

Hymns of the Faith: “Give to Our God Immortal Praise”

Psalm 103

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.”

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond! This is Ligon Duncan, and it's a joy to be along with you for another edition of “Hymns of the Faith” as we explore this repository of the devotional treasures of the ages in our hymnals. Unfortunately our hymnals have become to many an undiscovered country in our own time, and we love the privilege of introducing folk to some of these great, great treasures that have been bequeathed to us by the church before us, and which we've been singing in the English language for many, many years.

Today, Derek, we're looking at a song written by Isaac Watts. We've looked at a number of Isaac Watts' pieces in the last number of months, and this is based on Psalm 136. Psalm 136 is that Psalm that has the repeated line, “For His steadfast love endures forever,” or “For His lovingkindness... [or, His covenant love, which ever your translation is]...endures forever.” And “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever” is repeated at the beginning and the ending of the Psalm, and then there are all sorts of reasons given why the Lord's steadfast love endures forever, or manifestations of how His steadfast love endures forever, given throughout the Psalm. And this is Isaac Watts' version of it.

It's to the tune in our hymnal of WARRINGTON, and I wonder, Bill Wymond, if it might be good just to have that tune rumbling around in people's heads as we begin to talk about it. If you could just go ahead and play it now, and then we'll talk about the music in just a few moments.

[*Dr. Wymond plays.*] It's a good, bright, strong, opening, morning hymn! I love that tune! It carries the text well, and I think lifts up the hearts of the congregation to sing when we start off in the mornings.

Dr. Wymond: I think that. For me this is a very English-sounding tune, quintessentially English, partly because it's somewhat reserved, although it does have a bright overall effect to it. And I think it's just good for the text. The text talks a good bit about God, says things about God and so on, and then admonishes us of course to give Him praise right in the middle of the line. And the music sort of follows along that way.

So the tune just starts out in a somewhat pedestrian way.... Now, I like this tune! Derek, I know you're British, and so I want to make sure that you don't understand me! [*Plays*]...Pretty straightforward there, as it's talking about God... "truthful in all His ways." And then when it comes to the part that talks about the wonder of His grace, it expands and goes up the scale...[*plays*]...to this climax, and then continues on in the more normal vein. I can just see Queen Victoria sitting right there in her little outfit with the white cap on, you know, singing this!

Dr. Duncan: Bill, it strikes me...one, there is repetition in the music and there's repetition in the text repeatedly. In that second half of the line you get, "Wonders of grace to God belong" and "His mercy ever shall endure." So in the repetition of that, six times through each of the stanzas of the hymn, you get a little bit of the effect that you get when you're reading Psalm 136 out loud with that refrain, "For His steadfast love endures forever." So that's Watts sort of mimicking the text. But you also get, and you've told us this before.... sometimes it's a strong start to a hymn when you have a repeated note. You get the "dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun" and it sort of gets you going, gets the congregation kind of moving along with the tempo.

Dr. Wymond: Well, to me that musical effect also seems to be coupled to a command or a very strong statement. Here it says, "Give to God immortal praise," and starts off several lines just the same way, and it starts on the strong beat of the measure. This is in s time, and the strong beat of the measure is the first beat, so there's not what we would call a pickup, it just goes "Give-un-to-God" and that's a strong musical effect.

Dr. Duncan: Another thing that I love about the text here is it does indeed...at this point it's very, very literal in its rendering of Psalm 136, in that Psalm 136 begins with the exhortation "Give thanks to the Lord." And we've noticed as we've studied the Psalms together and as we've studied great hymns that repeatedly those Psalms and hymns involve the congregation exhorting itself to give praise to God. Recently a friend of ours complained that so many hymns ask us to sing about God rather than singing to God.

Well, the songs of the Bible do constantly encourage us to sing about God, and they exhort one another to sing about God. So that's a very biblical thing to do, and one of the reasons it's so important is very often we come to worship and we're so burdened and distracted by other things that we could very easily sit through a worship service and not be engaged with what's happening. And the

songs that we sing as a congregation are designed to stir us from that kind of slumber and to exhort one another to actually engage ourselves in what we ought to be involved in. I think that's a good thing to recognize when we're singing hymns together.

Dr. Wymond: Especially because we live in an age where people would rather just come and sit, either to be entertained or just not to have to be involved. They want a little hour of rest, I guess, or something like that.

But biblical worship just doesn't let you do that. It gets you engaged right away. That was the great gift of the Reformation, drawing the people back into the worship after they had been witnesses of the drama of the mass for several centuries, and now they are pulled back into the principal role of worshiper. So the Psalms are just perfect for helping them to engage that way. And of course once we do it, we find that our spirits are lifted and our energies are even increased by the process.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, this hymn, *Give to Our God Immortal Praise*, was written — its text was written — by Isaac Watts. You want to tell us a little bit about your perspective on the hymn, and on Isaac Watts, and maybe even something about Ralph Harrison, who authored the tune, WARRINGTON?

Dr. Thomas: Well, I love the tune, as Bill was pointing out earlier. For me, you know, there are certain tunes that just remind me of church. I don't mean to be quaint or old-fashioned, but that tune reminds me of church. I love the church, and I like tunes that remind me of church. And there's something...of all the shifting sands, this is a constant, this is a foundation. And I just love that tune. It draws me straight back to church.

It sounds folksy; I mean, like a folk hymn. And you've talked about the influence of folk tunes before. Isaac Watts, you know, "the father of English hymnody" he's been called, born in the late — well, his father lived in the late seventeenth century. Spent a couple of times in prison as a Dissenter, meaning one who would not concede to forced membership and worship of the state church, the Church of England. The son, Isaac Watts, was actually offered a substantial scholarship to attend — was it Brasenose College in Oxford? — to study for what would be called holy orders, to become a minister in the Church of England, but turned it down and maintained his father's dissenting ways. Of course you and I and Bill would be Dissenters by that definition, as Presbyterians.

I like Isaac Watts a great deal because of what I've talked about before, and that is Watts complained about...this isn't why I like him! [*Laughter*]... Get my punctuation and my sentence in right order here! Of course the tradition then was singing the Psalms, and I'm all for singing the Psalms. We should all be singing all the Psalms of David, and we should be singing them as part of everyday, every Sunday worship.

But there is a sense in which if all you do is sing the Psalms as they are found in the Old Testament, prophetic and anticipatory of the New Testament and of Christ, that you never actually sing Jesus. You may sing about Him, but you don't use the name *Jesus* in worship. You can use Him in prayer, you can use Him in sermon, but you can't use the name of Jesus in a song in worship, and that just seems to me to be a little odd. And I say that to my dearest friends in all the world.

And Isaac Watts has been charged with "Christianizing" the Psalms, which I think there's a good valid biblical principle of interpreting the Old in light of the New.

So for example, in this Psalm, which is Psalm 136, the fifth stanza says, "He sent His Son with power to save, from guilt and darkness and the grave." Now that's more than just Christianizing a little word here and there. I mean, that's a complete interpretation of course that he's added, I suppose. It's more than just changing the name of Jehovah or God to Jesus. He's done much more than that to the Psalm, which is fair enough. This is a hymn. But I think it's a way forward, and I sort of think that today we need to do that with the Psalms: that one of the ways to introduce the Psalms back into worship, at least in congregations that are not familiar with the Psalms, is to point out the gospel in the Psalms, to point out Jesus in the Psalms.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, it's a good example...this paraphrase of Psalm 136 is a good example of how singing the Psalms in a metrical form, and singing paraphrases of the Psalms that bring in the perspective of the new covenant believer and the fulfillment of the Old Testament designs in Jesus Christ and in the gospel, and in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a wonderful combination. Because this Psalm celebrates from about verse 10 on the victory of redemption that God had won for the children of Israel over Egypt, and bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea and giving them a land to live in.

But it doesn't even remotely look forward, at least in this particular text, to a redemption beyond that.

And what Watts does is he picks it up right there and he continues it on for you, and that's something that every new covenant believer needs to be doing as he's reading the Psalms.

Dr. Thomas: And it's what any preacher would do if he were preaching on this Psalm: what does this mean for us today? And you bring it all the way into the New Testament. And I think it's fair enough to do that in what is essentially a paraphrase of the Psalm.

There's a wonderful...you know, some hymns I sometimes think are too poetic.

The metaphors are too dense; they're too difficult to understand for congregational worship. They're something that perhaps could be studied in a poetry class somewhere. Now here there's some wonderful poetry, but it's still — how can I put it? — everyday kind of poetry. You understand what he's saying. I love the line of stanza four:

“He fills the sun with morning light;
He bids the moon direct the night:
His mercies ever shall endure,
When suns and moons shall shine no more.”

I just think that's beautiful poetry.

Dr. Duncan: It's very simple, but it's very gripping poetry.

Dr. Wymond: Well, gentlemen, while you're thinking about these lofty thoughts, may I come down... [*laughter*]...to a very earthly observation here? And it's about Isaac Watts. Forgive the discourses here. But anyway, he was a very good preacher evidently, and was called to an important London church which was called Mark Lane. Most of the members of this church were drawn from the merchant class, and evidently there were a number of rather wealthy people in the church. So here he is at the age of 26, and he becomes very frail and ill. And one of the members of the church is actually the Lord Mayor of London, and he is very fond of his preacher and wants to give him some opportunity to recover. So he invites him to come to his country home, to be there and to just read and relax and recover. (Evidently a lot of British people have country homes. I'm really impressed by that!) But anyway, this country home is near Stoke, and so he goes up there and he stays 36 years. You know, he's that houseguest who overstays by several weeks, anyway. [*Laughter*]

Dr. Duncan: Is that a British thing, too, Derek? You go somewhere and you stay 36 years?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I sort of joke about this, but actually it just shows the great providence of God to take care of this man and to give him a wonderful setting so that he can let loose all of his poetic powers and do the great translations of the Psalms that he did.

Dr. Thomas: And you'll remember the Countess of Huntingdon, who used her country home and her wealth to enable the gospel to spread, and bequeathed her finances in a very wise and helpful way that we today still profit from. That's a lesson, in fact, for those listening this morning to whom God has been favorable in giving enormous wealth, to use it wisely for gospel ends.

Dr. Duncan: The song picks up with the themes of Psalm 136. Let's just walk through each of the stanzas, Derek, because you've already drawn attention to

two beautiful stanzas. The first line says

“Give to our God immortal praise;
Mercy and truth are all His ways:
Wonders of grace to God belong;
Repeat His mercies in your song.”

And so it's a call for us to remember the mercies of God and to praise God for the mercies that He has shown to us, and exhorting one another to do this — bidding one another to do this. It then moves on in the second line to say

“Give to the Lord of lords renown;
The King of kings with glory crown:
His mercies ever shall endure,
When lords and kings are known no more.”

And that's a very similar thing to what he does in stanza four. He appeals to praising God for filling the sun with morning light, and for bidding the moon direct the night; but then he says God is going to be merciful and going to be manifesting His lovingkindness when the sun and moon no longer exist. So here in line two, “Give to the Lord of lords renown; the King of kings with glory crown...” but remember He's going to be King of kings and Lord of lords when there are no other lords and kings anymore. So he does this several times in the song, and as you say, the language is very simple. We're very soon going to be doing a hymn that comes from the nineteenth century, and the poetry is very flowery. There's nothing flowery about this poetry; it's very straightforward, but it's still very striking in the pictures that it draws.

“He built the earth,” is the next line. Isn't that an interesting way of saying it? You could have said it in a much more pedestrian way, but this...

“He built the earth, He spread the sky,
And fixed the starry lights on high:
Wonders of grace to God belong;
Repeat His mercies in your song.”

And then you've already mentioned the fourth stanza — “He fills the sun...” And then the fifth stanza, which is so beautiful:

“He sent His Son with power to save
From guilt and darkness and the grave:
Wonders of grace to God belong;
Repeat His mercies in your song.”

And then the concluding exhortation:

“Through this vain world He guides our feet,
And leads us to His heavenly seat:
His mercies ever shall endure,
When this vain world shall be no more.”

So for the third time in the song he draws our attention to something that God does for us now, and then asks us to think about a time when those things are no more, and yet we'll still be knowing God's mercy and God's lovingkindness. So it's a very effective way of addressing us about the Christian life because it asks us to praise God now for something He's doing, but also to look forward to something that he is going to do in the future.

Any thoughts about that, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Well, you know I've sung this hymn so many times, but I've only now realized that verses one, three, and five repeat “Wonders of grace to God belong; repeat His mercies in your song.” And verses two, four, and six repeat “His mercies ever shall endure, when this vain world shall be no more.”

I just love the way it starts. As you say, it's a good morning hymn. It's a good first hymn to sing on a Sunday morning, *Give to Our God Immortal Praise*. It's God-centered. It directs all of our attention to God. But it's also a thought that we need to increasingly return to, I think, in our materialistic age, and that is the fact that this world does not endure; that time is passing by and then this vain world shall be no more. So it directs our attention to the world to come, and by implication therefore asks whether we are in the right relationship to be ready for the world to come, rather than just for this world. So it's a wonderful hymn to begin the morning service, I think.

Dr. Duncan: And we often do begin our morning services with this hymn, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: We do. And I was just thinking, as you were talking about the language and the simplicity of it, how Anglo-Saxon the language is. The verbs are short, strong verbs, and I think that gives it part of the power. So he was very language conscious, obviously, and chose to let things fall in that direction rather than in Latin and French backgrounds and so on.

Did you know...also, if I may just interject...that Isaac Watts wrote children's hymns? And I think it's kind of interesting that there were three daughters of this Lord Mayor who lived at the estate where Watts was, and he took a real interest in their Christian education and wrote hymns for them. He left a number of children's hymns that have been published. Let me just show you a little bit of the language of one of those. It's kind of...slightly humorous, but it would catch children's attention. They say that six generations of British children have been brought up on this hymn. Derek, I don't know whether that was before your time or not. But it says,

Let dogs delight to bark and bite,
For God hath made them so;
But, children, you should never let
Such angry passions rise.
Your little hands were never made
To tear each other's eyes.

Very straightforward, isn't it?

How doth the busy little bee
Improve each shining hour?
In works of labor or of skill
I would be busy, too;
For Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.

Very, very simple poetry there, but good moral admonitions.

Let's listen now as Victor Smith sings for us *Give to Our God Immortal Praise*.

Give to our God immortal praise;
Mercy and truth are all His ways:
Wonders of grace to God belong;
Repeat His mercies in your song.

Give to the Lord of lords renown;
The King of kings with glory crown:
His mercies ever shall endure,
When lords and kings are known no more.

He built the earth, He spread the sky,
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Through this vain world He guides our feet,
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