

Hymns of the Faith: “Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!”

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: Thank you, Bill Wymond! This is Ligon Duncan, and this is “Hymns of the Faith.” Derek, good morning. It's good to be with you, and to join you today to be looking at some of the great hymns of the Christian church today. We're looking at one by one of my favorite authors, John Newton, and there's so much to say about him. If you're not familiar with John Newton, and you're in the listening audience today and you're going to be able to stay around with us for the next thirty minutes, you'll learn about this man who was significantly used in the history of Christianity and wrote some of our most beloved hymns.

Everyone will know *Amazing Grace*, written by John Newton. It's his most well-known hymn. But he wrote a number of other hymns that are part of *The Olney Hymnal*, and Bill Wymond is going to tell us a little bit about how that hymnal was put together. But today we're looking at a hymn that my guess is that most of you in the listening audience haven't heard before. It's a hymn called *Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!* It's a wonderful text that pertains to the Second Coming of Christ — the Judgment Day, which is a very important doctrine in historic Christianity. And there are not that many great hymns about it, at least that are in currency, that we sing. We sing *Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending*, which is a great Wesley text that refers to the Second Coming, but *Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!* is a Second Coming and Judgment text. And because this tune isn't familiar, Bill, why don't you go ahead and play through it so that people can get a tune in their mind, and then we'll begin to talk.

(Dr. Wymond plays.)

Dr. Duncan: That tune is called ST. AUSTIN, which is a typical British way of abbreviating Augustine...St. Austin. It apparently comes from a Gregorian chant. Bill, tell us a little bit about the tune. We don't know much, I guess, about who would have written the melody itself, but we do know that it came from *The Bristol Tune Book*, or at least that its arrangement came from *The Bristol Tune*

Book. Tell us a little bit about this.

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think this tune is perfectly suited to the words. It has a very dour sound to it, and a lot of people in our culture probably wouldn't like it because it is so serious! But it's in a minor key, and it's taken from Gregorian chant. You can sort of hear a little bit... (*plays*). It has that kind of meandering, wandering feel that you get from Gregorian chant, and it is made serious, as I said, because it's in a minor key (E minor). It doesn't have the brightness of a major key, but the minor key. It does not have a dramatic pulse to it at all, and it goes down the scale when it starts, which sometimes could be powerful...but the way it's done adds to the seriousness of the sound and so you get a feeling actually of...well, I've been using the word *seriousness*, but sadness sometimes comes from a minor key.

So it does come from Gregorian chant, which was the main song of the church for over a thousand years, and someone adapted this for a tune book that came from Bristol in England. So I think the tune fits the words. And when we talk about the text people will see that, I think, even better.

You said something about *The Olney Hymnal*, and I never want to miss a chance to talk about that hymnal, although this tune was probably not used for this text. *The Olney Hymnal*, which had the words by John Newton, fascinates me because John Newton was in sort of a country parish, as it were, and he had this assistant whose name was William Cowper (we would pronounce it Cow-per, but it's Coo-per), and this assistant was a very talented poet. And so these men decided for prayer meeting that they would conclude the service with a hymn about the text on which they were preaching, and a lot of times these were texts that had narratives or story lines to them. So in the hymn they would tell the story or they would recount the narrative there, and then they would make an application to the Christian life. And some great hymns have come out of that experience.

And what I like about it is not only that it's very creative poetry, but also I like the fact that even though they were in a small parish, they did their utmost to apply the word and make it come alive to their people, and they did it in this imaginative and creative way of writing all these wonderful hymns. So, "small churches matter" to me is one lesson that you get out of that.

Dr. Duncan: Now, *The Olney Hymns* was published in the 1770's, and Watts' paraphrases would have been published — what? — forty years or so before?

Dr. Wymond: I think so, the first of them.

Dr. Duncan: So these are among the pioneering evangelical hymnals of history, right?

Dr. Wymond: Yes, because the established church would have still been doing psalmody. In the independent churches there was a real stress on psalmody, and yet through Watts' paraphrases of the Psalms you got a loosening of the text so that people didn't feel that they were really singing necessarily the Psalms, but the thought of the Psalms. And that opened the door for other inspirational texts that you wouldn't get anywhere else.

Dr. Duncan: Think of this one. You have those Scottish paraphrases that were written — and I couldn't tell you exactly when they were written, but they paraphrased important passages of Scripture. And looking at our background information on this hymn, it's pointing out that this hymn not only is focused on the Judgment Day and the Second Coming of Christ and the reaction of both believers and unbelievers to that great event, but it has sort of echoes of the *Dies Irae* from the Latin requiem mass, in which judgment is pronounced on sinners and a prayer for mercy is lifted up for believer.

Dr. Wymond: And that *Dies Irae* was always such an awe-inspiring thing when you came into the mass, because it says, "Day of terror! Day of judgment!" and the music is always very dramatic...

Dr. Duncan: Maybe the most famous one known to the general population would be from the Mozart *Requiem*.

Dr. Wymond: That and Verdi's...

Dr. Duncan: And so this kind of captures that scene. It's a biblical scene that's being described in the hymn. And you were telling us that the way *The Olney Hymnal* was laid out that different parts of it were designed to do different things.

Dr. Wymond: Well, in their handling of that they used it as a teaching tool for their people, so they would put the narrative of the verse or the passage they had talked about in the first stanza or stanzas, and then they would make applications from that in the last stanzas.

Dr. Duncan: So that was a pattern that held in the texts that were being written. And Cowper, as you said, participated. And Cowper was reckoned as one of the finest poets of his era, so you have one of the best poets in Britain in the era cooperating with John Newton in the production of this hymnal. No wonder so many of these hymns have lasted to today. You've had two outstanding craftsmen...I mean, Newton's prose and poetry is excellent and he had a real creative mind. Derek, you and I are always trying to come up with creative ways to approach Christmas texts and things of that nature — well, he preached through the text of Handel's *Messiah* surely long before anyone else would have thought to have done something so creative! I think that would have been pretty out of the box for his day, don't you think?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, as memory serves...forty or fifty sermons.

Dr. Duncan: And *Messiah* was not received very well among conservative Christians at the time because it was...I guess kind of like people would have responded to Andrew Lloyd-Weber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It was thought that it was too secular to do sacred texts in the way that Handel had done it to be done in the opera house and that sort of thing.

Dr. Wymond: He had been doing all those oratorios on biblical themes, but they were done for commercial reasons, not in the church but out in the theater. And the same thing with *Messiah* in Dublin. It was not done in a church first.

Dr. Duncan: And so Newton, he's a creative mind as well, and so you put these two together and you get *The Olney Hymnal*. Give us the background on Newton. I never cease to be encouraged and instructed and inspired by him, by his story.

Dr. Thomas: Well, John Newton...and of course some of our listeners may well have seen the movie on Wilberforce, which was two years ago, in which Newton played a significant part, although it in my opinion was badly represented in the movie.

Dr. Duncan: Right...almost through a kind of Catholic penitential theology instead of evangelical theology.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, way too grumpy in the movie, I thought. You know he was born to godly parents. His mother died when he was quite young — seven or so, I think he was when his mother died. His father was a ship builder and master. As is often common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, godly parents would give to their children a book that seems to play a significant part in their lives. In this case it was Thomas `a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, which has a significant history, although questionable whether it's an evangelical work or not. But it's a spiritual work. And he was press ganged as a teenager...

Dr. Duncan: Which means he was forced into service, by force of arms. He might have been in a bar or somewhere...

Dr. Duncan: Wouldn't the Royal Navy...they would actually go into taverns and they would deliberately get young men drunk so that they were unable to resist being dragged to the ship.

Dr. Thomas: They'd wake up out miles at sea! And as I recall, his father tried to mediate...wasn't able to get him released from service, but was able to promote him to a midshipman, which was the first rung of the ladder to an officer rather than just be an ordinary sailor. But he attempted to run away...was caught and flogged, I think, and then demoted to an ordinary sailor. He managed then to be

released to a slave ship going to the west coast of Africa, and for a significant part of his life then would spend his time as first of all a sailor, but then as captain of his own ship, bringing slaves from Africa to be sold in markets in England. He fell in love, didn't he, with a very godly woman, and even in his darkest days the memory of that I think kept him from perhaps the worst of offences.

But it was a storm at sea in which he almost drowned, where they had to throw away much of what was on board the ship, that he eventually was converted. He ends up in Olney, which is in Dartmouth, which is in the southwest corner of England — it's off the beaten track. It's a very significant church building still there today, for what is a relatively small town.

But it's there in Olney that he meets William Cowper...William Cowper that suffered from great spiritual depression...maybe psychotic in part of his life...author of *God Moves in a Mysterious Way, His Wonders to Perform* ("He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.") Cowper lived fairly close to Newton. I think they were neighbors for a while. And it's just a remarkable friendship between a minister and a highly educated and very talented man who is just broken mentally, and from which these Olney hymns came — 250-300 of them, I think.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, 280 hymns, I think, that Newton wrote; and then of course I have no idea how many Cowper would have written over the course of his time. So it had a very substantial collection of hymns.

This text, Derek, has echoes of the discourse that Jesus gives at the end of Matthew, and also some hints of the book of Revelation. Walk us through line by line.

Dr. Thomas: Well, it's a thoroughly inappropriate text for the church of the twenty-first century because it says nothing about our self-esteem; it says absolutely nothing to initially comfort us and make us feel good and happy about going to church. I mean, who in the world would want to sing:

Day of judgment! Day of wonders!
Hark! the trumpet's awful sound,
louder than a thousand thunders,
shakes the vast creation round.
How the summons will the sinner's heart confound!

Dr. Duncan: What's the mindset of the pastor who writes this text? What's he trying to do?

Dr. Thomas: Well, he's someone that believes the Bible! He's an evangelist. I think Newton was for the rest of his life just conscious of "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." And no one spoke of judgment

more than Jesus, and that there's coming a day when He will say to those on His left one thing, and to His right another thing: "Come unto Me" or "Depart from Me."

Dr. Duncan: You know, it strikes me, too, that he was a man who had experienced a certain measure of judgment against his own person in his own life. And so, coming to Jesus Christ he has a great sense of a greater judgment from which he had been spared; and that he earnestly desired that, knowing judgment as he did, that others would be spared of that judgment.

Dr. Thomas: It was part of my criticism of the portrayal of Newton in the movie *Wilberforce* that it did a fine job of conveying that Newton felt enormous guilt, unspeakable guilt about his involvement in the slave trade. But it did an inadequate job of the assurance of forgiveness, I thought. But there's no doubt in my mind that his past life never just got away from him, of what he had done and the enormity of the grace of God that his sins were forgiven through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. But this is an evangelistic hymn, but it's almost entirely contrary to modern views of evangelism.

Dr. Duncan: It starts out asking believers to sing, to behold, the day of judgment, day of wonders, and the loud thunder and the shaking of the whole creation, and the summons that confounds the heart of the sinner. And then it does what in the second stanza?

Dr. Thomas: Well, I was going to ask you, because it does something unexpected. When you think of God as judgment you tend to think God is the Judge and Jesus is the one who is our Savior. But in that opening stanza, the opening line of the second verse...

Dr. Duncan: He does a very Pauline thing, doesn't he?

"See the Judge, our nature wearing,
clothed in majesty divine..."

And it's exactly what Jesus has said at the end of Matthew (that you will see Me coming on clouds with angels and trumpets to judge), so that He has come in mercy in His first coming and He is coming in judgment in His second coming. And it's the picture of the deity of Christ and His right to judge the world according to His gospel. Newton just very graphically asks you to look at that scene when you look up and you open your eyes, and if you're a sinner who's never embraced Christ, suddenly you're looking at the Christ that you've rejected and spurned, and He's the Judge.

Dr. Thomas: And what did you say again about the view of the cross that depicts an angry Father trying to be softened by a loving Son?

Dr. Duncan: Well, first of all, that's not what evangelicals have ever taught. And Jesus is every bit acting on behalf of His own integrity and righteousness, because He is the Second Person of the Trinity; and it is His own righteousness that has been offended as much as the Father's righteousness has been offended by our rebellion. And of course He is there on the embassy of His loving Father, and He is doing it knowing that His Father is delighting in seeing sinners who trust in him saved. And so the idea that Jesus is somehow assuaging the wrath of a vengeful Father who doesn't understand love is laughable in light of the text of Scripture which so clearly depicts it otherwise. And the best of Reformed and evangelical and Protestant theology has always acknowledged that. But here's the flip side of it: He's coming as the Judge. And Newton has you sing,

“You who long for His appearing
then shall say, ‘This God is mine!’
Gracious Savior, own me in that day as Thine.”

So he's saying of those who trusted on Him, that's my God, that's my Savior — and they're going to cry out, “Lord, own me! I've trusted You; I've rested in You alone for salvation as You are offered in the gospel. Own me as Your child. Own me as Your saved sinner. Own me as a member of Your family by grace. Own me as acquitted. Own me as accepted. Own me as forgiven. Number me among those who are on Your right hand, not the goats at Your left hand.” And so it's asking the believer in that stanza to think about your reaction to that Day.

Dr. Thomas: And there's a very solemn question asked in the third verse, and it's asked to careless sinners. Presumably there are careless sinners who happen to be singing this hymn:

“Careless sinners, what will then become of thee?”

Dr. Duncan: Yeah. Don't you think he's simultaneously asking believers to ask that question so that they are not indifferent to the plight of careless sinners? Newton's attitude, having been saved by amazing grace, was not an attitude of indifferent condescending contempt for sinners. It was of compassion for those who had not embraced the Savior, and it was a desire for them to embrace the Savior. And you almost think that one of the things that he's doing here is that he's asking believers not to be indifferent to the plight of careless sinners. But as you say, I think he's also assuming that there are going to be some careless sinners singing this hymn, and he's hoping that it will make them careful, as opposed to careless...that it will be used by the Spirit to awaken them to a sense of their doom.

And then in the final stanza, it's an encouragement, isn't it? What does he do?

Dr. Thomas:

But to those who have confessed,
loved and served the Lord below,
He will say, 'Come near, ye blessed,
see the kingdom I bestow;
You forever shall My love and glory know.

That's a beautiful ending to what is a very, very solemn...

Dr. Duncan: Right...even grim, in that question in the third stanza. You know, the amazing thing is the restraint of it. You know folks that are accusing evangelical ministers of being hellfire and brimstone; he manages to address a terrifying scene with significant restraint in the way that he describes it while at the same time making you think really hard indeed about what is coming.

Dr. Thomas: And the question is whether we have confessed and loved and served the Lord below.

Dr. Duncan: And I'll leave that as the last word. Bill, let's hear this great hymn, *Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!*

Dr. Wymond: Singing this hymn for us this morning is Victor Smith.

Day of judgment! Day of wonders!
Hark! the trumpet's awful sound,
louder than a thousand thunders,
shakes the vast creation round.
How the summons will the sinner's heart confound!

See the Judge, our nature wearing,
clothed in majesty divine;
you who long for His appearing
then shall say, 'This God is mine!
Gracious Savior, own me in that day as Thine.

At His call the dead awaken,
rise to life from earth and sea;
all the powers of nature,
shaken by His looks, prepare to flee.
Careless sinner, what will then become of thee?

But to those who have confessed,
loved and served the Lord below,
He will say, 'Come near, ye blessed,
see the kingdom I bestow;
You forever shall My love and glory know.

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

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