

Hymns of the Faith: "My God, How Wonderful Thou Art"

Psalm 113

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 with "Hymns of the Faith," is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond, and good morning Derek Thomas. It's good to be with you again on "Hymns of the Faith" and we have a lovely, really paraphrase of a psalm to study today. It's a hymn that I'm sure many, if you've grown up in a Protestant church and you've been a part of the singing in the last fifty years or so, you've heard this song sung, *My God, How Wonderful Thou Art*. And I'm looking at a hymn book that has it set to an English tune that we don't use. We use another tune, and Bill I've forgotten the name of the tune.

Dr. Wymond: ORTONVILLE

Dr. Duncan: ORTONVILLE, that's right. We once had a hymnal here called *The Worship and Service Hymnal* that some of you in the listening audience will be familiar with and then in the last decade and a half we have switched to a hymnal called *The Trinity Hymnal* which is a hymnal that has been put together by Presbyterians — Orthodox and Presbyterian Church in America — musicians and theologians. And that hymnal has this song set to a different tune, but our congregation knew ORTONVILLE by heart and once it's struck up, they could start singing the song without thinking. And so we have retained it in our singing of the hymn almost every time. I'm not sure we've ever sung it to the tune that it's set to in *The Trinity Hymnal*. We've sung this hymn a lot over the last fifteen years at First Pres. But let's here the tune itself, Bill, so that people get it in their heads and then I want you to tell us just a little bit about the tune and the author.

Dr. Wymond: What I'd like to do is to give you two tunes for this. I would like to go ahead and do ST. ETHELDREDA because this is the tune that most of the Christian church has used for this hymn. And so let's just hear this first and I'm going to do the unpardonable sin of just singing it for you here.

[Dr. Wymond sings tune.]

Now I did that because I think that is one of the dullest tunes I've ever heard and I'm so sorry the church has been shackled with that, but let me tell you why I think it was. A man named Thomas Turton, who was born in 1780 in Yorkshire, and what's interesting about him was that he was well-educated at Katherine Hall in Cambridge and he became a fellow of that college which is a prestigious thing to happen.

And as you know, at that time I think at Cambridge you had to have a theological degree also, no matter what you taught. So he had this theological degree, but he actually was a professor of mathematics as well as divinity. So that would help to explain possibly the dullness of the tune, if he were a mathematics professor to being with. (laughter) But then he became Dean of Peterborough, Dean of Westminster, Bishop of Ely, and he died in about 1864. But that helps perhaps to explain the kind of pedantry of this particular tune. I don't know the man's personality. Anyway, that having been said, we sing this tune, as you said, to ORTONVILLE, and that's a tune by a man named Thomas Hastings. Listen to this tune:

[Dr. Wymond sings tune.]

Now sing it to the words we normally sing that to.

[Dr. Wymond sings tune.]

I'll finally get that right.

Dr. Duncan: And it's got a little repeat at the end as well.

Dr. Wymond: That's right. You have to repeat the last phrase. Now frankly, I think that is not an appropriate tune either for these words. These words are so majestic and they are reflecting an awe of God and that tune is really light and flighty.

Dr. Duncan: It is. That's true.

Dr. Wymond: It just sounds like something that would have been in *Gone With the Wind*, nothing that would be used for such a majestic text. And so we need to find another tune for this that reflects the majesty and the solemnness and the awe of these words. But having come at this from a very negative way, let me hand it over to you because I know you all will have positive thoughts about the words!

Dr. Duncan: Well once again Derek, we come into contact with one of the

leading Tractarians of his time in Frederick Faber. And we need to give folks background on the Oxford Movement again and talk to them about the importance of Faber, who himself went all the way.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, his dates again are spanning the early-middle 19th century, 1814 to 1863. He died relatively young. Frederick William Faber, born into the Anglican Church, and my notes here say that he was a strict Calvinist, which is interesting. Went to Oxford University. At the time, when the Tractarian Movement was at its height, and we're thinking here of its principle leader, Cardinal Henry Newman, Faber became a close friend of Newman's.

The Tractarian Movement was a movement within 19th century Anglicanism, not just towards high-Anglicanism but towards Catholicism. And some of them stayed as Anglicans, but as high-Anglicans, introducing lots of elements of mystery and ritual and what we sometimes call "smells and bells" into the liturgy of the church, having particularly a view of the Supper that was akin to a Catholic view of the Mass. But Newman, of course, left the Anglican Church, became a fully-fledged Roman Catholic, as did this man Frederick William Faber.

And all that, of course, is happening just as we speak today. There are numerous, possibly hundreds, possibly greater than that, but certainly in England and Wales too, there are Anglicans leaving the Church of England or the Church of Wales to become fully-fledged Roman Catholics. And the reasons today are somewhat slightly different perhaps than in the 19th century.

Dr. Duncan: What were some of the reasons, Derek, that this was happening in the 19th century?

Dr. Thomas: Well, the Tractarian Movement was, I think, in some way a reaction to the dumbing-down, that's a 21st century expression, but a dumbing-down of worship and liturgy. At the low end of Anglicanism, which is not indistinguishable from, say, a typical Congregational Church in the 19th century where liturgy was — the Prayer Book probably was not used to any great extent, there was the introduction of extempore prayers, a lot of lay involvement perhaps in worship. I think the Supper, the whole issue about what takes place at the Supper, the saying of the Supper in a basilican position — with the priest with his back to the congregation with robes and the view there was something mysterious taking place in the elements, whether that was a fully-fledged Tridentine Mass interpretation or what — but those were some of the things —

Dr. Duncan: Well I think, don't you think, behind and underneath all of those things which are true, this was, I think, in the Romanic era, a response, a mystical religious response to theological liberalism. And I think if you look at the early Tractarians they're trying to chart out their own response to the bleed-over of the German enlightenment into England, and so when you look at — who's the famous Anglican who writes on the text and the canon and just is absolutely deaf

on Westcott and Hort, and just sees them as the one who's going to introduce liberalism into the churches, who develops the *Textus Receptus* mythology and such — this is a high-church —

Dr. Thomas: Burgon?

Dr. Duncan: Yes, Dean Burgon. You know, even the ones that don't end up going to Roman Catholicism clearly are looking for a traditionalist response to theological liberalism and I think that's got to factor in large with the other things that are going on. I do think that the emphasis on the liturgy and on the sacraments makes sense, not only in the context of liberalism, they also make sense in the context of romanticism, and especially in that sort of English-intellectual climate.

Dr. Wymond: I was wondering, what were those German influences from the Romanic Movement? What were concepts that were worrying people?

Dr. Duncan: Well, I mean I think actually the Romantic Movement in some ways supplied a relief from the sort of arid rationalism that was going on in the German universities at the level of philosophy and religion and history and the various hard sciences. I mean, you have an explosion of knowledge going on, beginning at the turn of the 19th century. You have that explosion that's happening in geology, it's happening in biology. Darwin's going to hit the scene at the end of the 19th century, and there is sort of a reaction on the part of Christianity all over Europe, from central Europe to western Europe, to how to handle this new learning. And I think the Romantic Movement, in part itself, is, even in its non-Christian forms, is a response to that kind of rationalism.

But I think what was worrying folks in England were their best students were going to Germany and in the universities they were losing faith in any recognizable aspect of orthodox Christianity. They could no longer believe in the inspiration of Scripture, they could no longer believe in the deity of Christ. They could no longer believe in a whole range of just typical Apostles Creed, cardinal doctrines of the church because of —

Dr. Thomas: Yeah, I think all of that is true Ligon, but I also think there is an element in high Anglicanism on the issue of authority. You know, in low-church Anglicanism, and for that matter liberalism, there is no basis for authority. In high Anglicanism the priest is king. And I wonder sometimes in our own day and age, you know we see various responses say, to the “worship wars.” And one response is to introduce masses of liturgy because that produces an authoritative structure out of which you cannot get out of.

Dr. Duncan: No, I agree entirely, but that is exactly my point. In response to theological liberalism there was a quest for authority that was rooted in the Tractarians. And even those Tractarians that didn't stay in the Church of England

but went all the way to Rome, it was rooted in seeking the answer to it in ecclesiastical authority. And Rome is the best picture of hierarchical ecclesiastical authority that you can find, at least in western Christianity. You could argue obviously, and some of our friends listening today might be Greek Orthodox and they might be very quick to argue “No, you can find the best answer to that in eastern Christianity.” But certainly in western Christianity you had a very strong hierarchy that, frankly, it didn't care what university professors thought about anything because it's the pope and the college of cardinals and the councils and the traditions of the church and the Holy Spirit speaking in that tradition that establishes religious authority and professors can go off and say anything they want and the church does not care. The church determines what the church will believe, whatever their discoveries or not. And I think there was this searching for that kind of authority in response to the faith crisis.

And in fact, I would argue that's the exact same thing that's happening today for a slightly different reason. It's not theological liberalism that's pounding against the shore, but it's this anemic church authority that's especially manifest in Rowan Williams, the dithering Archbishop of Canterbury, who cannot figure out what he wants to do about anything and who looks sort of like a druid. And these people who are out there that are just desperate for someone to sound a note of authority. And who is out there doing that but Pope Benedict XVI who releases this document two years ago. What's it called? *The Splendor of Truth*. Now you know, who's talking about *The Splendor of Truth* amongst, at least amongst the sort of in-crowd in the hierarchy in the church in England today. And so you have all these guys saying, “Let's go someplace where we can find authority.” So I do think there are similar things going on and I do agree that that's where the liturgy and the high view of the Supper comes in, because it roots it back into church tradition, it wants to locate authority in not only the rites but in sort of the hierarchical stability of truth that's assured.

Dr. Thomas: In the text, again this is one of the hymns, *My God, How Wonderful Thou Art* that has been tinkered with. The original text is based of course just on Psalm 113.

The original text ended with “Father of Jesus, loves reward, what rapture will it be? Prostrate before Thy throne to lie, and gaze and gaze on Thee.” And you might say, “Well what on earth is wrong with that?”

But of course, behind it lies a very Catholic vision of after purgatory, the beatific vision — anything of Cardinal Newman's, *Dream of Gerontius* which is about that very thing. And the term “rapture,” which in our circle is probably kind of something entirely different, but for the Tractarians, rapture was the beatific vision post-purgatory. So that last stanza has been completely removed from at least the version we have in *The Trinity Hymnal*.

Dr. Wymond: Be careful. I have a good anthem on this text and it retains that

last verse! (laughter) And in the most mystical and elevated musical terms, we end with that “what rapture it must be,” so I’ll have to think about that!

Dr. Thomas: I think, read dispassionately, it's perfectly orthodox. I think, read in the context of who wrote it, it probably means something else.

Dr. Duncan: Well, I mean that raises a whole other issue that I've just been thinking about. I have a friend of mine who's upset with me right now because he says that you cannot utilize words that another person means in a different way even if you mean them in an orthodox way that doesn't contract truth.

And I think that if you buy that, then you’re going to have to excise a lot of hymns from your hymnbook. And you think of Faber's, *Faith of Our Fathers*, which I must say I do personally struggle singing that one just because it's just such a strong, you know, kind of song related to the Tractarian Movement. A lot of people don't know the background of it and I don't want to even tell them the background of the song because I don't want to ruin it for them.

Dr. Wymond: Please don't. I like that hymn!

Dr. Duncan: I won't! But there are associations with it, that if you know, it can ruin it for you. But at the same time, I think that if you do that you’ll lose some words that are perfectly useful and helpful and orthodox without those associations in our hymnbooks. And this is a great rendering of Psalm 113. Why don't you walk us through line-by-line, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Of course. These are psalms, Psalm 113 through 118, associated with the Passover, and one assumes these are psalms Jesus would have sung perhaps, with the disciples in the Upper Room, which is an interesting thought.

But it begins — you know, Bill's point earlier about needing a great tune for this hymn, “My God, how wonderful Thou art, Thy majesty how bright! How beautiful Thy mercy seat, in depths of burning light!” And it's almost an Isaiah 6, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts” kind of vision. And it's a very worshipful stance right at the outset. It's an opening hymn, almost, to bring us right into the presence of our majestic God.

Dr. Duncan: The intensity of the lyrics, which Bill has already brought to our attention, is obviously — “In depths of burning light” is a strong lyrical ending to a first line. And you get that kind of intense lyric throughout the song. You know in the second line, you get “unceasingly adored.” In the third stanza you get “deepest, tend’rest fears,” and you get “trembling hope and penitential tears.” This is very passionate language.

Dr. Thomas: This isn't “happy-clappy.”

Dr. Duncan: No, it is not.

Dr. Wymond: But you know, I don't want to detract or distract the conversation, but I do think that the choice of meter on this, which is the common meter — 8-6-8-6 — I think it is, is a pretty pedestrian meter, and I think that's what causes the problem in selecting tunes. So the meter that Faber chose presents a little bit of a problem, and you could get a more majestic setting of this had the meter been longer in the number of feet in a song like that. But anyway, that having been said, we all agree that it needs a better tune I guess.

Dr. Duncan: The fourth stanza begins to explore this idea that as majestic as God is, as wondrous as He is, as holy as He is, as awesome as He is, as infinite and separate from us as He is, yet we are able to love Him. "Yet I may love Thee too, O Lord, almighty as Thou art; for Thou hast stopped to ask of me the love of my poor heart." That's an important realization in the Christian life, Derek.

Dr. Thomas: Right. You know, I'm reading this and thinking, "If Watts had translated this psalm there might have been more Gospel notes sounded." It's very generic. You know, a Unitarian could sing this with no difficulty. And it brings back that issue of — How do you sing the Psalms? And I'm offending some of my friends now, but there is a case to be made for centering the Gospel very clearly in the psalms, which of course is their presupposition. I think I would have — I sort of wish that line wasn't sort of suggesting that I had some kind of native love to offer apart from grace first operating in my heart. But the poetry is beautiful. It's well-written, I think, in terms of just the way the words flow. "No earthly father loves like Thee, no mother half so mild bears and forebears, as Thou hast done with me, Thy sinful child." Those are profound thoughts. And then in the final stanza, having dropped the original final stanza — "How wonderful, how beautiful, the sight of Thee will be, Thine endless wisdom, boundless pow'r, and awesome purity!"

Dr. Duncan: So as a movement, the song begins looking at the majesty of God and then it contemplates our love for God in spite of His majesty and His condescension to receive that love. And then it meditates on the compassion of God and how His compassion transcends the best of human experience of compassion in the best mother and the best father that you could possibly conceive. And then the eyes then look into the future when we will see Him in His endless wisdom and boundless power and awesome purity and we will see that as beautiful. We will see Him as beautiful. And so it's an excellent text for a song of praise. That's where it's situated in our hymnal, in the beginning of the hymnal where we have songs of praise. And Erik Routley has an interesting meditation. Did you read that in our material, our background material?

Erik Routley, the very famous hymnologist, has a long meditation on wonder based on this hymn. And one of the things he says is that, "Now and again, a minister, when he's gained the confidence of his people, will be asked the

question by one of the more thoughtful of them, 'How can I love God?' To confess such an intellectual doubt is the act of an honest man, and the question is a great question. It may well be true, moreover, that for every ten people who can understand the notion of God loving man, there may be hardly one who is clear about what is implied by man loving God." And then he meditates on how this hymn might help and here's one of the things that he says. "For the great and ancient question it puts to the Christian is this, 'When did you last consciously and purposely practice the sacred employment of wonder?' There is a very familiar, not to say hackney quotation, about the usefulness of a life in which there is no time to stand and stare.

That is well said, provided that you are staring at something and that the right thing.

'There is not much to be said,' as C.S. Lewis says in *The Screwtape Letters* 'for staring at a dead fire alone in the small hours.' God has given us a dimension in which we can look at Him, a language in which we may speak to Him and hear Him speaking the dimension and language of wonder. And wonder is killed by the same thing that kills prayer. Communication is broken by the same things. Neither the proud mind nor the servile mind can pray, nor can they wonder. But wonder cannot be commanded, for it is a natural endowment of man. It can only be impeded or choked by these habits of mind."

And it's an interesting meditation but I think we need to hear this hymn now —
My God, How Wonderful Thou Art.

My God, how wonderful Thou art,
Thy majesty, how bright;
How beautiful Thy mercy seat
In depths of burning light!

O how I fear Thee, living God,
With deep and tender fear;
And worship Thee with trembling hope,
And penitential tears!

Yet, I may love Thee, too, O Lord,
Almighty as Thou art;
For Thou hast stooped to ask of me
The love of my poor heart!

No earthly father loves like Thee,
No mother, e'er so mild,
Bears and forbears as Thou hast done,
With me, Thy sinful child.

How wonderful, how beautiful,
The sight of Thee must be;
Thy endless wisdom, boundless power,
And glorious purity!

Dr. Wymond: This has been “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson’s First Presbyterian Church.

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