

Hymns of the Faith : “Lift High the Cross”

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.

Dr. Duncan: Thanks, Bill Wymond! It's a delight to be with you again on a Sunday morning for “Hymns of the Faith.” And Derek and Bill, good morning to you.

Dr. Thomas/Dr. Wymond: Good morning.

Dr. Duncan: We are looking at a delightful Anglican hymn today. “Delightful” may not actually quite grasp the sort of martial nature of this tune, but it is one that certainly gives the soul delight. But the text and the tune are excellent. I was reading the literature leading up to the program this morning. I noticed someone saying they thought this was Sydney Nicholson's finest tune, and it is a very regal, glorious, martial tune, and a strong missionary evangelistic text:

“Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred name.”

Now a lot of folks (if you're Presbyterian or Methodist or Anglican) will probably be familiar with this hymn; I'm not sure that it's been sung so much in Baptist circles. So it might be good, Bill, to just right off the bat hear this wonderful tune. (*Dr. Wymond plays.*) It's a beautiful tune, and it has a refrain that you sing in unison, and then it has an independent part for each stanza that expresses a particular line of reasoning. But, Bill, tell us a little bit about Sydney Nicholson and tell us about this tune and why we like it so much.

Dr. Wymond: Sydney Nicholson died in 1947, so this is a relatively contemporary tune very Victorian and Edwardian, I guess I should say, in its sweep. It sounds like something that could have been in *Chariots of Fire* or something like that — just a wonderful, martial kind of tune, in a sense. It's like a march. I think you can see the missionaries marching off...

Dr. Duncan: It carries you through the whole song. There's a beat to it and you really could march to it.

Dr. Wymond: It's true. And the tune is what I would call a sweeping tune. It just goes right up to a high note (*plays*)...and it says "Lift high...." And toward the end it ascends like that again (*plays*)...and so on like that. So it's a wonderful tune to sing and it's a very soul stirring kind of tune.

Sydney Nicholson was an organist and a composer, and he had important positions in the

Anglican Church. He was at Chester Cathedral. But the best place, the most important place was Westminster Abbey. He was there in the 1920's, and he was so concerned about the state of church music in the Anglican Church that he formed The Royal School of Church Music, which is a very important institution in church music and is still going strong in England now. And he in fact gave up his position at Westminster Abbey (which is something hardly anybody does) so that he could run this school of church music. So he did that from about 1929 until about 1947, when he died. He has written several tunes, as you said, but this one by far is the best. And there are just not a lot of new hymns in the church (in the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first century) that have received as wide an embrace as this one has. But many, many of the denominations and churches have taken this hymn. It's one of those things that I like, because whether or not the gospel is preached in every church, the cross is certainly preached because this is a favorite processional hymn for very many.

Just a word...I was talking about the sweep of the hymn and how it has these sort of large leaps that add kind of an expansive mood to the hymn. There's an interesting way that he handles the lower voices. They are more important sometimes in building a sense of growing majesty, and it happens in the second line. I'll show you. This is the way the hymn starts...(*plays*)...now listen to the lower voices...so after the melody goes up, then the lower voices keep rising, and that just adds this wonderful sense of progressing up the scale, and it adds a real excitement and punch to the whole effect of the hymn. So this is a good tune.

Dr. Duncan: The refrain...the line of the refrain, Bill, says, "Till all the world adore His sacred name." It's right at that point where you were talking about the lower voices, that left hand going up, that accompanies that part of the line. And so really you feel like you are going out in all the world. So the music sounds like what you're doing in the text at that point.

Dr. Thomas: Bill, it's not that often that the refrain comes at the beginning of the hymn rather than at the end of the hymn. Tell us, how does that change or alter the feel of the hymn?

Dr. Wymond: Well, what it does is to get right to the point of the hymn. “Lift high the cross...” so right away it sounds the theme of the hymn and gets you off to a good start, because when you get into the narrative where it goes, “Come, brethren, follow where our Savior led...” the notes get lower and the dramatic effect is lessened. (*Plays*)

Dr. Duncan: It's sort of pensive and reflective. You're sort of reflecting on this. Really, some hard truths are recorded in those lines. And don't you think it also — because it varies from the standard format of most hymns — it kind of arrests your attention to start out with a refrain.

Dr. Wymond: And it's kind of interesting, because you really have two moods in this hymn and you have this expansive mood on the refrain. And then when you get down to the narrative and the reasoning and the challenges and all this that are discussed and explored, you go to a minor key (*plays*)...which says we're about serious business here. So you get a real mood change in the hymn. And then you go back to the refrain as though you're saying, “Based on what we just said, let's lift high the cross.” So it just works in so many different ways very well.

Dr. Thomas: I think I was commenting before we started how very Anglican, how very English this tune is. It reminds me of Elgar...*Land of Hope and Glory... Pomp and Circumstance* marches. There's something as you said earlier, “Edwardian.” And at that time of the British Empire going out into all the world. It's amazing how a tune can carry all those associations. I can't imagine this tune being written today. But it is a memorable tune.

Dr. Wymond: Well, melodies influence melodies in certain periods, and when you listen to *Jerusalem...* (*plays*)...it has that same feel that this melody does. It has the same effect. (That's of course *Chariots of Fire*, the great period tune of this same era.)

Dr. Duncan: And that's a Hubert Parry hymn.

Dr. Wymond: Yes, Hubert Parry ran in the same circles with Nicholson. They influenced each other, I believe.

Dr. Duncan: And again, you can see a choir processing in Winchester Cathedral, or Chester Cathedral at the beginning of a service with all the priests and the readers as well as the choristers. And this was apparently written for a big meeting of The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which was a major Anglican mission agency. Derek, could you tell the folks about The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel?

Dr. Thomas: The SPG (The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel) began in the eighteenth century sometime after the Great Awakening. One thinks of it just after the period of John Newton or George Whitefield...just after that, at the

beginning, I suppose, of the great missionary movement. And one associates SPG with evangelical Anglicanism for a substantial period of time.

Dr. Duncan: It was only evangelical Baptists, evangelical Presbyterians, and evangelical Anglicans that were doing missions work (in the English-speaking world, at least) at that time. There were a lot of people that didn't think that it needed to be done.

Dr. Thomas: Right. And it was done on the back of the beginning of the British Empire and its forays into the Far East and India...

Dr. Duncan: The British East India Company, and chaplains going with the company?

Dr. Thomas: Right. And then you had the missionaries that went out with SPG, went on shipping lines that were going to various parts of Africa and various parts of India and the Far East. And for the best part of its existence, I think, this was a solidly evangelical organization. George Kitchin, who originally wrote *Lift High the Cross* (it was amended and put into a different form that we now have it, by a man called Michael Newbolt) ...but George Kitchin is the original author of the text (nineteenth century, born in 1827, and died at the good old age in 1912). So he was almost 90 by the time he had died. He has an illustrious career as a scholar and an Anglican clergyman; held posts...educated at ChristChurch in Oxford, where John Owen was the Vice Chancellor in the seventeenth century. Ordained in 1852, and served as a headmaster, originally in Twiford in Hampshire; and then as a tutorer at Oxford; Dean of Winchester Cathedral; Dean of Durham Cathedral; and, in the latter part of his life was the Chancellor of Durham University. A major scholar...wrote a three-volume work entitled *The History of France*.

Dr. Duncan: He also wrote a biography of the Pope, Pope Pious. Was that the Pious of the Vatican I Council? I can't remember if that's the one who was over Vatican I. But that's interesting, for an Anglican who had been involved in The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to write a biography of a pope. I want to pick it up now and read it and see what it says!

Dr. Thomas: And Newbolt, who revised the hymn, was of a similar sort of background.

St. John's College...which brings back memories. I spent a year in Oxford in 1975, and ate formal dinners at St. John's College on many an occasion.

Dr. Duncan: Now, you taught school in Oxfordshire?

Dr. Thomas: I suppose I was an intern. I ministered. I preached, basically, at a Reformed Baptist work.

Dr. Duncan: It was before you came...

Dr. Thomas: It was before I came to seminary. Houghton, the founder — at least he's one of the co-founders of *The Banner of Truth*, along with Ian Murray lived at Cotswald, just a few miles away from Oxford.

Dr. Duncan: What a wonderful little book on the history of the church — a quick overview, one volume, sort of history...and was a terror of an editor! Very precise...

Dr. Thomas: I have vivid memories of him. He had been a headmaster in a boys' grammar school in North Wales all of his life, and he had that headmaster-ish demeanor about him... (*Dr. Duncan laughs.*) I always got very nervous when I came into his presence. I remember preaching one time and using as an illustration, you know, something on church history, and saying, "As So-and-So said in 1593..." and he would say to me at the door, "Actually, it was 1592." I vividly remember him doing that to me! (*Dr. Duncan laughs.*) So this is the author, George Kitchin, this Anglican scholar and clergyman.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, Stanley Osborne said of the text of this song that "the images are biblical, it's moods expectant, its promises courageous, and its demands costly." That's almost like a sentence that you would expect from Derek Kidner, by the way, just pregnant with significance. I think it's a great description of the text. Let's talk through the text a little bit, beginning with the opening unison refrain:

"Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred name."

That really sets the kind of missionary feel to the whole hymn, doesn't it?

"Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred name."

Dr. Thomas: Well, it does, but it also begs the question, "Why should Christians want to glory in the cross?" And we do need to constantly remind ourselves the cross was an instrument of execution. It would be like, "Lift high the gas chamber," or "Lift high the electric chair" or "Lift high the syringe" because it was an instrument of execution.

Dr. Duncan: And a dreaded one. So why do Christians...?

Dr. Thomas: Why do Christians? You know Paul says, "Let me glory in nothing but the cross." Why do we glory in an instrument of execution? And unless you have an evangelical doctrine of the atonement that doesn't make any sense

whatsoever. If the cross is merely “Let's follow Jesus as our example,” why are you glorying in the cross? That doesn't make sense. And you can only glory in it if you see it as the means of your salvation — double imputation, the great exchange that on the cross our sins were nailed to Jesus' account, and His perfect spotless righteousness reckoned to our account. That's why we glory in the cross.

Dr. Duncan: Don't you think also that properly glorying in the cross requires that you understand the irony of the Lord using that which clearly to Jewish people and to Gentiles, as well in the Mediterranean world at the time of Christ, requires you to understand that that symbol of the cross was a symbol of Roman power and domination and oppression, and the ultimate symbol of the cruel, oppressive domination of a worldly regime? And that God says, ‘Okay, I'm going to show you My sovereignty. I'm going to take that which is the symbol of the apex, the pinnacle of worldly power oftentimes used for wrong, and I'm going to make that the instrument of salvation’?

Dr. Thomas: And to pious Jews the cross was a symbol of a curse, to be executed that way.

Dr. Duncan: “Cursed is he who hangs on a tree,” the Jews had heard from the time of Moses, 1400 years before the cross ever appeared.

Dr. Thomas: And it forces us then to ask the question, “Why would Paul, a Jew, glory in something that was symbolic of a man who had been cursed?”

Dr. Duncan: Right. And which his contemporaries to whom he was preaching verbally and vehemently objected. In I Corinthians he tells us that for the Jews the cross is an offense, and to the Gentiles (the Greeks) it's foolishness. And so he says, ‘What am I going to do? I'm going to proclaim the cross, Christ, and Him crucified.’ It's really striking. It takes us back to...you're always reminding us of Calvin's phrase about the Christian life, that God has so appointed...

Dr. Thomas: “God has so appointed the church from the very beginning that death is the way to life, and the cross the way to victory.”

Dr. Duncan: And that irony...you have to understand that irony to understand the significance of that statement, as well. The way up is the way down; the way to life is to die to self; and the way of the cross is the way to glory. It's a glorious thing. And that's really pressed on you from the opening refrain.

Then, walk us through the story that's being told in the five stanzas:

“Come, brethren, follow where our Savior trod,
Our King victorious, Christ, the Son of God.”

And that starts us down the same road that we've just been talking about. Presumably we're picking up the language of "Take up your cross and follow Me."

Dr. Thomas: The great statement...perhaps the greatest statement that Jesus made at Caesarea Philippi, that "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up a cross"—a symbol of self-denial, of not insisting upon one's rights—"...and let him follow Me." And you know, as Bonhoeffer said a few days before he died, "Jesus bids us take up a cross and die."

I just finished reading — although I don't recommend it because the language in it was not for the fainthearted — but it's a history book written in the form of a novel on the Battle of Agincourt, and Henry V marching his few thousand men, facing...I think he had five or six thousand men facing 30,000 French soldiers...

Dr. Duncan: ...and those Welsh archers — they were terrors!

Dr. Thomas: ...and those Welsh archers. But I was thinking of that imagery as this opening stanza says,

"Come, brethren, follow where our Savior trod,
our King victorious, Christ, the Son of God."

Now it's one thing to follow Henry V into a battle where they felt they were going to die for sure (and in God's mercy they didn't, although many of them did, of course), but it's another thing here that we've been called to follow our Savior, our victorious Christ, the Son of God. But follow Him where? Into a battle, into a fight. And right at the outset — you know this is one of these great...in a sense, great Puritan themes. It's a biblical theme, of course, that the Christian life is war. It's a fight, it's a battle. "Put on the whole armor of God" and get ready for a battle.

Dr. Duncan: The second stanza carries this theme on:

"Led on their way by this triumphant sign,
The host of God in conquering ranks combine."

It reminds you again that ironically this symbol of domination and oppression and cruel punishment and suffering has become a triumphant sign of victory, and will win the day. And this point is emphasized in the third stanza as well:

"O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,
As Thou hast promised, draw men unto Thee."

So that by..."If the Son of Man be lifted up, He will draw all men to Him," Jesus said. So it's picking up on that language right out of the Gospels. And then comes

a prayer in the fourth stanza:

“Thy kingdom come, that earth's despair may cease
Beneath the shadow of its healing peace.”

There may be a hint of post-millennialism in there perhaps...you know, late nineteenth-century Anglican expansion of Christianity to the ends of the earth. But even if you're not a post-millennialist, you can pray that prayer because it's just expanding on the Lord's Prayer itself. And then:

“For Thy blest cross which doth for us atone...”

[Don't you appreciate a hymn that will just state it: “The cross atones”?]

“Creation's praises rise before Thy throne.”

So you've got a hymn praising God for the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. In a day and age when the atonement is being questioned and quibbled with and denied even by evangelicals, it's nice to have a cross-centered, atonement-centered hymn. You might could ask for more, but you're certainly happy with that kind of an assertion.

Dr. Thomas: Right. Some of the evangelical-ness of the doctrines are implied here. You have to dig for them. They use the right words, and I think if we were writing this today in our battles we'd perhaps want to make some clearer statements.

Dr. Duncan: Right. Like you get in the Getty and Townsend hymns, for instance.

Dr. Thomas: That's correct. But to sing a hymn that glories in the atoning cross of Jesus Christ, written to this very, very martial dominant tune is a great way to worship God on the Lord's Day.

Dr. Duncan: And this is a great way to start the Lord's Day. So having looked at this wonderful hymn by Kitchin and Newbolt and Nicholson, *Lift High the Cross*, Bill Wymond, let's listen to *Lift High the Cross*, the love of Christ proclaim.

Refrain:

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred name.”

Come, brethren, follow where our Savior trod,
Our King victorious, Christ, the Son of God.
Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred name.

Led on their way by this triumphant sign,
The host of God in conquering ranks combine.
Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred name.

O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,
As Thou hast promised, draw men unto Thee.
Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
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Thy kingdom come, that earth's despair may cease
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For Thy blest cross which doth for us atone,
Creation's praises rise before Thy throne.
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Dr. Wymond: Singing for us this morning was Genesa Case. This has been "Hymns of the Faith," brought to us by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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