

## Hymns of the Faith: “Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim”

Psalm 135

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! This is Ligon Duncan, and I'm delighted to be with you and with Derek Thomas for today's “Hymns of the Faith” radio program. Today we're looking at a wonderful tune with a sturdy text right out of the Psalms. It's a metrically arranged version of Psalm 135, called *Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*.

Now even if you're in the listening audience this morning and don't recognize that hymn title, you're going to recognize this tune because the hymn tune itself is based on a wonderful melody that comes right out of Franz Joseph Haydn's glorious piece, *The Creation*. And, Bill, before we even start talking about the hymn, I think it would be good for us to have that beautiful tune ringing in our ears. [*Dr. Wymond plays.*] Bill, it's been since college that I've sung Haydn's *Creation*, and so though I know the words that go to that song in Haydn's *Creation*, I can't get the text of this Psalm out of my mind because this is the one I've sung most often! But Haydn gives the basses such a nice line there, especially at the end. Normally we basses have to have sort of boring lines that fill out the rest of the chord, but Haydn really does us right on that particular piece and arrangement. Tell us a little bit about the music, Bill.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, this hymn is just based on one of the six choruses found in *The Creation*— and I suspect that Derek would like to say a little bit about *The Creation* himself, since he's such a wonderful, knowledgeable person on music! But the chorus is “The Heaven's Are Telling” [the glory of God], and it's just one of the happiest songs I know — so exuberant and so joyful. That just reflected the spirit of Haydn, as far as we can tell from what he has said and others have said about him.

The remarkable thing about Haydn was that he was born into a poor family (his father was a wheelwright) and a talent evidenced itself early in his life, so by the age of eight he was in the choir of St. Stephen's Cathedral there in Vienna — a very well-known choir with possibilities for excellent training. And he sang as a soprano in that choir from the age of eight until he was 18 years old. Back in those days boys' voices didn't change until later. Bach was a soprano (I think I've said before) until he was 19. Anyway, at the time that his voice changed he was thrown out of the choir and was really poverty-stricken. For about eight years he struggled just trying to make it as a poor musician, and to his great fortune the Prince of Esterhazy invited him to become his court musician and Haydn had that position for thirty years. And during those thirty years, Haydn wrote dozens of symphonies and string quartets, and I think his output on symphonies was more than a hundred...

**Dr. Thomas:** ...103...

**Dr. Wymond:** ...103! Exactly! And he traveled with the prince when the prince would go to other courts, and so Haydn became pretty well known throughout Europe. Late in his life, in his sixties, he was invited to go to England, where he was a smash-hit. He wrote symphonies for the occasion. And he came back to Esterhazy, and then went again to England, where he again was wonderfully well received, so it was a very affirming thing for him. He was at the age of 65 by his second trip. Anyway, at this time, at this late time in life, after his second trip to England he came back and he composed this work called *The Creation*, which has been a favorite of choral groups ever since.

The thing that I like especially about Haydn was that he had this happy spirit, and everyone who knew him says that he was a religious man — a man interested in the things of the Lord. And on his scores, as Bach did, he would put a little notation in the beginning and at the end that this was to the glory of God, or for God, or in the name of God. Haydn said on one occasion (and I would quote him), “When I think of God, my heart dances within me, and the music has to dance, too.” And his music does dance and this hymn tune certainly dances, so it's just a great marriage of words and music.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, it's not often, Bill, that you get an oratorio piece that translates well to a hymn because sometimes they're too complex for a large congregation to sing, whereas a choir that has adequate opportunity to train and to rehearse and to get the tricky parts down is able to do something a little more complex. But this one works, and I don't know whether it's because people are used to hearing it and so have it in their minds and are able to sing... Do you have any theories on why this particular oratorio melody and arrangement work for a hymn and others don't?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, just fortunately it's simple enough that it could be adapted. A couple of Mendelssohn songs from larger works have been adapted the same

way, and Handel, too — a couple of his have been made into hymns. The tune is not complex. It's sort of a long hymn; it's longer than most hymns, in fact, but it has sections that are easily discerned and broken down. I'll try to show you, if you'd like.

**Dr. Duncan:** Yes, do that. That would be great.

**Dr. Wymond:** The first section is this opening statement, “Exalt the Lord...” [plays] ...so there's nothing complicated about that, and then that repeats again. We would just say that A section repeats, and then when it goes to the B section it's equally simple... [plays]...you hear the patterns there. The ear easily picks it up, and then does...[plays]...the C section is this...[plays]. So there are patterns that your ear just naturally picks up, and even the non-trained musician doesn't seem to have a problem with that. It's all so logical. A simple melody, and the range of it is not difficult.

**Dr. Duncan:** And I think it's probably the logic that helps most because, you know, it moves along. And there are a lot of notes and the runs, but the logic works. Another piece that I like a lot...I love (though this is a little pedestrian for Derek!)...I do love Gustav Holtz's *The Planets*, okay? But there is a *Trinity Hymnal* hymn setting that tries to use one of the pieces from *The Planets* and I think the intervals throw it off. I was trying to sing it...was just sort of caught off-guard by it in another church and was trying to sing it...and I love the particular piece that it's based on from Holtz's *The Planets*, but I couldn't sing the hymn very well and I think it was probably intervals that were making it difficult. This is more logical and helps, I think, a congregation to be able to sing it.

**Dr. Wymond:** That's right. Intervals are the distance between notes, and in this I think we don't have any more than about a fifth. It starts out on a fourth [plays]...and then thirds...and so the notes are close together and that makes it easier. One characteristic of music of the classical period was that it had balance and a certain predictability about it, and the music that really lasted and stood out was not because it was strange and complex but because it was skillfully done within those boundaries.

**Dr. Duncan:** And I always found if we were rehearsing most pieces by Handel or by Bach in choir in college, you had this strange feeling even when you were given a piece that you'd never sung before that you knew where Bach was going, or you knew where Handel was going, or you knew where... [Laughter]...and I always wondered, “Why do I think that I know where he's going? Because I've not sung this before.” But there was a logic to it, and there was a certain type of predictability that helped you. Even if you weren't a great sight-reader, a lot of times you sort of instinctively felt where the piece was going.

**Dr. Wymond:** Um-hmm. It was just as though they had rules for how melodies ought to go. But the interesting thing and intriguing thing — especially about

Handel and Bach — is that within that predictability there would be just one or two notes, especially at the end of a run or something like that....

**Dr. Duncan:** [*Laughing*] That's true!

**Dr. Wymond:** When we learn the *Messiah*, we have to be careful because we get into these runs, you know, and it's going... [*plays*]...and then at the very end of it, he will break the pattern and you have to be careful that you don't go crashing into the wrong notes! You have to be very observant.

**Dr. Duncan:** [*Laughing*] That is true, and I can remember our college choir director sort of yelling at us about those and saying, "No, that's the wrong run! That's the one that you were to do before; the second one is different!" But there is a logic to it that makes it easier to sing.

Derek, thoughts on Haydn? I know that you love Haydn's music and listen to probably all of his symphonies. Thoughts on the musical end, before we talk about the text itself?

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes! As Bill was playing that tune, I was thinking of a performance of *The Creation* I heard in London with Sir Colin Davis conducting the BBC Symphony and BBC Symphony Chorus in the German edition, *Die Schopfung* (the creation). And of course Handel's *Water Music* — everybody knows that, I'm sure. I often think — and this is a layman's observation from you two musical scholars...

**Dr. Duncan:** [*Laughing*]...Yeah, right!

**Dr. Thomas:** ...who've sung a lot of music. I always find this tune a bit like *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* in that if you really sing this, at the end of the stanza you're almost breathless — which leads me to suggest that singing is a physical act. I know that sounds commonplace to say that, but there is an aspect of standing up (and I know we Presbyterians like to sit down to sing, but choir directors will tell you that's probably not the best way to sing, of course)...there is a sense in which the sheer physical exhaustion of singing is in itself an act of worship because you've given yourself to do something.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, I think that's an interesting point that I had actually not thought of; I've always said that music in worship brings in the emotions of us which expands our total involvement, but now that you bring up the point about the physicality of it, that really does show the total man involved in worship.

**Dr. Thomas:** This is a completely layman's observation now, but sometimes at the 8:30 service...I'm not a morning person, all right? I mean, there are morning people and there are evening people, and I'm an evening person! [*Laughter*] I always have been, and probably always will be. But the 8:30 service is a struggle

for me. And that first two or three minutes of the 8:30 service, even if I get up (as I do) at 5:30 on a Sunday morning, I'm still not ready until I sing that first hymn. And if it's an exhausting hymn, it's like a good workout (and I don't work out, either!) [*Laughter*] But I imagine it to be like a good workout, you know? I'm ready now for worship.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, of course we do have two morning services, and the first one I notice is much quieter in the beginning than the second because of that phenomenon...people just really waking up.

**Dr. Thomas:** And I think there's something to be said for having a hymn at the very beginning at 8:30 on Sunday morning that wakes you up! It's okay to have the ...you know, "let us lie down and slumber" in the evening service [*Laughter*], but in the morning service I think this tune is such a great tune to sort of wake you up.

**Dr. Wymond:** Absolutely! It's one of my very favorite hymns and hymn tunes because of that — because of the fact that the music and the words are just so wonderfully wedded that you just can't sing this without getting involved in it. You can't sing it indifferently, I think.

**Dr. Thomas:** And again this is just a complete layman's observation, but the way it begins by ascending, and we are exalting the Lord ("His praise proclaim"), and it's like looking upwards to heaven and God sitting on His throne surrounded by the angels, and...

**Dr. Wymond:** And my little intervallic theory is that this interval of a fourth [*plays*] is a very strong upward movement used in other hymns of praise, really to benefit.

**Dr. Duncan:** In light of what you say about the length and the rigor of the hymn tune and arrangement, it is good that we have in this Psalm text just three stanzas because it really does give you a workout, and at the end you don't feel like, "Well, boy, I'm glad that's over!" I think you still feel exhilarated from the music and from the combination with the text.

This is a Psalm. It's a metrical Psalm text, but it's a recent metrical Psalm text. In fact, I was just looking in some of the material we have on the background, and this Psalm text, Derek, comes out of *The Psalter of 1912*, which was a Psalter produced by the old United Presbyterian Church, and that is, interestingly, the Presbyterian tradition that Dr. John Reed Miller came out of. (They had the old Xenia Seminary in western Pennsylvania, and Reed Miller, who was the pastor here from 1952-1969, was out of that denominational tradition. That tradition eventually merged with the PCUSA to become the UPCUSA, and then eventually what is today called the PCUSA denomination. But they were both Northern branches of Presbyterianism, but the old united church was also, interestingly,

the same denomination that John Gerstner came out of. He was a professor for many years at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and the old Xenia Seminary and the Pittsburgh Seminaries merged together and John came out of that old United Presbyterian tradition.) So it's a new Psalter by Psalter standards, because Psalters go way back, Derek. Not only did the Catholic church have a Psalter in the Middle Ages, in Latin, but from the very earliest days of the Reformation in continental Europe and in England and in Scotland, Psalters were a big part. Tell us just a little bit about that.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, of course Calvin went to Geneva, and he began work on it when he was exiled to Strasbourg for three years. And then when he came back to Geneva again, one of the things of course that he introduced was the Psalter. And Clement Marau, until he died...oh, 1548 or so he died..and then Theodore Beza, who became Calvin's successor, worked on the rest of the Psalms. And then...my mind has gone blank...the tune...

**Dr. Wymond:** Louis Bourgeois...

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes, Louis Bourgeois was hired to write tunes for *The Psalter*. And one has these wonderful stories — we were thinking this morning at a staff meeting about the Huguenots and the tradition of Psalm singing among the French Huguenots — singing, in fact, Calvin's *Genevan* Psalms — as they were, some of them, going to battle, to war. And we've spoken many times here of course in these programs of the importance of Psalm-singing — of inclusive Psalm-singing, as opposed to exclusive Psalm-singing.

**Dr. Duncan:** And you mean by that...what, Derek?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, not just singing Psalms and nothing else, but at least singing Psalms...Psalms and hymns.

**Dr. Duncan:** And we think that's important...why?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, not least because the hymnbook of the Bible is of course the Psalter, and for the Old Testament church the hymnbook was the Psalter. The hymnbook, if you like, that Jesus sang from in the synagogue in Nazareth as a young teenager and young man was undoubtedly the Psalms of David. And for a thousand years up until the Reformation, whilst there were some other items of Scripture, I think, that were also sung during the course of a worship service, the Psalter was the basic hymnbook of the church. And we lose a lot by not singing the Psalter.

I wanted to ask you a question. This is a call to worship: "Exalt the Lord, His praise proclaim; All you His servants, praise His name," and there's a sense in which I can understand a tension developing. Assuming that this is the first hymn that you sing in a worship service, you're actually speaking not to God, but you're

actually speaking to one another. And some people find that a tension...that in our praise we ought to be speaking directly to God. We've had this conversation in the last few days somewhere, and I can't quite reflect where we've had this conversation, but here's a wonderful example from Psalm 135 of exhorting one another in worship. The call to worship.... If you come, say, to First Presbyterian Church, or for that matter almost any Presbyterian church that follows any kind of traditional liturgy, the first thing is the call to worship. And sometimes that takes the form of a minister reciting a verse of Scripture. In this case it is a collective call to worship by the whole congregation. Talk to me about the role and function of calls to worship.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, it does fascinate me again, and I was thinking about it, Derek, as you were talking, that once again you meet a Psalm in which the very opening phrase of the Psalm is a call to one another: "Praise the Lord...praise the name of the Lord." "Praise Him, you servants of the Lord" is clearly directed from the worship leader (the pastor, the priest) to the people in the context of the worship of the living God.

**Dr. Thomas:** So this would be difficult to do if Sunday worship is only about fishing on a lake.

**Dr. Duncan:** Absolutely. It just points to the absolute necessity of public worship. It's not an optional thing that's nice to do occasionally. It's absolutely necessary. You can't worship God like He is intended to be worshiped on His day if you're not with His people, and I find it fascinating that even the calls to worship are directed not to individual souls in isolation from the others, but think of the.... Maybe our all-time favorite morning call to worship, "O come, let us worship and bow down" — you can't get five words into that until you've said "us"! So there's this constant emphasis on all of us together gathering to worship the living God. And then it's interesting that if you use this hymn as we so often do as the opening song in response, the response then to God's call to us to come and worship Him is to look at one another and say, "Let us go worship God, let us exalt His name together."

And we did have this conversation recently, and we were talking about a dear friend of ours whom we love and respect who was complaining about the fact that so many of the hymns that we sing actually exhort one another to sing to God or to sing about God rather than directly addressing God. And we simply observed that the hymns can't be discounted for doing that, because that's exactly what the Psalms do. This is a Psalm, and what's it doing? It's talking to one another, exhorting us to exalt God. Bill?

**Dr. Wymond:** I was just going to say Calvin, as you well know, thought that singing Psalms was prayer to God, and a lot of the Psalms have things where we're talking to ourselves sometimes or talking to other people. And so it must be, it seems to me, that even talking about God and His attributes is as though

you were talking to God, because you're praising God in that sense.

**Dr. Duncan:** Absolutely. And that is part of the corporate dynamic, and I think it's probably meant to be reverential as well: the almost indirect form of address is an expression of your deference to the majesty of worshiping.

But we're almost out of time this morning, and we don't want to miss being able to hear this great Psalm, so, Bill, why don't you play this Psalm for us.

Exalt the Lord, His praise proclaim; All ye His servants, praise His name,  
Who in the Lord's house ever stand and humbly serve at His command.  
The Lord is good, His praise proclaim; since it is pleasant, praise His  
name;  
His people for His own He takes and His peculiar treasure makes.

I know the Lord is high in state, above all gods our Lord is great;  
The Lord performs what He decrees, in heav'n and earth, in depths and  
seas.  
He makes the vapors to ascend in clouds from earth's remotest end;  
The lightnings flash at His command; He holds the tempest in His hand.

Exalt the Lord, His praise proclaim, all ye His servants,  
Praise His name, who in the Lord's house ever stand and humbly serve at  
His command.  
Forever praise and bless His name, and in the church His praise proclaim;  
In Zion is His dwelling place; Praise ye the Lord, show forth His grace.

**Dr. Wymond:** This has been "Hymns of the Faith," brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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