

Hymns of the Faith: “O Worship the King”

Psalm 104

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 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. This is Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas, and we're delighted today to be talking with you about hymns of the faith. “Hymns of the Faith” is a radio program in which we explore the devotional treasures of the ages that have been deposited for us in this grand repository of sung praise of the people of God, the hymnal. And the hymnal, unfortunately, is something that has been lost on many in our generation as churches have moved away from using hymnals and singing the songs of the last twenty centuries, and it's our joy and delight to explore this treasury together.

Over the last number of months we have explored some of the best songs that are now sung—some of them having been translated into and some of them written in English. So although we are concentrating on English-speaking hymnody, hymnody that's been sung in English-speaking churches from Britain to America to Australia and around the world in the English language, but some of which come to us from other languages.

But today we're actually going to be talking about a hymn which is based on a Psalm, which has always, ever, and only been sung in English, although no doubt it has been translated into other languages now. It's a song called *O Worship the King*, and the lyric, the text, of this hymn is based on Psalm 104. And, Derek, it was written by a man named Robert Grant, who was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, but who served the British Empire in India. Good morning, my friend! Tell us just a little bit about Robert Grant.

Dr. Thomas: Well, Sir Robert Grant, as he became...born as you say in Scotland in 1785. His father was a Member of Parliament and director of the most influential East India Company, and that of course had significant

ramifications for the spread of missions in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A lot of missionaries went on the tail of...I'm not sure what sort of metaphor to use with the East India Company, but it was a good way of getting to various parts of the world which otherwise would not have been possible. So there was a connection between this East India Company and missions.

Dr. Duncan: And the East India Company, I think it has to be said, didn't have wholly pure motives in their cooperation. Sometimes they were desirous of having chaplains along just for the sake of keeping order on the ship amongst the crew, and then sometimes they were desirous of having chaplains along because it sort of kept the natives from attacking them as the gospel was going forward.

Dr. Thomas: Right, and there's some evidence that some (like Carey, for example) in India were critical of the trading policies of the East India Company, especially with natives and slave labor and so on, and that caused a rift between the various missions and the use of East India Company...not that there was much alternative.

Dr. Duncan: Right. I don't think we can fault or blame our Christian forebears for utilizing that particular way of getting into parts of the world that Christian missionaries just would not have had open to them in any other way than through those means, but there were certainly tensions that were brought about by cooperating with what was essentially a business enterprise that wasn't always concerned about the best interests of the people that it was trading with. And by the way, that's not just the British East India Company: we could talk about the Dutch East India Company, and we could talk about the other colonial powers. In fact, you can make an argument, I think, that the British East India Company had as good a track record of dealings as anybody, if not better, in that time frame. But definitely that was a major way that the gospel spread.

Dr. Thomas: Robert Grant goes to Cambridge University, graduates with... I think he's about 20-21 or so, in 1806; begins to practice law. Some twenty years later, he was elected to Parliament, following in his father's footsteps, and five years after that becomes Privy Counselor, and in 1834 (another decade or so), he's named the Governor of Bombay (so he escalates very quickly up that civil servant scale), and dies in Dapooree in Western India. So, he's in Bombay and in Dapooree in Western India, and dies in 1838, so he was only actually in India for four years.

While he was a Member of Parliament, he introduced a bill to remove the restrictions imposed upon the Jews. One of the historians, McCauley, made his maiden speech in support of that measure. So—Sir Robert Grant.

Dr. Duncan: And just to follow up on that—because I'm going to ask Bill Wymond to play this song in just a second, at least to the tune that we sing it to in the United States, and we may even compare it to the one that you sing it to or have

sung it to in Britain, Derek.

But before we do that, just a comment about Robert Grant. I did not know what you just told me about Robert Grant and the law in Parliament about reducing or removing some of the restrictions that had been put on the Jewish people, and that would indicate.... At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the early 1800's, you begin to have a number of British Christians that are deeply concerned for the welfare and for the conversion of the Jewish people, and presumably that motion that he made in Parliament may well have been as a part of a goodwill expression to the Jewish people that reflected a deep concern for their well-being and for their salvation. And so you begin to see Christians sending missions to the Jewish people, and then taking up the cause of the Jewish *Diaspora*.

There was no... the modern nation state that we call Israel didn't exist until 1948, so there's obviously no single nation. The Jews were spread throughout Europe and all over the world, and in many countries had special restrictions on them. I couldn't tell you exactly when that movement began to grow, but I do know that in the early nineteenth century you have a lot of Christians concerned about the well-being of the Jewish people and advocating for them, and you begin to see significant conversions of Jewish people to Christianity — like Alfred Edersheim. Was he converted under one of John Duncan's ministries in Germany. Then ends up writing some very famous books and such.

But we're looking at Robert Grant's beautiful hymn based on Psalm 104, *O Worship the King*. Now, Bill, in the United States, ever since I was a child I've sung this to a tune which we think is LYONS as opposed to "lions." It's depending on whether that's from a French origin or an English origin. It may be pronounced one way or the other. We sing it to this, but in a minute I want you to play it to the one that it's sung to in Britain. But just so the people can hear the tune in your head as we talk about it, here's *O Worship the King*. [Dr. Wymond plays.] It's a simple and majestic tune, Bill, and we use it very often to open our worship services.

Dr. Wymond: I like this particular tune — and I'll talk a little bit about the composer of the tune, whose name was Michael Haydn. But I like this tune because the words are majestic and they are extolling God's glorious nature, and every phrase of this tune rises as the things that are being exclaimed about God as King are laid out. And so each line goes up like that [plays]...and it really has this wonderful climax [plays]...as it talks about "the Ancient of Days." See how it keeps going up the scale?... There was a little eighteenth-century effect right there that occurs twice in the hymn — that little dotted sound. So that's a period kind of thing more than anything else. But again, the tune doesn't do anything dramatic as far as the intervals are concerned. They are fairly close together and so it makes a very singable tune.

The other tune that you were talking about is the tune which is called HANOVER, and that tune goes like this. It's actually an earlier English tune by William Croft. [Plays.] Now, I like that tune, and if I compare the two tunes I actually like that tune — partly also because of the harmony that's with it. I think it has particular harmonic interest. It's an older tune, and so it follows some of the patterns tune-wise that tunes that were written in the earlier days would follow. But I think that for the text of *O Worship the King* that the LYONS tune works a lot better. It has a little bit more of a progression that goes along with the thoughts of majesty. Shall I tell you something about the composer?

Dr. Duncan: Oh, please! I was just going to ask that. What's the relationship between Johann Michael Haydn and Franz Josef Haydn?

Dr. Wymond: Well, Johann Michael Haydn is the younger brother of Josef Haydn, who is such a famous composer out of the Austrian school, and we know him because he wrote a lot of wonderful symphonies and also because he wrote *The Creation*, which is a glorious choral work about the creation of the world by God. But Johann Michael Haydn was born in 1737, in a small Austrian village which is near the Hungarian border. His father was a wheelwright, perhaps the mayor of this little small community. His mother had been a cook in one of the palaces there. Neither one of them read music, but the father was very interested in music and made sure that his sons all learned music.

Both Johann and his brother, Josef, sang in the cathedral choir of St. Stephen's there in Vienna, which was a wonderful choir and a great place for them to get musical training because they not only would sing in the choir, but they would be taught all the rudiments of music and instruments as well. So it was a really thoroughgoing musical education that they got, just as the boys who sing in the Westminster Abbey Choir or the King's College Choir in England would get. And it's said that Michael was actually the better singer than his older brother, and perhaps in some ways a better musician. All these things are relative, of course, I realize; but, nevertheless...

Both of them profited so much from being in this, and this training that they had set the course of their lives. And for Michael, his was to be a church musician all of his life. Mainly he served in Salzburg for about 43 years. Salzburg was where Mozart was, and they were pretty much contemporaneous. Unfortunately, it's said that the Mozart women did not like Michael's wife, and so there was some antipathy between the families. However, Mozart appreciated Michael's music and used several of his compositions in his own works. That was a really common thing to do, to borrow from each other tunes and other things like that. Nobody thought that you were stealing at that time.

Dr. Duncan: To illustrate that from a fictional account, some people may remember the movie *Amadeus*, which has all manner of historical inaccuracies in it. But there's one scene where a composer comes to court and plays a really

simple little boring tune, and Mozart on the spot composes an entire new piece around this boring little tune and it is absolutely glorious by the time he's done with it! And that's actually not uncommon for that period, to take a tune or a riff or a line and then just build something else around it.

Dr. Wymond: Absolutely! The one thing that we don't do now as musicians and as church musicians is to improvise. But in Europe there's still this great tradition of improvising, so that many of the preludes and postludes are improvised on the spot, either on a well-known tune or on a theme that just comes to the musician's mind. So it was a great gift and a great skill that they had.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, in looking at the text of this hymn — and as Bill has already indicated, it's a great, great text of praise to God:

“O worship the King all-glorious above,
O gratefully sing His power and His love...”

And then just as Bill was saying, this expanding crescendo —

“Our shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,
Pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise.”

The line just soars as it picks up at that point and rises. The text is Grant's meditation on (in part) Psalm 104, and of course there had been a long tradition of singing Psalms in all of the British churches — English, Welsh, Irish, Scottish — and Sir Robert Grant would have been very familiar with William Kethe's rendering of Psalm 104:

“My soul, praise the Lord, speak good of His name.
O Lord, our great God, how doest thou appear?
So passing in glory that great is Thy fame,
Honor and majesty in Thee shine most clear.”

And you can almost hear the rhythm and cadence in which he writes *O Worship the King* out of Kethe's poetry—although I have to say that I think Grant's poetry is much better. Kethe may be a little more faithful to Psalm 104 in his meter, but Grant's text is really, really good from the standpoint of the poetry. You want to comment a little bit about the Psalm 104? The metrical versions, as opposed to this more paraphrastic thing that Grant has done?

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course you know I think you have to put yourself in the mindset of those for whom only Psalms should be sung in worship, and therefore once you're in that mindset, how do you versify the Hebrew Psalms? You know — how do you sing, say, from the Geneva translation of the Psalms? Or how do you sing from other King James translations of the Psalms? Well, you can't unless you chant them, so you have to versify them in some way. And in doing

that you're actually — it's one of our arguments against what they're doing — you're actually moving away from the original in order for it to rhyme.

It would be highly unusual for something that rhymes in Hebrew to rhyme in English without maybe changing significantly what's being said, but keeping within the spirit of it, which is what Grant is doing. And maybe what Kethe is trying not to do, because the verse does sound rather... [Dr. Duncan laughs...] You know, it ends...not with the word that you expect it to end with! And he's probably just trying to keep as faithful to the text as possible. [He just needs to loosen up a little! Because even what he's doing isn't accurate to the Hebrew text, I'm pretty sure.] It is an interesting issue, and we've talked about it several times now in the course of these discussions, where a Psalm text is used as a hymn

This is a great opening hymn. I can't think of anything better to begin a worship service on a Sunday morning than "O worship the King, all glorious above."

Dr. Duncan: Derek, share just a little. You've got a little Trinitarian theory about hymnody in churches like the ones that you and I have been in all of our lives, where you will typically have four or so songs of praise sung by the congregation. You feel that there needs to be a regular emphasis upon the one true Triune God, but also on each of the three persons of the Trinity. Talk about that just a little bit, what your theory is.

Dr. Thomas: Well, the doctrine of the Trinity is a central doctrine to Christianity. It's what distinguishes Christianity from every other religion. But I fear that if the church forgot the doctrine of the Trinity tomorrow, it would continue to do what it's always been doing; and I'm not sure that we're as self-conscious in our Trinitarianism as our forefathers were, or as some of our great ecumenical creeds are.

I think one way to ensure that we are Trinitarian and biblical is to begin with a hymn that extols God, and principally God the Father. The third hymn, because it usually comes before the reading of Scripture and the sermon, is, I think, suitably a hymn to the Holy Spirit, as one of the works of the Holy Spirit is inspiration of Scripture and illumination of Scripture. And I think then I would argue that the second hymn should be a hymn extolling the person and work of Christ. So you've got the flow of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I don't think I'd want to do that every service, but I think that is a good practical way of ensuring the Trinitarian and God-centeredness of worship, but also of maintaining in our self-awareness and consciousness the doctrine of the Trinity.

Dr. Duncan: So the flow would be a focus on the Father, then on the Son, then on the Holy Spirit, so that the congregation was thinking through the reality of the one true God who eternally exists in three persons.

Dr. Thomas: Indeed. And then to close the service with something, obviously, that flows from the sermon that's just gone before, perhaps; or perhaps something that's more doxological, which would be a good way to end a service.

Dr. Duncan: There are songs in which there are phrases that catch in my heart that come back to me on numerous occasions, whether it be when I'm called upon to pray in public or when I'm encountering a particular difficult circumstance in life, and the final two stanzas of this song and the first stanza of this song are stanzas that stick in my mind. We've read the first stanza to

O Worship the King, but the final two stanzas are:

“Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In You...

[and now this is directed towards God]...

“In You do we trust...”
[not in ourselves, but in You, in God do we trust],

“...nor find You to fail;
Your mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend!”

And that phrase, “our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend,” comes back to me. It captures different aspects of who the one true God is. He's our Maker (He made us, He created us); He's our Defender (He protects us, He providentially watches over us); He's our Redeemer (He saved us from our sins and from His just judgment and condemnation of us); and, He is our friend (He is our God and we are His people). He is our great and good Shepherd, who makes us to lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters.

It reminds me a little of that famous hymn — it's a hymn that you love about the Lord Jesus Christ — that extols Jesus as our Master and as our Friend: “*How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds* in a believer's ear.” And so that phrase, “our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend” just rings in my ears and in my heart. So are there other phrases from this hymn that catch you like that, Derek? Or do you want to think about that one for a moment?

Dr. Thomas: Well, I was just thinking...and we mentioned this before...in hymnody one can transgress the boundary of what is a hymn. And it's a difficult line to actually put down in black and white as to what we mean by that. But sometimes you sing certain words that are more poetic. In verse 4,

“Your bountiful care what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air; it shines in the light;

It streams from the hills; it descends to the plain;
And sweetly distils in the dew and the rain.”

For me, that's just right on the edge of what is the poetry art, but it's...once you know this stanza, you cannot forget it.

Dr. Duncan: Let's hear this great hymn, Bill.

O worship the King all-glorious above,
O gratefully sing His power and His love;
Our shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,
Pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise.

O tell of His might, O sing of His grace,
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space.
His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,
And dark is His path on the wings of the storm.

The earth with its store of wonders untold,
Almighty, your power has founded of old;
Has 'stablished it fast by a changeless decrees,
And round it has cast, like a mantle, the sea.

Your bountiful care what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air; it shines in the light;
It streams from the hills; it descends to the plain;
And sweetly distils in the dew and the rain.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In You do we trust, nor find You to fail;
Your mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend!

O measureless Might! Ineffable Love!
While angels delight to hymn You above,
The humbler creation, though feeble their lays,
With true adoration shall lisp to Your praise.

Dr. Wymond: This has been “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church, with Ben Roberson as our soloist this morning.

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