

## Hymns of the Faith: “O for a Thousand Tongues to 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.”... Here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas, and this is “Hymns of the Faith,” where we have the joy of recounting some of the great hymns of the Christian tradition written over the last two thousand years, and especially those hymns that have come down to us in English-speaking hymnody. Though they may be from different languages and cultures and ages, they find their way into the very best of our hymns and hymnbooks, and we have the sheer joy of studying these together and learning about them.

Today we have come to study one of the finest of the evangelical hymns of the last three hundred years; it's by Charles Wesley, who's been known as “the sweet bard of Methodism.”

There was a time, Derek, when the Methodist hymnal that was published...oh, I don't know...in the 1780's in Britain, had something like 750 hymns in it, and 680 of them were written by Charles Wesley! [*Laughs*] The man was an amazing writer. I can't remember how many hymns he wrote. I think he wrote maybe six and a half thousand hymns during the course of his life, and really wrote...I mean, very few people have been privileged to write as many good hymns as Charles Wesley, and hymns that we're still singing today.

I think I was reading another Methodist hymnologist who was saying that very often this is the first hymn in a Methodist hymnal. It was given that sort of pride of place by...I don't know...John Wesley may have made that judgment call many years ago. But at any rate, *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* is the name of the hymn. Charles Wesley wrote this on the anniversary of his own conversion, and it's said that he was perhaps inspired by a statement by a very famous and influential Moravian pastor that had the Lord given him a thousand tongues, he would use them all to praise Him. And so this hymn was written by Wesley in

reflection on God's sovereign work in converting him.

**Dr. Thomas:** There's a connection I'm just recalling between the Wesleys (Charles and his brother John Wesley, and their mother, Susanna Wesley) and the previous hymn we talked about that was on last week, maybe...Isaac Watts...in that Isaac Watts and Susanna Wesley, Charles Wesley, are buried in Bunhill Fields in London. Anyone ever visiting London should make their way to Bunhill Fields. It's a fascinating graveyard opposite the headquarters of the Methodist Movement in London.

**Dr. Duncan:** Sort of the Valhalla of evangelical non-Conformity...

**Dr. Thomas:** Bunyan is there, and John Owen is there, and Daniel Defoe is there, and Isaac Watts, and Susanna Wesley...

**Dr. Duncan:** That's interesting, that connection in and of itself, because people sort of debate about who the greatest of the English hymn writers was, and it's always either Watts or Wesley. Those two are always mentioned in the same breath.

**Dr. Thomas:** Wesley of course comes a little earlier than Watts, in that in 1735 he makes that trip over to Georgia as an unconverted minister, with John. And then it's back in London in 1738, just at the beginning of what we call The Great Awakening, the phenomenal revival, outpouring of God's Spirit...

**Dr. Duncan:** And it hit both sides of the Atlantic.

**Dr. Thomas:** And it's in 1738 that he is converted, on May 21. So this hymn is written the following year, May 21, 1739; and it's said that Wesley remembered his — not birthday, but conversion day every year until he died...that he held it in special remembrance.

**Dr. Duncan:** The Wesleyan revival in Britain has often been credited even by secular historians with sparing Britain from the societal, civil, and even governmental/political, upheavals that swept across Europe throughout the 1700's and even the early 1800's. I mean, how many revolutions went on in France from 1789 to 1870? Like what? Seven different constitutions, and however many revolutions. And Wesley and Whitefield and the others that were involved in preaching the gospel in those days and saw just a tremendous response are often credited with laying the foundation in the personal transformation of people's lives that was a key part of sparing England of the upheavals that other countries experienced.

**Dr. Thomas:** The original hymn had eighteen verses! And it began with three emphasizing the occasion of its composition. He called the hymn, dedicated the hymn, "For the anniversary day of one's conversion."

Glory to God, and praise and love, be ever, ever given  
By saints below and saints above, the church in earth and heaven.

On this glad day, the glorious Son of righteousness arose;  
On my benighted soul He shone, and filled it with repose.

Sudden expired the legal strife; 'twas then I ceased to grieve.  
My second, real, and living life, I then began to live.

Now we couldn't sing that, of course; it's very personal, and it's not terribly good poetry in parts. But that was the introduction to this hymn.

**Dr. Duncan:** And we now... I mean, typically about six stanzas is all you see of it in a modern hymnal. But again, they're solid gold, Derek!

O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,  
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace.

My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad the honors of Thy name.

Jesus, the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease;  
'Tis music in the sinner's ears, 'this life and health and peace.

That's a very, very powerful stanza. Bill, play through this hymn one time in the tune that we most frequently sing it here in America, AZMON. Derek was telling us off-air that RICHMOND is a tune that this is also often sung in Britain, but AZMON I think is what most Americans know this song to. [*Dr. Wymond plays.*]

**Dr. Thomas:** In Wales, it's sung to [*hums tune, LYNGHAM*]...but you need a thousand people to sing that tune!

**Dr. Wymond:** That's not a real easy tune, no.

**Dr. Thomas:** It never works, I think, either in a congregation that doesn't sing well, or in a small setting. I think the tune was meant for a thousand tongues! But when it's sung really well...

**Dr. Duncan:** ...with a lot of people, that is an overwhelming experience, absolutely right!

**Dr. Wymond:** Is that the tune that goes... [*plays...*] something like that?

**Dr. Thomas:** And that tune, RICHMOND, I think is the tune that's sung by Methodists in England. [*Dr. Wymond plays tune.*] I love that tune.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill, the tune AZMON was written by a German composer, and apparently (I'm looking at our hymnal)... Our hymnal tells me that Lowell Mason did the arrangement for it which we use, which probably explains why most American churches have ended up using AZMON, because Lowell Mason was so influential on American hymnody.

**Dr. Wymond:** That's true. Carl Gdser was the German composer of the tune, and John Wesley translated a lot of German hymns; and they knew the Moravian community, so they knew the tunes undoubtedly, too, from that community.

Lowell Mason is an amazing fellow, because he is considered the father of public school music in the United States. He established curricula and programs, especially in the Boston area, and so he was really influential on the whole movement of getting Americans to sing in schools. That was so helpful to church life because people had a tradition of singing not only in their families, but in singing in schools and so on like that. That's something that we're losing, sadly, because schools have cut out music as a part of the training (especially in the older grades) because of budgetary problems.

But Lowell Mason was for a time in Savannah, Georgia. He was the music director/organist at the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, and I think it was while he was there that he wrote the missionary hymn, *From Greenland's Icy Mountains*, which we used to sing a lot. Having been at that organ in that church, I remember that they have a framed copy of Mason's hymn right over the organ console, just to remind you of the heritage that you have if you're playing at that particular church.

**Dr. Duncan:** By the way, if folks in the listening audience, Bill, are ever in Savannah, they will miss a treat if they don't go. That is one of the most beautiful rooms that I've ever seen in all of Protestant church architecture. It is a gorgeous room.

**Dr. Wymond:** The Independent Presbyterian Church really is. It has also a magnificent steeple there.

**Dr. Duncan:** And the pulpit is the highest pulpit I've ever seen, period! You've heard of six feet above contradiction? Well, he's twenty feet above contradiction! [Laughs]

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, the pulpit is a large construction. You can sit up...it has an area like on the second floor level. Several people can sit up in the pulpit area, and it puts you at just the right level for speaking to the balcony which surrounds. It's a large church, and has an amazing history.

But we're really indebted to Lowell Mason. Lowell Mason's tunes follow that

pattern of having long beats at the beginning and at the end of lines also, as we have pointed out in some other period hymns of this time, and some of his tunes are a little awkward to sing now because they have some periodic kinds of strange kinds of rhythmic things to them and so on.

But this tune works beautifully, and it has a lot of energy to it. It just starts out with... [*plays*]... To me, that's just a perfect match for what the words are saying: "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise"...that line of poetry has such an elevated, excited majesty about it, and the tune just gives the energy to it. It's a wonderful marriage, I think, of tune and words.

**Dr. Thomas:** Once again, the original hymn has been modified and somebody has to raise... [*Dr. Duncan laughs*]...our beloved Wesley's theology, of course! And we sing,

"He breaks the power of reigning sin, He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me."

Originally, Wesley had "He breaks the power of cancelled sin." And then our hymn ends with the stanza,

"Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ;  
Ye blind, behold your Savior come; and leap, ye lame, for joy."

But the next stanza went on to say,

"See all your sins on Jesus laid, the Lamb of God was slain;  
His soul was once an offering made, for every soul of man."

Now, Presbyterians would balk at the idea that Jesus died for every individual, and that raises the whole issue of the atonement. And that was of course the difference and separation — and heated separation — between Wesley and George Whitefield during The Great Awakening. It divided the Calvinists from the Methodists.

**Dr. Wymond:** And George Whitefield was really influential in evangelizing in this country, and so it was a brotherly kind of dispute, I'm sure, wasn't it?

**Dr. Thomas:** It got heated, for sure, and Wesley was a man who would stand his ground.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, there was an estrangement for a period of time, and then Wesley preached Whitefield's funeral, right? Is that the way it happened, or is it the other way around? One of them preaches the other one's funeral, and I can't remember which is which. But there was a great personal respect between the two men.

It needs to be said that we sing tons of Wesley hymns and 96.7% of the lyric that he writes we would have absolutely no qualms about and appreciate greatly, and are profoundly indebted to the products of the Wesleyan Methodist revival of the 1700's and the 1800's.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, let me just ask...I don't want to take too long on this, but ...so there is a theological difference between them about the atonement. What are the implications, in a brief way, if you go with one or the other? Wesley or Whitefield? What is the implication and the practical application?

**Dr. Thomas:** ...I was still researching who died first, and Whitefield died before Wesley...

**Dr. Wymond:** So, if Jesus died for everyone...

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, Calvinists of course, like Whitefield, insist that Jesus only died for the elect; that atonement was only offered for the elect. And the argument was that if Jesus died for everyone and provided atonement for everyone, why should that person (if they weren't converted) then go to hell?

In other words, it's double justice that sin has been punished once in Christ on the cross but is again punished on the Day of Judgment. And that's double jeopardy.

**Dr. Duncan:** You know, Bill, it strikes me that one of the reasons that Wesley (and Whitefield, and Calvinists and people that have typically labeled the Wesley's as "evangelical Arminians" to distinguish them from the kinds of Arminians that existed in the continent of Europe a century before that had a slightly different thing going on)...I think that perhaps the big difference or disconnect between Whitefield and Wesley on this issue was that for Wesley this was an issue of evangelism and the free offer of the gospel. He thought that unless you affirmed that Jesus had literally died for every human being that had ever lived, was alive now, and would ever live in the future, that you couldn't preach the gospel...you couldn't offer the gospel.

And I think out of that very sincere desire to offer the gospel to every man, Wesley made a theological deduction that no other Protestant had ever made. And very frankly, nobody in the Christian tradition had made that kind of an argument before, that the free offer of the gospel was contingent upon some sort of effect of Jesus' death on every person that ever lived.

**Dr. Thomas:** And the hymn itself, of course...the previous stanza (which is our final stanza) is an evangelistic call to belief:

"Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ;

Ye blind, behold your Savior come; and leap, ye lame, for joy.”

**Dr. Duncan:** So Calvinists at their best would say, “Yes, absolutely. That is exactly what you want to press upon every human being that you come into contact with. You offer the gospel to everyone.”

But the reason that Whitefield wants to go a different direction is that he does not want to affirm that the death of Christ *merely* makes people “savable” or able to save themselves. He wants to affirm that the death of Jesus Christ actually accomplished for a multitude that no man can number, of men and women and boys and girls from every tribe, and people, and tongue, that it actually accomplished redemption for them. It didn't just put them in a position where they then could take one further step and then save themselves in some way or cooperate in salvation, but they were actually saved from first to last by the work of Christ on the cross. And so they're wrestling with two different concerns and answering them in different ways.

I don't mean to say, by the way, that they actually agreed. They didn't agree on this. But I think it was the starting point of concern that caused them to answer that question differently, and I think Wesley in the end was confused on this issue.

I think J.I. Packer is right when he says Wesley was really not an Arminian, he was a confused Calvinist. I don't mean to say that...to our Methodist friends listening today, I'm not poking fun at Wesley or at anyone else, but I do think that what you find in Wesley's thought is that there is a lot of Calvinism mixed into it. You know, one of the hymns that our congregation loves to sing is *And Can It Be?* And you know when he says, “Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,” and he talks about the work of grace in his heart, it comes from where? It comes from God's work in his heart.

**Dr. Wymond:** And this word *Arminian* that you're using? A quick....

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes. The word *Arminian* comes from a man named Jacob Arminius, who was a theology professor in the Netherlands at the end of the 1500's, early 1600's, and he had a bunch of students who sort of codified his teaching, and it was a protest against Calvinism. It was a modified version of Calvinistic teaching. And eventually the Wesleyans start a magazine called *The Arminian Magazine*. But I think J.I. Packer is right. They were actually confused on that issue, and on a whole host of issues. They were actually much closer to Calvin than they were to Arminius, but on this issue of the death of Christ, they clearly *thought* that the universal atonement was necessary for the free offer of the gospel. So, Derek, you're right. They worked that into hymns over and over, and it's in *And Can It Be?* We've modified the language of *And Can It Be?* to reflect a more Calvinistic understanding of it now.

**Dr. Thomas:** The final stanza of the original eighteen stanzas is quite fascinating:

“In Christ your head, you then shall know, shall feel your sins forgiven;  
Anticipate your heaven below, and own that love in heaven.”

And the emphasis on the experiential “shall feel your sins forgiven” I find fascinating. We don’t sing it, of course, but...

**Dr. Wymond:** In our last verse here,

“Hear Him, ye deaf; praise Him, ye dumb...”

All these people can't do these things they're told to do, and so the implication is that the Holy Spirit enables them to hear, to leap, to speak.

**Dr. Duncan:** And he explicitly makes that clear! I mean, in the stanza immediately prior,

“He speaks, and listening to His voice, new life the dead receive;  
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.”

So he's emphasizing the priority of God's grace in breaking through in someone's life. That's why Jim Packer will say the Wesley's were confused Calvinists, in the sense of their affirming the necessity of divine sovereign regeneration for a person to do these things.

Bill, are we ready to listen to this hymn?

**Dr. Wymond:** Let's do.

O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,  
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace.

My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad the honors of Thy name.

Jesus, the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease;  
'Tis music in the sinner's ears, 'this life and health and peace.

He breaks the power of reigning sin, He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.

He speaks and, listening to His voice, new life the dead receive;  
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice; the humble poor believe.



Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ;  
Ye blind, behold your Savior come; and leap, ye lame, for joy.

**Dr. Wymond:** You have been hearing “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. Our soloist this morning was Ben Roberson.

©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](#).