzig that were going on at the same time. He was in charge of St. Thomas Church, St. Nicholas Church — and I think it was St. Paul, if I'm not mistaken. And so he had choirs in all of those churches that had to be prepared each Sunday. Usually he was at St. Thomas Church. But Burney says that you could leave St. Thomas Church as they were beginning a hymn, and you could walk over the several blocks to St. Nicholas and come back

later to St. Thomas, and they'd still be singing the hymn! Because they sang so slowly back in those days, because the organ did not accompany the hymns at that time in Bach's church. The organ gave a prelude to the hymn. We call it a chorale prelude. It would be a fancy introduction that would go on for a couple of minutes, and so we have all those chorale preludes that Bach did. But then the organ stopped, and the singers — boy singers in the choir — would lead the congregation. And the tunes tended to slow down a good bit.

**Dr. Duncan:** And they're big...those big German tunes, and when you start singing them *a capella*, unless you have a choir really pushing you along, you can....

**Dr. Wymond:** You could really get slow, plodding, on these. But what I think is important is that we sing this tune with energy and vigor, and so we're not captive to the system of that time. We use the organ now. In fact, I think it's important to us as organists to sing through tunes when we're preparing for the service even though we know them all the time, so that we can get the sense of how fast it should go. And normally I think you should have something like a speaking speed. Let me sing this so that it is as though I am saying it when I sing it. It will be slower, but it shouldn't be too slow.

**Dr. Duncan:** This tune, as you say, is didactic and it's straightforward, but I also find it a very ....there's a lot of feeling in this tune. There's ...I'm not even sure how to put it. There is a certain quality of ...it supports the sober message of the song in such a way that it...

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, let me just say this. Emotionally, I think the ascending line which makes the statement "Whatever God does is right," is responded to by a descending line. And I always think descending lines are a little more emotional, but also they are relaxed and comfortable.

**Dr. Thomas:** And resignation, too.

**Dr. Wymond:** Yes, a sense of resignation.

**Dr. Thomas:** I love the way at the end of the first stanza, and then at the end of the final stanza, it says, "Wherefore to Him I leave it all."

**Dr. Duncan:** Oh, I love that!

**Dr. Wymond:** And it goes back up high again [plays phrase] and then it comes down the scale [plays].

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, it sort of reminds me, really, of what the book of Job is about: that there is no resolution to Job's predicament or his questions — God never answers Job's question as to why — and at the end Job has resigned himself to

the sovereignty of God. It's not important that Job understands what God is doing; what is important is that God understands what He's doing. "Wherefore to Him I leave it all." And that statement alone to me epitomizes what being a disciple and what being a pilgrim really is: trust...trust in God.

**Dr. Duncan:** Amen! And this hymn, the very meter of the hymn supports the emphasis of all of these discrete statements so well. It's an 8-7, 8-7, 4-4, 8-8. That's an irregular kind of metrical flow to a tune. I'm not sure that I've even checked in my hymnal to see how many others of those there are. This may be the only one in our particular hymnal. But what it ends up doing is it allows several different parts of the hymn to distinctly, discretely assert truths. For instance, take those 4-4 in sort of the third quadrant of each line. It repeats or emphasizes the terms "He is my God, though dark my road"; and "I take, content, what He hath sent"; and "My God is true; each morn anew"; and "My Father's care is round me there."

And then at the same time, because of that sort of discrete content, it allows the next line to also have its highlighting. And so the very way that the meter of the tune flows allows for these assertions to have their own distinct emphasis. And so I think that the tune itself is not only...there's a lot of pathos to it, but it also really helpfully emphasizes the teaching that's being affirmed in the text.

**Dr. Wymond:** You know, even some of our brethren in various other Christian faiths are a little nervous about saying that God ordains things in our lives, as though we are giving up all freedom and that we are more like puppets. But it seems to me that real comfort comes out of the fact of saying that we are not in charge of our lives, and we are not determining our futures, ultimately, although we can affect by choices, I think. But these great issues are left in God's hands.

**Dr. Duncan:** And doesn't it beautifully affirm exactly that in the fourth stanza? "Whate'er my God ordains is right"—by the way, that's the fourth time that it's been said! I haven't looked at the German on this particular text yet, but I'm going to go back to it afterwards and see how each line starts, but at least in Winkworth's translation every single line begins with "Whate'er my God ordains is right." And then here's how she renders it:

"Here shall my stand be taken;  
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine,  
Yet am I not forsaken."

Isn't it interesting that that's the deduction that circumstances do not drive you to think that you are forsaken, but the truth that God what ordains is right means that despite my circumstances, I'm not forsaken. And that, Bill, is exactly why this is such a liberating truth. Otherwise, you are completely captive to reading your life through the lenses of your circumstances.

**Dr. Thomas:** And the sovereignty here — absolute! It's the sovereignty of a Father who loves you and cares for you...

**Dr. Duncan:** Just share that line, because there it is.

**Dr. Thomas:** “My Father's care is round me there; He holds me that I shall not fall: And so to Him I leave it all.”

**Dr. Duncan:** And by the way, there's the other difference between the Christian doctrine of God's sovereignty and the Muslim doctrine. The Christian doctrine of God's sovereignty is the sovereignty of a personal God, not some impersonal force, and it's the Father. The heavenly Father is a caring, loving, heavenly Father who will not allow one hair of your head to be harmed apart from His good purposes. So it is, it's a wonderful profession of faith.

I love to sing this with strong believers in times of trouble. I love to look out at the congregation when we sing this hymn at people who have gone through trouble, that I know are trusting in Christ, and they're trusting in the heavenly Father. And I love to sing this hymn with them.

Bill, let's listen to *Whate'er My God Ordains is Right*, by Samuel Rodigast, and translated by Catherine Winkworth.

**Dr. Wymond:** *Whate'er My God Ordains is Right* is sung by Victor Smith.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
His holy will abideth;  
I will be still whate'er he doth,  
And follow where he guideth.  
He is my God; though dark my road,  
He holds me that I shall not fall:  
Wherefore to him I leave it all.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
He never will deceive me;  
He leads me by the proper path;  
I know he will not leave me.  
I take, content, what he hath sent;  
His hand can turn my griefs away,  
And patiently I wait his day.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
Though now this cup, in drinking,  
May bitter seem to my faint heart,  
I take it, all unshrinking.  
My God is true; each morn anew



Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart,  
And pain and sorrow shall depart.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
Here shall my stand be taken;  
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine,  
Yet am I not forsaken.  
My Father's care is round me there;  
He holds me that I shall not fall:  
And so to him I leave it all.

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