

Hymns of the Faith: “Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates”

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 and good morning, Bill Wymond! This is Ligon Duncan, and I'm here with you and with Derek Thomas for “Hymns of the Faith.”

Dr. Duncan: Delighted to be with you two, and delighted to be looking at the great hymns of the church. And this morning the great hymn of the church that we're going to be looking at is actually a Psalm. It's from Psalm 24. It's an arrangement of Psalm 24 that comes from the mid-seventeenth century, and then was translated and arranged by the very famous Catherine Winkworth in the mid-nineteenth century.

We've been talking off-air about some of our favorite versions of the Twenty-fourth Psalm in the Scottish and Irish psalters, and we've been reminiscing about how much we love to hear a good congregation singing ST. GEORGE'S, EDINBUROUGH, that very famous arrangement of the end of Psalm 24 in *The Scottish Psalter* and *The Irish Psalter*. But this is set to a tune called TRURO — to which we sing a couple of hymns, Bill, that are escaping my memory right now. Why don't you let the listening audience hear TRURO; and again, this is the Psalm, *Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates!* [Dr. Wymond plays.] Bill, we were talking before we came on air this morning about the name of the tune, and Derek, you told us that it's Cornish...that the place name Truro is Cornish.

Dr. Thomas: Truro is down to the southwest of England. Head towards Bristol and then go all the way down to Devon Cornwall; it's down there.

Dr. Duncan: And of course “Cornish” refers to Cornwall and that larger area, and it's a unique linguistic aspect of England.

Dr. Thomas: And it's a Celtic language, Cornish, like Welsh and Gaelic, and Breton in France. Cornish is still spoken by some, I think, today.

Dr. Duncan: I didn't know that. But, Bill, I don't know whether the tune emanates from that particular culture, but it's a Long Meter tune, so it's in the sort of normal flow of meters that were used in hymnals from the 1600's through the 1900's. Tell us a little bit. I don't know anything about the *Psalmodia Evangelica* from which it comes, or really anything about the tune. Tell us a little bit about the tune.

Dr. Wymond: Well, the tune actually is an anonymous tune, and so we're not really sure why it has this Cornish name. But there was some association evidently along the way so that that was adopted. And this is from Thomas Williams' *Evangelical Psalms*, which, it says, was published as a three-part Psalm and hymn tune collection (that means there were not four parts but three parts, musically, to it), and it was for "churches, chapels, and dissenting meetings in England, Scotland, and Ireland."

So this was not done for the Church of England, but for the dissenting churches — all the other churches outside that and the Roman Catholic Church.

And this tune obviously has roots in Handel. *Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates* is one of the big choruses in the latter part of Handel's *Messiah*, and so the associations here stylistically and melodically really are to that Handel anthem. Let me just play the first part of that, *Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates*. [Plays.] So you get that really enthusiastic beginning. I love this song! It starts out with a three-part women's chorus in the *Messiah*. So listen to the hymn now... [plays]...and here's Handel... [plays].

Dr. Duncan: When the men come in, their line is even more like this hymn. I was just thinking about that. When the men come in finally...don't the women sing first?

Dr. Wymond: They say, "And who is this King of glory?" [Plays.] And so it's the same kind of rhythm, this dotted rhythm. This hymn is written in 2/2 time, by the way.

Dr. Duncan: Now, Handel wrote the *Messiah* in the 1740's, is that right?

Dr. Wymond: That's right.

Dr. Duncan: So this is written about forty years later, so it's entirely possible that the lyric and the meter had an effect on the text and the tune.

Dr. Wymond: Well, it was published in 1789, which means that it had been around for a while, so it's contemporaneous with Handel's *Messiah*.

Dr. Thomas: I've sung that hymn for...I don't know...35 years? And I've never noticed that!

That's just amazing. I won't be able to sing it again without thinking of Handel.

Dr. Wymond: Well, I always think of that because actually, I think about...when we do this with the congregation we need to preserve the cheerfulness of it, the sprightliness of it.

Dr. Thomas: I was just thinking that, because I have sung it 35 years at a speed a tenth of what you just played, and it does become a really heavy tune when you play it slowly.

Dr. Wymond: Well, my goal with the congregation is to have in a tune like this an enthusiastic approach to it, and so perhaps I even get too fast sometimes with them; but nevertheless, my goal is to preserve that sense of energy that you have. And you have to do that here... [plays]...and that's not actually easy for a congregation today. They're used to more sedate, less syncopated sounds than that, so we have to give a good organ introduction that shows that spirit, I think, to get them ready to do that. And there are several Christmas carols that have that same kind of beat, because they emanate from the same era.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, I don't know much about the author of the hymn. I know more about Catherine Winkworth than I do about Georg Weissel.

Dr. Thomas: It's German. I really don't know a whole lot about him except that he originates in Konigsberg, which...

Dr. Wymond: Well, of course that's a part of Poland now, I believe. It was a very eastern province.

Dr. Thomas: Right. This is 1642, so this is just three years before The Westminster Assembly in London and *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, so it's at that period when Psalm-singing was at its peak. Following Calvin a hundred years before, it re-introduced Psalm-singing into Geneva. Churches up and down Europe and Britain in the 1640's would have been singing the Psalms.

This particular Psalm is associated with the ascension. You know if you only sing the Psalms (and for many years we had a practice in the church I used to be in of singing two Psalms and two hymns in every service), and if you wanted to sing something about the ascension from the Psalms, you were pretty limited. But this was certainly one of them, the picture of the gates being opened and Jesus returning to His Father.

So it of course it's referred to in Ephesians...I'm speaking off the top of my head now...but Ephesians...I'm going to say 4. And this is actually cited — Psalm 24, Paul cites it as a reference to “having ascended up on high, He distributes gifts

unto men.” That passage. So it's not a Christmas hymn so much now as an ascension hymn, and it's one of my hobby horses that we don't think sufficiently about the ascension — about the resurrection and ascension events.

Dr. Duncan: And you wrote a book about the ascension.

Dr. Thomas: *Taken Up to Heaven*, yes.

Dr. Duncan: And Evangelical Press published that book. I think maybe it's the first book that I'd ever read devoted to the ascension, so that does reflect your desire to see that aspect of the exaltation of Christ emphasized adequately, as it is in the Scripture. It's a big deal in the Scripture.

Dr. Thomas: Well, as a redemptive event, as part of what Jesus came to do.... You know we think of the incarnation and death and resurrection, but it culminates in the ascension: His being received back to His Father, and Him then sending forth the Holy Spirit. So as a redemptive historical event, it is of immense significance. And I think Paul in Ephesians 4 elaborates.

Dr. Duncan: ...Draws out one of the practical implications of that with regard to the gifting of the church, so the very fact that the church has gifts is evidence of the completion of that ascension to the right hand.

Dr. Thomas: But I want to go back, if I may, Ligon. You alluded right at the beginning that the two of us especially have been in congregations where this has been sung to ST. GEORGE'S, EDINBURGH. This is a magnificent tune — granted, I think, designed to be sung by a large congregation rather than a small one. It works well if there are, you know, three figures singing it and singing it with enthusiasm. Because of the text, it's something that's sung on a special occasion.

Dr. Duncan: That's true.

Dr. Thomas: If there was a gathering of a presbytery, if there was a gathering for thanksgiving of some kind...sometimes at an ordination service...sometimes at the Watch Night Service...these would be the sort of texts sung to a magnificent tune. It has a rousing ending, with “amens” that, now that you say so, actually sound Handelian.

Dr. Duncan: You're right, it does. With its extended *amens*...

Dr. Thomas: I'm just saying that in a Presbyterian Scottish/Irish tradition, this is a very important Psalm, you know: one of the top ten or fifteen Psalms in the repertoire.

Dr. Duncan: That's true, for sure. We sang parts of Psalm 24...I mean, there

was definitely not a year when we didn't sing Psalm 24 at Holyrood in Edinburgh. That was a regularly repeated Psalm, for sure. And there are lots of good things...sometimes it's sung to DUNFERMLIN. So it's a great Psalm text. I was looking at Bailey's work on hymnody, and the hymnal he's working out of only has four stanzas. Our *Trinity Hymnal* gives us six of the stanzas, so obviously Catherine Winkworth, when she did the translation, worked from this German hymn writer, did lots of verses. She may well have done the whole Psalm, I don't know. I don't have that information before me. We're told that the original author was a Prussian scholar, and a schoolteacher and a pastor, and that he wrote about twenty hymns, and that most of those hymns were associated with various Christian festivals of the year; and that she had taken this and worked it into the English text that we know today as *Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates*. Bailey describes the first stanza this way:

“The imagery is suggested by Psalm 24, which celebrated the approach of the ark of the covenant to the gates of Jerusalem when David brought it from its twenty-year captivity.”

So let's look through the words there of the first stanza:

“Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates!
Behold, the King of glory waits;
The King of kings is drawing near,
The Savior of the world is here.”

Now she takes that and applies it to Jesus Christ, and you're saying that there's the ascension reference of the Lord Jesus approaching His heavenly reign and rule as He ascends on high, taking captivity captive. What's the significance of that for the believer?

Dr. Thomas: Well, a backward reference to the triumph of the cross. And you could argue, as we often do argue, that the sign of the Father's approval of the work that Jesus had done was the resurrection. But you could also argue that it's not just the resurrection and the empty tomb, but it's Him being received back again. And I think as a worshipful theme...I mean you've got several things all together. One is you have to think of the reception that the Father gives to the Son: “Well done, Thou good and faithful Servant.”

Imagine the reception as Jesus walks into heaven with His resurrected flesh! That's of immense significance. But also, taking captivity captive; in other words, fulfilling the original promise of Genesis 3:15, that He has crushed the head of Satan, that He has spoiled principalities and powers and made a triumph over them openly in the cross; that Jesus Christ came into the world to destroy the works of the devil.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, I love what — and I'm guessing that it's either in the original

text or Catherine Winkworth did it to the original text — I love what she does by way of taking this and applying it personally and experientially, because after her first stanza where she holds before you the ascension and the beginning of what was called by theologians *the heavenly session* (the sitting of Jesus at the right hand of God the Father Almighty), all the rest of the thrust of the hymn is of Jesus coming back to us from His heavenly rule and ministering to us from the standpoint of His heavenly greatness. So that in the second stanza we're told,

“A helper just he comes to thee,
His chariot is humility,”

[So you have this wonderful juxtaposition of His enthronement, and yet His coming to us in humility.]

“His kingly crown is holiness,
His scepter, pity in distress.”

And in each of the successive stanzas, she's talking to us about ways that He ministers to us. And then especially in stanzas four and five and six, she's talking about our receiving Him, our embracing Him in our own hearts:

“Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.”

So there's an experiential dimension to the very hymn writing. And again, I don't have the German before me, Bill, so I can't comment on what the original German was and whether this was a very literal translation of an experiential...I mean, it wouldn't be uncommon for a German text to have that experiential dimension to it, or whether that's due to Catherine Winkworth's design, but it sure is appropriate. You can see how nineteenth century folk would have responded well to that experiential dimension being stressed, and it's a good picture to young ministers about how a doctrine like the ascension has to be applied. It's not just an abstract truth; it's a truth that has experiential consequences. Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Well, I think what I like about it...I mean, I love that line, “Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple set apart....” And then in the fifth stanza, “Redeemer, come! I open wide/ my heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide!” I mean, it's a hymn that begins by extolling the majesty and sovereignty and greatness of Christ, but it goes in the direction of consecration.

Dr. Wymond: What I was just thinking was you were talking about the experiential aspects and so on like that, and so this Georg Weissel must have been Pietistic in his leanings to make those kinds of applications. But what I think is interesting is that he saw this as an ascension interpretation, and then of

course Handel in his *Messiah* definitely interprets it that way from Jennen's script that he gave him. Well, I've kind of gotten you all off, but nevertheless...

Dr. Duncan: I think it's appropriate to draw attention to that. I was trying to flip back through my biographical material on that to see if there was any other indication of connections with the German Pietistic school, but I don't necessarily find them...

Dr. Wymond: There really isn't. I thought it was interesting that this man...and it just shows how the church is enriched by scholars, by humble people and so on like that, but he was definitely a scholar, having taught at Wittenberg, Leipzig, Strasbourg, and so on, and yet he was very pious and she (Catherine Winkworth, this wonderful English lady) did us such a service by translating all this.

Dr. Duncan: She certainly did. Now, Bill, what...? Apparently she went to Germany...was it just once that she went to Germany and heard these things and brought them back?

Dr. Wymond: My understanding is that she had sort of a prolonged trip to Germany and went to Heidelberg and other places and gathered together as many tunes as she could, as many songs as she could.

Dr. Duncan: Now, Bill, you've described that process before, and I had just picked up at Barnes & Noble a few weeks ago the new — and I couldn't tell you whether it's the Oxford edition or another edition, but it's a new edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. And in the introduction they describe how the Grimms went about collecting this folklore, and it was not unlike the process that you describe for hymnologists sort of going out and listening to these tunes that were used by the folk people, and then coming back and recording them. And somebody on the BBC the other day was telling that that's how we got *I Wonder as I Wander*.

Dr. Wymond: Well, it's really funny. Actually *I Wonder as I Wander* — Burl Ives is the one who wrote that song, and he 'fessed up that it really didn't...he said, "I wrote that. I made that up."

Dr. Duncan: Oh, he did? Well, then what I heard on BBC was wrong!

Dr. Wymond: He sure did! It says "An Appalachian folk song" but it's not. He told someone one time, "Well, it's sort of folksong-ish, but I just made it up."

Dr. Duncan: Isn't that interesting? Because the way it was said, and I'm trying to think which program I was listening to, is that they went out and they found some girl in the country and she sort of half could remember it, and they wrote it down and fixed it up from there. But at least that is the process that was often used by hymnologists as they were going in and listening to these tunes.

Dr. Wymond: And musicologists — Dvorak — so many of them gathered the folk melodies for their central themes. Bela Bartok was big in that. So it's enriched our music...nationalistically.

Dr. Duncan: That was a nineteenth century thing as part of the Romantic Movement to get back the folk songs, and Vaughan Williams continued that into the twentieth century.

Dr. Wymond: And Gustaf Holtz made a very concerted effort in England. And they've published several books of folk songs and carols — just numerous carols! Easter carols, all sorts of things. Some are almost pagan in their origin, but nevertheless they are rooted in the folk songs.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, the final stanza of the song:

“So come, my Sovereign, enter in!
Let new and nobler life begin!
Thy Holy Spirit, guide us on,
Until the glorious crown be won.”

Again, I love the emphasis on renewal and regeneration and sanctification. It's nice to get that in a hymn, and certainly in a hymn that we often sing during Advent or during the Christmas season. I was thinking of that when I was looking at another carol — that you often point out the fact that you like the way that it takes you to the cross, and that it takes you to regeneration. It was one of the Wesley carols that I was looking at, and you were emphasizing that. This one does the same thing. So let's listen to *Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates!*

Dr. Wymond: Singing our hymn this morning is Ben Roberson.

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates!
Behold, the King of glory waits;
The King of kings is drawing near,
The Savior of the world is here.

A helper just he comes to thee,
His chariot is humility,
His kingly crown is holiness,
His scepter, pity in distress.

O blest the land, the city blest,
Where Christ the Ruler is confessed!
O happy hearts and happy homes,
To whom this King in triumph comes!

Fling wide the portals of your heart;

Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come! I open wide
My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide!
Let me Thy inner presence feel;
Thy grace and love in me reveal.

So come, my Sovereign, enter in!
Let new and nobler life begin!
Thy Holy Spirit, guide us on,
Until the glorious crown be won.

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