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Hymns of the Faith:
"Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor"

By Dr. Bill Wymond

A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi,
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, Dr. Bill Wymond

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. Good morning, this is Ligon Duncan and Derek Thomas, good morning to you.

Dr. Thomas: Good morning.

Dr. Duncan: It's great to be with you two friends on Hymns of the Faith and we're looking at one of my favorite hymn texts in all of hymnody today. It may not be so familiar to those in our listening audience although I'll bet there are going to be a bunch of you who know this hymn. It's called, "Thou Who Wast Rich beyond All Splendor." We tend to sing it a Christmastime because it does speak of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ but it's really a text that is of broader application than just Christmastime because it speaks, Derek doesn't it, of the whole message of Philippians 2 and the incarnation and the humiliation of Christ. As so many of the Christmas carols do, they highlight that point of the amazing condescension of God in sending His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to take on our poor flesh and our poor blood. And the story behind this has a connection to Jackson and to First Presbyterian Church and even to the Belhaven neighborhood, which I'll tell us about a little bit later on.

It was written, the text, by the wonderful Anglican bishop, Frank Houghton, and who himself — didn't he write a book on hymns, on some of the wonderful English hymns? But let's talk just a little bit about this hymn. Before we do, Bill, since it may not be so familiar to everyone in the listening audience, why don't you just play it through once for them?

Dr. Thomas: That's a beautiful, beautiful tune.

Dr. Duncan: I love that tune.

Dr. Thomas: It's hard to think that that's fairly recent — written in 1930. It sounds as if it's a carol that's been around forever and ever and ever.

Dr. Wymond: Well actually the setting of it was done in the 20th century but the carol is a French carol, an older French carol. And I've always been interested in

that carol because the words that we know to it the best are “whence is that goodly fragrance flowing.”

And the fragrance, as best I can tell, has to do with a field of flowers in May. This carol puts the birth of Christ in May, or talks about that anyway, which is really unusual. It talks about that fragrance but then it takes you to the barn or the stable in Bethlehem.

Dr. Duncan: Now is that found in the *Oxford Carol Book* that David Willcocks did?

Dr. Wymond: Yes.

Dr. Duncan: I didn't go back to check that, Bill, so good for you for doing that. And I do remember when I was looking some information up on this carol, months, maybe a couple of years ago, running across that text. Why don't you share the words of that text real quickly? This is not the text that we're going to be studying today, but if you’re looking at that wonderful four-volume set of Oxford carols, this is the text that this tune, this beautiful French tune, is set to.

Dr. Wymond: This text is: “Whence is that goodly fragrance flowing, stealing our senses all away? Ne’er the like did come a blowing, shepherds in flowing fields in May. Whence is that goodly fragrance flowing, stealing our sense all away?” And then — “What is that light, so brilliant breaking, here in the night across our eyes? Never so bright, the day star waking, startled to climb the morning skies. What is the light, so brilliant breaking, here in the night across our eyes?”

What interests me about this particular text, and there's another verse, but it is centered on the wise men as well as the shepherds. And most carols talk about the angels and the wise men but don't say quite so much about the shepherds. It's hard to find good wise men songs.

The third stanza is — “Bethlehem there in manger lying, find your Redeemer hast away. Run ye with eager footsteps, to worship the Savior born today.”

Dr. Duncan: Now when does the text date from? When is that particular — do you have any indication of when that would have been written?

Dr. Wymond: No. That, of course, is an English text by an Englishman, so it's not the French text particularly, but I'm not quite sure.

Dr. Duncan: Okay. It's very flowery poetry and sounds sort of Victorian, but it does zero in on a few metaphors or images. It zeros in on the fragrance, on the light, on Bethlehem, and interestingly as you say, looks at things from the perspective of the wise men.

Dr. Wymond: As I see the French text, and Derek could verify this more, the English text doesn't follow it real closely. It talks about other things.

Dr. Duncan: Well the text that we are studying with this wonderful carol today is a different text, the text “Thou Who Wast Rich beyond All Splendor.” And Derek, maybe you want to tell a little bit of the background to this particular hymn because it's very poignant and our friend Chip Stam has actually a relation to the people who really were part of, in God's providence, the prompting of Frank Houghton's writing of this text. Tell us a little bit about that story.

Dr. Thomas: And tell us who Chip Stam is.

Dr. Duncan: Our friend, Chip Stam, teaches in the music school at the Southern Seminary in Louisville and recently was in Jackson at First Baptist Church to do the Baptist Minister of Music Conference that they do each year at the time of the state Baptist Convention. And Chip was involved at Church of the Good Shepherd, I think in North Carolina, while maybe he was doing doctrinal work, leading music there. So he's got lots of PCA contacts but he's a Baptist minister and is at Clifton Baptist in Louisville, Kentucky as a music director but also in the music school at Southern Seminary. And so this is about his family that you’re about to tell.

Dr. Thomas: That's right, Chip Stam's great-aunt and uncle, John and Betty Stam, were captured in the 1930s, 1934 I think it was, in China and were beheaded. It was a time of great persecution for the church in China, the beginning of the communist Red Army period that we all know of for the past three-quarters of a century now in China. This is associated, this hymn is associated of course with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and the China Inland Mission, two related organizations. Nowadays one thinks of Hudson Taylor, which would be a hundred years before this period. We’re talking about the 1930's and Hudson Taylor would be in the 1830s and 40s - great, great missionary to China — and the hymn is written by this man, Frank Houghton who became the bishop — now how do you pronounce it? Is it Sichuan?

Dr. Duncan: Sichuan

Dr. Thomas: Sichuan province in China and he became the bishop there, the Anglican bishop, well, well known in evangelical, Anglican circles. That old fashioned pietistic in the right sense of the term — has written I know one volume on music and on hymns and carols. He was sent there — several missionaries apparently were captured. Stam, Chip Stam's great-aunt and uncle, John and Betty Stam were captured and they were beheaded. Others were killed too, and then in the middle of all of that, Frank Houghton decides that he must go to China and visit the mission stations and provide encouragement. And out of that darkness, which I think only Christianity can do, this exquisite carol emerges based on 2 Corinthians 8:9 — “Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He

became poor that we, through His poverty, might become rich."

Dr. Duncan: As I remember Chip telling the story, Derek, his great-aunt and uncle had just had an infant daughter. They had to flee from their village, they had gotten to another village, the Red Army caught up with them, they managed to hide their daughter, their infant daughter, in their belongings and in the hay or the straw where they were. They were taken out and killed and one of the villagers found their daughter still alive. She was spared because her mother had hidden her. And somehow that daughter, the Chinese villagers somehow got her back so that she could be reunited with her family in the United States, and I guess that would be Chip's aunt, but a really extraordinary story.

And Houghton, when he came back to that province to visit, was so moved by this sacrifice of these missionaries for the sake of taking the Gospel to the Chinese people that it made him think of the greater sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ who, though He was rich, made Himself poor. These brave missionaries, who, Bill correct me, I think the Stams lived either on Gillespie Street or Pinehurst Street , right back here in Belhaven. When Chip was here for that conference he said, "Would you take me into Belhaven?" And we drove around and he said, "I wanted to see the house that my aunt had grown up in." So there's a connection with Jackson to this text, and it's a beautiful picture of how Christians, because of Jesus' great love for us and His giving up His riches and coming in poverty for us, so many Christian missionaries have turned around and done the same thing. And the Stams are examples of that kind of missionary impetus. Walk us through, a little bit, the text Derek because it beautifully picks up the story of 2 Corinthians 8:9.

Dr. Thomas: Well, it's just exquisite. Of course it's based on the idea of incarnation, exchanging "sapphire-paved courts for stable floor." That's a beautiful line. I think once you've got that line in your head I doubt you can forget it easily. "Thrones for a manger didst surrender." It's of course what Philippians 2, as you were saying earlier, is telling us, that in the incarnation you have the idea of God, the second person of the Trinity, becoming a man, becoming an infant, becoming a helpless babe in Bethlehem. And it beautifully captures I think, in an exquisite way, the mystery which is Christmas, of God the Son taking to Himself flesh and blood. But it's the exchanging riches for poverty — "sapphire paved courts for stable floor."

Dr. Duncan: I love the phrase in between those two phrases too. It begins "Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becamest poor," which is a beautiful line in and of itself. But then, it says, "thrones for a manger didst surrender." That's another very memorable line. And then it follow it up with that right hook — "sapphire paved courts for stable floor" — and then repeats the opening line again of the first stanza. Now take us through the second stanza, Derek.

Dr. Thomas: Well having asserted the incarnation of Jesus, it now affirms that in the incarnation you don't have incarnation by suicide, divine suicide — He doesn't cease to be God. He still is God. “Thou who art God beyond all praising,” not “Thou who used to be God but now You’re a man.” And that's a crucial, crucial point to see. “Thou who art God beyond all praising, all for love's sake becamest man; stooping so low, but sinners raising, heav’nward by Thine eternal plan.” That's strong theology — the eternal plan and purpose of God in redemption.

Dr. Duncan: Very significant, especially in the context of 20th century Anglican theology because Frank Houghton would have been well aware of Anglican theologians like Bishop Charles Gore in the 19th century and others. I'm forgetting the most famous of the Catholic theologians of the 19th century who actually argued that Jesus’ humiliation and His making of Himself nothing in Philippians 2 involved His emptying Himself of deity. And orthodox theologians in response said, “No, Jesus’ humiliation, Jesus’ making Himself of nothing or making Himself of no reputation — as the authorized version of the King James so beautifully says — was actually subtraction by addition. It wasn't that He became nothing by losing something that He essentially was. It was that He became nothing by taking upon Himself something that He was not. He, as fully divine, also became man in the incarnation.” And this stanza beautifully captures that orthodox Christian theology about Jesus Christ.

Dr. Thomas: It's a line, and it has it in the first verse and it has it again in the second verse — “All for love's sake becamest man.” What is the answer to the question — Why did Jesus come into the world?

Dr. Duncan: Boy. And that's Deuteronomy 7 all over again you know when Moses is going through — Why did the Lord chose you? It wasn't because you were the greatest, it wasn't because you were the most, it was because He loved you.

Dr. Thomas: And why did He love you?

(Derek and Ligon) Because He loved you.

Dr. Duncan: Amen!

Dr. Thomas: But I love again the third line, “Stooping so low, but sinners raising.” It's that great exchange language that the reformation loved so much.

Dr. Duncan: Well, and tell us — you are famous for reminding us of this Calvin quote that the whole course of the Christian life can be summed up in what idea what you’re always reminding us of, of Calvin?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, my mind has gone blank! It's Calvin's comment on 1 Peter.

No, I'm thinking of another quote from Calvin about suffering, so which one are you?

Dr. Duncan: Well you like to remind us that God has so appointed — go ahead, you've got it now.

Dr. Thomas: God has so appointed that death is the way to life and the cross the way to victory — or something, yes.

Dr. Duncan: And it's the whole idea of our lives as believers mirroring what the Lord Jesus Christ has done so that the way of glory is in fact the way of the cross and the way up is the way down. And this hymn beautifully captures that in the phrase that you were just pointing to. Even though He stoops low, the result is sinners being raised.

Dr. Thomas: And raised to redemption, raised to a renewed relationship and fellowship with God, raised as John will say — “Now are we the sons of God, but it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” And it's the picture, isn't it, of being exalted, exalted to heaven, but all at the cost of Jesus’ lowliness, that He became man and as Philippians 2 goes on to say, “even the death of the cross.” The stooping low — He stooped and stooped and stooped again.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, I want to ask you a question about the music. I love the tune and I love the arrangement. It's a little bit hard for some congregations to sing and my guess is that in our listening audience today there are probably more people that enjoy listening to this played maybe on a holiday radio station or on a John Rutter CD of Cambridge Singers of something than they are, you know, enjoying easily singing it because there's a little syncopation to it.

Dr. Thomas: And the intervals are quite large.

Dr. Duncan: Yeah. Why do I like the tune and why is it a little bit hard for congregations to sing.

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think you like the tune because it's a really good tune — pardon me there, I was about to play it for you! It is a good tune and I think Derek's right. It does have a bit difficult intervals because it jumps up and down an octave. So it goes a bit high for some people. If we pitch it low it still has these jumps which are just not quite natural to the normal melodic sense that people have. And because of that it's a little bit more imaginative and that makes it to someone who's musical like yourself have appeal because it has a little more musical creativity than some others. But actually the tune is fairly predictable. The carol is not too difficult once you mount those intervals because there's a good bit of repetition in it. The last lines repeat the first of the melody so that helps I think. And then frankly the harmonizations make it so pretty. Let me play it

without a harmonization. There's the syncopation, but that comes probably from its medieval, early carol roots in France. Harmony is a nice thing and the church went about a thousand years without it and so when they started adding it in France in the 11th and 12th centuries it had great appeal.

Dr. Duncan: Now Bill it is interesting to me, given the carol origins of this, presumably as a folk song that would have been sung by the common people, I mean that shows something that they're able to handle those sort of octave ranges and things like that.

Dr. Wymond: Well let me just show you something. I suspect that it was —

Dr. Duncan: Some sort of a dance.

Dr. Wymond: Maybe had a different set of words and had that dance feel and that wasn't so hard for them.

Dr. Duncan: Well that makes perfect sense. Well Derek talk us through the final stanza. We've only got a minute or so to go, but let's listen to the words of the final stanza.

Dr. Thomas: The end of all things is worship, it's the beginning and end of all things, and in the third stanza we're led now to worship Christ who became lowly, who is and who always will be God — "Thou who art loved beyond all telling, Savior and King, we worship Thee. Emmanuel, within us dwelling, make us what Thou wouldst have us be." And that consecration element at the end, the application if you like of it all, that He has raised us in order that we might be like —

Dr. Duncan: You know our Anglican friends from about the 1850s to 1950s were so good about including that theological idea in their hymns. I think of "Once In Royal David's City" has that same idea. It's not just to be forgiven, but to be transformed, to be like Christ.

Dr. Thomas: It's a great prayer for Christmas or any other time of year. "Make us what Thou wouldst have us to be."

Dr. Duncan: And with that word we'll give Derek the last word and we'll listen to this beautiful hymn and carol, "Thou Who Wast Rich beyond All Splendor."

> Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
> All for love's sake becamest poor;
> Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
> Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
> Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
> All for love's sake becomes poor.

Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man;
Stooping so low, but sinners raising
Heavenwards by thine eternal plan.
Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man.

Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.

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