

Hymns of the Faith: “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of 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 with “Hymns of Faith” now is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond! This is Ligon Duncan along with Derek Thomas, and we are here for “Hymns of the Faith.” I need to say “Happy Easter” to you on this beautiful Lord's Day morning.

Derek, it's a delight to be back with you talking about a great, great hymn of the faith, and Bill, you, too. We were just chatting off air before we came on this morning about Charles Wesley and the remarkable poet that he was, and this amazing text, *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*, which was written within the first year of his conversion, and it's one of his greatest texts. This hymn is one of the handful of favorite Easter hymns in all of the English-speaking world, and I hope that my grandchildren are still singing this hymn many, many years from now.

Christ the Lord Is Risen Today has an interesting textual history that Bill Wymond is going to tell us a little bit about later today, and it also has some interesting music history to it, because Bill was telling us that it was actually wed to a different tune, and the tune that we use today is very different from that tune. So we'll get to hear about all of those things.

But this is a great Easter hymn, *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*. We have an *alleluia* in it at the end of each phrase in each stanza: “Sons of men and angels... *Alleluia!*” Of course *alleluia* is just the Latinized version of the Hebrew word *Hallelujah*, which means *praise God or praise Jehovah*. And “Raise your joys and triumphs high; *Alleluia!* Sing ye heavens, and earth, reply....”

Derek, tell us a little bit about this amazing man, Charles Wesley.

Dr. Thomas: Well, yes, good morning. Charles and John Wesley are household names, of course, in any Christian home, and further afield. John and Charles were two sons of nineteen children born to Samuel Wesley and Susanna

Wesley. Susanna Wesley is one of the great mothers of Israel in the literal sense. If you go to London and go to the headquarters of Methodism in London, right across the road is Bunhill Fields, where John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe and John Owen, among many others, are buried. It's beautifully, immaculately kept. Susanna Wesley is buried there and her tomb is somewhat in the back, as I recall, but well worth going to see.

Dr. Duncan: Have you been there, Bill?

Dr. Wymond: Yes. Yes, I have seen those wonderful graves.

Dr. Thomas: And they've just recently restored it. But anyway, it's hard to think these days of nineteen children. And John and Charles of course are the most famous. The father, Samuel Wesley, was a minister of the Church of England in Epworth...and the famous incident in 1709, when the house in which they lived caught fire at night, and then the forlorn figure of John Wesley in the upper bedroom window appearing as the house is aflame, and Samuel falling on his knees and beseeching God to find some way to save him. And somebody, I think, gets on somebody else's shoulders — I can't think who that was now — and rescues John Wesley. It had a profound effect on John Wesley, for sure, but I can't imagine but that it had a similar effect on Charles. Both of them went to Oxford University.

Dr. Duncan: And they were part of the Holy Club while they were there?

Dr. Thomas: They were. And we are familiar with John Wesley's tale, of course: that he was not converted even though they were part of that Holy Club; and both of them sail then to the New World, to America.

Dr. Duncan: Landing in Savannah, and preaching in Savannah and all the way up the coast...with Whitefield at one point?

Dr. Thomas: At one point. Being impressed on the journey across by the faith, and perhaps more so by the assurance of the Moravian community, how assured they were of their relationship to Christ. But it isn't until they come home again that they are converted. And Charles, I think, is converted first, and then John Wesley...the famous Aldersgate "strange warming within his heart" experience.

Charles was a poet, I think a bit like William Cowper without the melancholy. He composed somewhere in the region of six and a half thousand hymns, of which maybe seven or eight hundred of them were published and put in a hymnbook, and many of them of course we still know: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing; Love Divine, All Loves Excelling; Jesus, Lover of My Soul; Soldiers of Christ, Arise; Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus; Lo, He Come with Clouds Descending; O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing; O for a Heart to Praise My God.*

All of these are very, very familiar...Charles Wesley's hymns. He wrote them...I mean, if you write six and a half thousand hymns, that's a lot of hymns! I'd say he must have constantly been writing hymns and poetry on the back of a horse or in a coach, or on his journeys or late at night; even on his deathbed. And his death is recorded for us. His final words were, "Oh, praise! Oh, praise!" and I think he's trying to quote actually a line of one of his hymns. But even then he had on the previous night, I think, dictated the first line of what would become a hymn.

He wasn't a preacher like John Wesley. John Wesley preached, I think...Oh, I don't know...how many thousands? Twenty-five thousand Americans...? That's been the figure given to John Wesley, and all his travels on the back of a horse. Charles, I think, only preached on a few occasions (but maybe even just once), but devoted his entire life to writing hymns. I've never fully understood how he survived financially on that. I'm not clear on that part of it, whether he was employed by someone or paid by the Countess of Huntington out of her benevolent fund that supported so many people at that time — and possibly that is the answer.

Dr. Wymond: I think so, too. And his actual occupation was in superintending several societies that they had—undoubtedly some orphanage work and other things like that, rather than preaching. There are two providential things in his life that interest me. One of them was when he was young. An uncle that he had in Ireland had offered to make him his heir, and that would have required evidently his going to Ireland and just living there. And the father left it to Charles to decide, and he decided not to do that. So one wonders if he had gone another way what would have happened. And also, his marriage. He evidently had a good marriage and a very happy marriage, and children. And his wife often accompanied him in his work, and it's pointed out that's in opposition to John's. And that's always been a sad thing that undoubtedly formed the character of John Wesley as his wife was outspokenly sometimes critical of him, and so on. It was a burden he had to bear amongst other things, but I thought those were two providences that were interesting.

Dr. Duncan: The mother and father's relationship was somewhat strained, as well — Susanna and Samuel. She was a fiery figure, and there were strains there, so maybe it's not surprising that John would find himself in that kind of a situation, but it's happy to know that Charles Wesley had a good, enjoyable, hope-filled life and marriage.

Dr. Thomas: It's a difficult thing. And we're talking about Charles more than John, of course, but John could hardly have been home much with the amount of preaching...and that in itself is a problematic thing to discuss. It's like some of the stories of the great nineteenth century missionaries whose marriages were troubled by their frequency of being away from home and so on.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. But you've just listed a tremendous treasury of some of our

favorite hymns in the English language that were written by this amazing man, Charles Wesley. And this hymn, this Easter hymn, is surely one of the four or five best known of all his hymns. And, Bill, you were telling us that the tune that we sing this to today — and why don't you just play that. Everybody's going to know that the minute you start playing it. [Dr. Wymond plays.] It's not the tune that it was originally wedded to. Could you tell us a little bit about the tune?

Dr. Wymond: That's right. Originally there was a tune called *Orientis partibus* that was the tune that was used for this, and it's a shorter tune. I'm just going to play it for you [plays].

Dr. Thomas: That's all on changing the tune! [*Laughter*]

Dr. Wymond: Well, actually I didn't play it in a friendly way! I could have made it much more majestic! But it's a rather pedestrian sort of tune, and if one is looking at the music and trying to fit the words that we now use, we can see that the *alleluias* wouldn't have fitted in there. So an editor later added those because he had a tune that the thought was a better tune for it, which is the tune that we now use. And this was a tune that was published earlier, before the words were written, and it was found in a book called *Lyra Davidica* ("Songs of David"); and the book that it's found in has only one existing copy that's now in the British Museum. Nevertheless, it's the tune that I just had played for us a minute ago, and I have to just tell you: on a personal level, I have so many associations with this tune, having been a musician. And in my young years, as I was telling the choir the other night, I can remember playing for many Easter sunrise services where this tune was sung. And it's actually kind of high in its range, and it used to be played in a higher key than it is now. I can remember people really straining at six in the morning to sing this tune! And also I can remember some high school brass players playing along that didn't quite make it on everything.

Dr. Duncan: Did it go up to an F in the? What was the high note? We've got it down to what?

Dr. Wymond: It's in C now, but it had been in D at one time so it took it up to an F-sharp, which is a very high note.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, especially early in the morning on the Easter sunrise!

Dr. Wymond: For women or men. But of course people used to sing more. Voices, I think, generally were pitched higher. They certainly were back in Wesley's day, and in Bach's day music goes much higher for the congregation than it could today.

Dr. Duncan: Then is this one of those hymns for which there are lots of different descants that have been written, so the sopranos are sort of soaring around in the stratosphere while everyone else...?

Dr. Wymond: Yes, for those who can soar there are some very nice descants! Another thing that I think is interesting — and this is a fairly common thing, too — the tune that we now use is not exactly the tune as it appeared originally. It was a more complicated and fancy tune, and I'm just going to play a little bit of that as it used to be. So here's the way it would have been done back when it was published. [Plays.]

Dr. Duncan: Once again, good call for going with what we sing now!

Dr. Wymond: So people over the years modified it to the simpler tune that we use now. But it is a good tune, and I think the addition of the *Alleluia* at the end, although it was done to make these words fit a tune, it's a really good thing, I think, because that's the most common word of praise in Christendom. And it used to be in the early church, the greeting that was always given on Sunday morning (or one of the greetings), "Alleluia!" in response to "Christ is risen!" And so those are nice traditions to tie into.

It is actually not a real easy tune, but it's a majestic and exciting tune. The *Alleluia's* are not easy. The first part is easy [plays]...easy enough. But then you have [plays]...and then [plays]...and then the *Alleluia*. Then we start getting higher [plays]...that's pretty high right there for most congregations...[plays]...I'll finish it out...and here's the hard one [plays]. I can guarantee you that no congregation would sing that right off the bat had they not heard it all through their lives, but it's a good tune.

Dr. Duncan: And the text...the *Alleluia's* are echoing back to the announcement of the resurrection as it's unfolded in the text. Let's walk through each of the four stanzas, Derek. It begins with the announcement that the Lord is risen today (that is, on the resurrection morning — what we call Easter Day), and then it invites sons of men and angels to proclaim His resurrection.

Dr. Thomas: And of course in both Eastern and Western churches, and probably in the Anglican Church in the eighteenth century, it would have been customary to begin Easter Sunday with the words "He is risen!" and then the congregation would repeat, "He is risen indeed!" So the fact that you then sing *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today* would also echo in what had been a longstanding tradition for Easter Sunday.

Dr. Duncan: And so the text continues on, saying, "Raise your joys and triumphs high," and the whole song — the tune, the accompaniment, the *alleluias* in echo are triumphant and joyful. The tune that you're singing exudes the kind of triumph and joy that are spoken of in the text, which is another good sign of a good hymn. The text has been wed to a tune in such a way that the tune expresses what the text is saying.

And then there's a call for the whole of the heavens and the earth to celebrate the resurrection of Christ: "Sing ye heavens, and earth, reply...." Then he begins to walk through some of the aspects of what has happened through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Derek, the second stanza: "Vain the stone, the watch, the seal...." That reference is...?

Dr. Thomas: ...To the fact that the tomb of Jesus was sealed and that soldiers were set to guard the tomb; but on Easter Sunday morning of course the stone is rolled away, and He is not there.

Dr. Duncan: And then Wesley says, "Christ has burst the gates of hell." What's he talking about?

Dr. Thomas: I suspect the allusion to the rest of the hymn is I Corinthians 15, the resurrection chapter. Here perhaps a reference to the Colossian text that He has spoiled principalities and powers and made a triumph over them; made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in the cross. I think the idea that at least an aspect of the cross work of Jesus is to gain and pronounce victory over the powers of darkness. Now, there may be more going on there than meets the eye, but it's part of a biblical emphasis on the cross gaining victory over the powers of darkness.

Dr. Duncan: One hymnologist says of this section,

In the exultant phrases of this hymn are reflected the various incidents of the crucifixion and the resurrection: the battle fought upon the cross with death, apparently lost but finally won; the eclipse of the sun, the symbol of temporary defeat; the measures taken by Pilate to prevent the stealing of the body; the descent into hell, as in *The Apostles' Creed*; to receive the punishment due to the sins of mankind, and to liberate the Old Testament saints who had been kept in limbo...

Now I'm not sure whether all of those things are entailed in Wesley's mind at this point, but there does seem to be a reference here to *The Apostles' Creed* and to the language of the *Te Deum*, which was sung from of old in the early church: "When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers." And of course to the I Corinthians 15 passage.

But then there is a focus in the third stanza on the indomitable, inextinguishable life of Christ: "Lives again our glorious King...Where, O death, is now thy sting?...Once He died, our souls to save...Where thy victory, O grave?" And so there's an exulting over death again, just like in I Corinthians 15. We were talking earlier about the change in that third stanza — "Once He died, our souls to save." Any comments about that, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, briefly. Of course Wesley — John and Charles — were virulently opposed to the tenet of particular redemption of Calvinism and of George Whitefield. And I think the original said, “Once He died *all* souls to save,” which would be the view that John and Charles Wesley would have adhered to. And it's been changed, perhaps unwittingly for some, to reflect a statement that's more in keeping with a particular redemption view of the atonement.

Dr. Duncan: The easy way to say this, too, as well, is that the New Testament doesn't seem interested in making any argument for the efficacy of the cross for those who do not believe in Christ. And so in this passage it's simply being asserted that He died for all who trust in Him; that is, “Once He died, our souls to save” as opposed to some sort of a generic reference to all mankind.

But then the final stanza is interesting. It reminds me a little bit of the words that have been associated with Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*: “Soar we now where Christ has led...following our exalted Head...Made like Him, like Him we rise...” [that's one of my favorite lines of the whole song] “...ours the cross, the grave, the skies.” Again, another incredible line — so much said in so few words.

Dr. Thomas: And it's beautiful poetry, and very simple poetry and memorable poetry. But it is so biblical in terms of the dynamics of union with Christ, in Romans 6 and Colossians 3.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, you so often remind the congregation of Calvin's words that it is the wisdom of God that the way to glory is the way of the cross. And what's the language that you love to use?

Dr. Thomas: Christ has so ordered the church from the very beginning that death is the way to life, and the cross the way to victory.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. And that last line encapsulates that thought, doesn't it? “Ours the cross, the grave...” but it doesn't stop there—“the skies.” And that's a beautiful rendition of that very biblical truth.

Dr. Thomas: And there's a way in which...I mean, even physically, when you say those very last lines, those last words of that last line, “Ours the cross, the grave, the skies”...as though you're lifting your head in anticipation of what is to come.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. The movement is glorious. And the tune really takes you there, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: I think so. May I also share something else of the verses? There were eleven, originally, stanzas used. We just use normally about four. I think one of the last — perhaps the last — in the original was “Hail, the Lord of earth and heaven... praise to You by both be given...every knee to You shall bow...Risen Christ, triumphant now. *Alleluia!*”

Dr. Duncan: Yes. And there's...I've sung that before in some hymn texts. Not ours. But we need to listen to this hymn now, don't we, Bill?

Dr. Wymond: Yes. Singing *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today* for us is Victor Smith.

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say; Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumph high; Alleluia!
Sing ye heavens, and earth, reply. Alleluia!

Vain the stone, the watch, the seal; Alleluia!
Christ has burst the gates of hell: Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids His rise; Alleluia!
Christ has opened paradise. Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King; Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once He died, our souls to save; Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head; Alleluia!
Made like Him, like Him we rise; Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

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