

Hymns of the Faith: “Before Jehovah's Awesome Throne”

Psalm 100

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 now with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Good morning, Bill Wymond, and it's great to be with you on “Hymns of the Faith.” To our listening audience, I welcome you on behalf of Derek Thomas and Bill Wymond and myself as we explore some of the great hymns of the Christian church over the last 2,000 years, and today we're in a very famous text.

It is another text written by Isaac Watts. We have studied already together several of Isaac Watts' hymns, and it's called *Before Jehovah's Awesome Throne*. It's one of many, many hymns that are heavily based on Psalm 100. Those Psalms that run from Psalm 95 to Psalm 100 have produced...boy, it would be hard to calculate how many hymns have been based on thoughts out of those Psalms, because those Psalms have so many very familiar calls to worship. If you are in a congregation in which the minister opens the worship service with a scriptural call to worship, the language of Psalm 95-100 regularly feature in those calls to congregational worship and they also regularly feature in a number of hymns. And Isaac Watts based this particular hymn, *Before Jehovah's Awesome Throne*, on Psalm 100, so we're going to look at it today.

But it's set to a tune from the early nineteenth century. We don't know a whole lot about the author of the tune. The tune is called PARK STREET; and, Bill Wymond, you were telling me off air before we came on this morning that this is not Park Street in Boston, it's Park Street somewhere else.

Dr. Wymond: That's right. It's a Park Street known to the composer somewhere in England. But not a Park Street known to me. Shall I play it?

Dr. Duncan: Yes, play the tune for us because some folks may not know PARK

STREET. [*Dr. Wymond plays.*]

Now, Bill, if I had to give an evaluation of that tune, I think if I were being charitable I would say it's pleasant, but unremarkable. I think you may have your own opinions about that tune. Tell me about your thoughts on PARK STREET.

Dr. Wymond: Well, actually I don't like this tune! And I thought, well, maybe it's a good idea just to go ahead and talk about that a little bit. The tunes for me from the early nineteenth century, at least some of them, are not strong tunes, and it had to do just with the compositional style of the time. There are aspects of this tune that could have made it strong. One thing that we've talked about before is the fact that repeated notes sometimes in the very beginning of a hymn can suggest strength. In this one it starts out that way [*plays*].

Dr. Duncan: Yes! Let me ask you the question then, because I noticed that too. But it never gets strong. What happened? Is it the key that it's working in? Is it the pitch that it starts on? What happens?

Dr. Wymond: I think part of it does have to do with the low center of pitch in this hymn. It's a low-pitched hymn, which in itself is not bad, but there are a couple of other factors here that weaken the tune, I think, and one of them is that the hymn changes keys in a way that does not suggest strength. You have ... [*plays*]...and then it does this... [*plays*]...and here's the key change. It's going to another key, which is the key of C, and I just don't think that's a very strong sound. And then it has this gesture... [*plays*]...which is boring to me.

Dr. Duncan: It slows it down. Whatever momentum has been built up from the little runs, it just sort of slows down, doesn't it?

Dr. Wymond: And then it goes... [*plays*]...which I think is not very attractive, and I should give a technical reason for that. It is just a little bit...well, we've said pedestrian before...but it's unimaginative to me. And then it ends on a very weak stroke [*plays*]. There's just no strength in that.

Dr. Duncan: It's Long Meter with a chorus, with a repetition at the very end, and we've talked a little bit about Long Meter and Short Meter and Common Meter, but this repeats the last line. And again a lot of times when you get a chorus at the end it will actually re-emphasize something very strong. But because the tune ends on...as it were, it's on a sloping down...

Dr. Wymond: It's a down sound, and it just sounds to me quite honestly as though he had to end the hymn and he had to have enough beats in the hymn! [*Dr. Duncan laughs*] But he didn't have an original thought, and so I'm just honestly critical of this tune.

Dr. Duncan: PARK STREET gets used ubiquitously in some hymnals to service

several different hymn texts, not unlike DUKE STREET. You know DUKE STREET gets used over and over to do different hymns. Why?

Dr. Wymond: I am not sure. It just must have been known, and sometimes people go for the convenient, and I think that may be well what happened here.

Dr. Duncan: Well, here's my challenge: You need to write a tune for this text, because actually the text is pretty good.

Dr. Wymond: There are a lot of other good Long Meter tunes that it could go with, and I think I would consider marrying it with one. The biggest objection that I have is that the tune does not suit the exalted text. The text is really exalted, and the tune is very common.

Dr. Duncan: It really is exalted text, and there are some...there are a couple of stanzas in here that are up there in the top ten percent of any stanzas that Watts turned. He had an ability to in a very few words turn a very powerful phrase, and he does that. This stanza is one of my favorite stanzas in all of Watts' writings. I did not check before we started this, Bill...very often I'll go to the hymnal site that Calvin College does, and I'll go to CyberHymnal to see what other tunes a particular hymn has been set to over the course of its history. Do you happen to know, either of you, is this the tune that this would be sung to in Britain, Derek? It is sung to PARK STREET in Britain. Do you know of other tunes, Bill?

Dr. Wymond: I haven't seen it set to other tunes, but as I say...

Dr. Duncan: That would be a real...I think we could do a service to the church to find a more suitable tune for this very, very good text.

Dr. Wymond: Well, now that we've all said this, I guess that's what we're going to have to do, because I don't think this tune is going to survive this generation, probably, unless people such as we just don't go to the trouble to find a better tune.

Dr. Duncan: Listen, Bill, do you know anything about the author of PARK STREET, this Frederick Venua?

Dr. Wymond: Well, "bless his heart" I guess, as we would say here in the South. I'm sorry I've just run down his tune. But he was from an Italian family that lived in France, and he went to the Paris Conservatory. These are good credentials. And he studied composition in London and lived there. He composed for the ballet orchestra of the King's Theater there, and he became a member of the British Royal Society of Musicians. So he immersed himself in the musical life of London. He retired to Exeter, and he died there in England in 1872. So his life span was from 1778-1872, and other than that, Frederick Marc Antoine Venua is not very well known.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, the author of most of this hymn as we have it is Isaac Watts, but John Wesley also contributed an alternative version of the first stanza that has been incorporated into the version that we have in *The Trinity Hymnal*. You may want to remind folks who perhaps haven't heard our previous programs on Isaac Watts who Isaac Watts is, and why he's famous.

Dr. Thomas: Well, Isaac Watts of course is probably the most important English hymn writer of all time, I suppose, having written hundreds and hundreds of hymns. But he was a poet in his own right, and published a volume — perhaps more than one volume, as far as I know — of poetry, and that poetry is still studied in eighteenth century studies. He is the father of independency for many. His church in Southampton is still there and still bearing witness to the gospel and to “the arid tones of Calvinism,” as I read somewhere in these notes from somebody who obviously was not a Calvinist.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, from A.E. Bailey, who is a wonderful hymnologist, but who hates Calvinists, yes!

Dr. Thomas: And Isaac Watts was a Calvinist with a capital “C” although he had Episcopalian roots and was offered scholarships to study at an Episcopalian college, which he turned down. And my independent friends in Britain, for example, see Isaac Watts as one of the great heroes. A remarkable story in that quite early on in his life — maybe he was in his early thirties, perhaps — when he was taken ill and went to stay at a friend's house and was there for thirty years or more. I can't find another reference as to how...yes, 36 years! You invite this fellow to stay for a few months, and he's still there.

Dr. Duncan: He's still there! Derek, Bill Wymond was just drawing my attention to the original opening stanza that Isaac Watts — and I think you'll get a kick out of this — this is how Isaac Watts originally wrote the first stanza. The first stanza that reads in our altered modified version (and I'll explain that in just a minute) in our hymnal:

“Before Jehovah's awesome throne,
All nations, bow with sacred joy;
Know that the Lord is God alone,
He can create, and He destroy—He can create, and He destroy.”

Well, this is how Watts originally wrote it:

“Sing to the Lord with joyful voice,
Let every land His name adore.
The British Isles shall send the noise
Across the ocean to the shore.”

Well, you Brits are pretty confident!

Dr. Thomas: I don't know why you would change that! What was the deal?

Dr. Wymond: Actually now, I think I like the way the verse starts. I think it's strong like the Psalm. But it does reflect a tendency sometimes of British hymn writers to think of Britain as sort of the center...

Dr. Thomas: It's okay for you to trash the Italian composer, Bill, but not the British writer!

Dr. Wymond: And do you know, one of my favorite hymns is *The Day You Gave Us, Lord, Is Ended*. It's a hymn by John Ellerton, and one of the stanzas in the original of that talks about the fact that the sun never sets on the Empire, which was a Victorian thought. I realize that Watts was not Victorian, but anyway....

Dr. Duncan: So just remember when you tell us how America-centric we are, you know, we learned from past masters on that, Derek!

Dr. Thomas: We should at some point slip that old version into the bulletin and have people suddenly come across these words as they're singing on Sunday morning...that would be just wonderful!

Dr. Duncan: What Wesley did is take that first line and change it to something more closely akin to what we sing now:

"Nations attend before His throne,
With solemn fear, with sacred joy;"

And that's been turned around now to what I think is actually improved verse,

"Before Jehovah's awesome throne,
All nations, bow with sacred joy;
Know that the Lord is God alone,
He can create, and He destroy—He can create, and He destroy."

So it is interesting to see the modifications that even well-known texts undergo over the course of the years.

Watts wrote this in 1705, he modified it in 1719; Wesley made some modifications to it, an alternative version of it was developed in 1961, and then when *The Trinity Hymnal* was being edited and published in 1990, it was modified again. So this will happen with a number of hymns. There will be significant modifications and there will be different reasons why that happens — sometimes for theological reasons, and sometimes it's just reasons of verse.

Dr. Wymond: I was just going to say the title itself where we use the word “awesome” used to be “awful,” and I’ve thought it’s too bad that that word has been reduced to be a negative term...awe, awesome, awful — you know, it was a wonderful word at one time.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, and that’s a great point. Do you remember...let me see...I’m going to mess this story up, but I think...wasn’t St. Paul’s Cathedral in London designed by Christopher Wren? And Queen Anne would have been the queen when it was completed. And she was brought in and asked to give her opinion, and Christopher Wren was in the presence, and her response was two words: “Awful” and “artificial.” Now to us today that would seem like a crushing criticism, but for her that was the highest compliment that she could have given, because when she said “awful” *she meant* what we meant by “awesome” — This thing evokes awe, it is full of awe. And “artificial” *for her meant* that it bore the marks of a master artisan; that you could see the work of his artifice in every detail. And so “awful” and “artificial” was actually the highest compliment she could have paid to that architect. Well, same thing with this, Bill.

And there’s another hymn we sing, *How Sweet and Awful Is the Place*, which in many of our hymnals has been changed to *How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place*. The nice side of that is that it does allow us to use the word “awesome” like it ought to be used, as opposed to a filler word that it has come to be in our language.

But, Derek, looking through each of the stanzas of this hymn, there’s some wonderful theology from Psalm 100 that Watts manages to pack into this thing. One is simply the call that you see for the nations to worship God. Tell us a little bit about that in the Psalms. That might surprise some people to know that in the Old Testament there was a continual call, not just for the Jewish people or for the nation of Israel, but for all the nations to worship God. What’s going on there?

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course it underlines that mission or evangelism, but mission in particular, is a theme that begins with Abraham, that the blessing of Abraham was to be a blessing upon the world and the nations; that through Abraham the world, the nations, would come to know God. This Hundredth Psalm of course is probably... In another version, the Scottish version of the Hundredth Psalm would be the most popular Psalm, along with Psalm 23...

Dr. Duncan: “All people that on earth do dwell,” in the old *Metrical Psalter*...yes.

Dr. Thomas: “...sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.” And again, the use of *mirth*...

Dr. Duncan: Yes! “Him serve with *mirth*, His praise forthtell...” — another word that has a different connotation now.

Dr. Thomas: Of course in the early church the Hundredth Psalm was probably not the most popular Psalm. Psalm 110...

Dr. Duncan: I was just going to say Psalms 110, 118; there are other messianic Psalms that were...

Dr. Thomas: ...and Psalms that were particularly employed in the liturgy of Passover. The Psalms 113-118 were probably more well-known than Psalm 100. Psalm 100 is a Psalm that most congregations in Britain — at least Presbyterian congregations in Britain — could sing without accompaniment and without a hymnbook. If you found yourself in a context, for example at the graveside, you could always begin to sing the Twenty-third or the Hundredth Psalm and everybody would join in because they would both know the tune and the words. It's interesting how this Psalm begins as aspiration that looks perhaps forward to a day when actually this will be true, when the nations will bow before the sovereign throne of Almighty God.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, the second stanza does some things really interesting to me. One is it states something that's very clearly in that Psalm and in this whole set of Psalms that runs from 95-100, the expression that God in His sovereign power created us from dust. The repeated emphasis that He is the sovereign, almighty, creator God just comes through that whole set of Psalms. But then it does something really interesting at the end of the stanza:

“And when like wandering sheep we strayed,
He brought us to His fold again...”

—and there's almost that sort of new covenant perspective on the Psalms that is so typical of Watts in the Psalms of David imitated, where you have almost this evangelistic and new covenant and gospel twist on the Psalm. Any reflections on that second stanza and what Watts does there?

Dr. Thomas: We've spoken several times, of course, about how Watts Christianized the Psalms — infused into the Psalms a fulfilled theology of the New Testament in terms of sometimes very specific references to Christ and the gospel that are perhaps only embryonic in the Psalms themselves.

I'm not a fan of the repeated line at the end. I find it a little stilted, especially the strength of “He can create and He destroy.” I'm just not sure about that. But...

Dr. Duncan: You think it would be...unrepeated would be more forceful. That's an interesting thought.

Dr. Thomas: And I think you'd get a better tune for it. If you repeat the words, you've obviously got to repeat...well, especially since Bill has spoken about the unremarkableness of the...

Dr. Duncan: Well, this is the point. If you're a pastor out there and you're thinking, "Boy, this is a great hymn text," if you lop off that repetition you've certainly got more Long Meter tunes that you can choose from than you can choose from Long Meter tunes with a built-in repetition. So there are for sure more options there.

Derek, one thing I want to comment about the third stanza and then hasten on to the fourth stanza, because we don't have a whole lot of time, but

"We are His people, we His care,
Our souls and all our mortal frame..."

That's a beautiful and comprehensive declaration of God's providential watchcare over us.

Dr. Thomas: Indeed. I suspect that these are things that would need to be brought out. And I'm quite a fan of introducing a hymn and at least saying a sentence about what we're about to sing. I think we assume everybody understands what they're singing, but that's a false assumption.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, I think so, too.

Dr. Thomas: And you know, for somebody who's passing through trials and tribulations, those are tender words, that we are...well, to follow the metaphor of the previous stanza of sheep, and it's continued now of course in this stanza that we are brought into His fold again, and God as our Shepherd reflecting a link, in fact, between the Hundredth Psalm and the Twenty-third Psalm.

Dr. Duncan: That's right. And then the fourth stanza says,

"We'll crowd your gates with thankful songs,
High as the heavens our voices raise;
And earth, with her ten thousand tongues,
Shall fill Your courts with sounding praise."

And there you see that missionary emphasis again — all the languages of earth crowding Your courts with sounding praise. It's a beautiful...it's almost sort of an *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* kind of thing.

Dr. Thomas: Right, and there's a sort of glimpse of *For All the Saints* in there, too, that hymn that we love so much. It's actually beautiful poetry. I think it's probably the best...I know you like the last stanza, but the poetry of that fourth stanza is not...I mean, some poetry can be high-faluting, it can be over the top...but there's a cadence:

“We’ll crowd your gates with thankful songs,
High as the heavens our voices raise;
And earth, with her ten thousand tongues,
Shall fill Your courts with sounding praise.”

Dr. Duncan: Yes, I love how Watts manages to be poetic and straightforward at the same time! I've never been able to match that kind of ability. Here's the fifth stanza:

“Wide as the world is Your command,
Vast as eternity Your love;
Firm as a rock Your truth must stand,
When rolling years shall cease to move.”

That's a strong textual ending to this hymn, don't you think?

Well, Bill, let's hear *Before Jehovah's Awesome Throne*, and we'll start thinking about what tune we want to set this to.

Dr. Wymond: This is “Hymns of the Faith” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church, and singing this hymn this morning is Lauren Randall.

Before Jehovah's awesome throne,
All nations, bow with sacred joy;
Know that the Lord is God alone,
He can create, and He destroy—He can create, and He destroy.

His sovereign power, without our aid,
Made us of dust and formed us men;
And when like wandering sheep we strayed,
He brought us to His fold again—He brought us to His fold again.

We are His people, we His care,
Our souls and all our mortal frame;
What lasting honors shall we rear,
Almighty Maker, to Your name?—Almighty Maker, to Your name?

We’ll crowd your gates with thankful songs,
High as the heavens our voices raise;
And earth, with her ten thousand tongues,
Shall fill Your courts with sounding praise—shall fill Your courts with
sounding praise.

Wide as the world is Your command,
Vast as eternity Your love;
Firm as a rock Your truth must stand,

When rolling years shall cease to move—when rolling years shall cease to move.”

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