

Hymns of the Faith: “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness”

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 it's a joy to be with you, Bill, and with you, Derek, and with you, our listening audience, to talk about “Hymns of the Faith.”

For a couple of years now we have been working through some of the greatest hymns written in the history of the Christian church and sung in the English-speaking world for the last 400-500 years, and today we have come to another jewel. This is one of my favorite hymns. It's a hymn that speaks, Derek, of the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone as well as any hymn on that subject speaks. Actually, there are some very good hymns on this particular theme but this one comes to us, interestingly, not from an English speaker (although it comes to us through a very famous English speaker). It comes to us through John Wesley...no one less prominent than John Wesley, who translated this back in the eighteenth century. But it originates from a German, from a Moravian who was one of the major sponsors of the Pietist movement which had so much to do about the initial world mission movement at the end of the eighteenth century-early nineteenth century — Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. And it's his great hymn, *Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness*, which we sing...and I don't know the history of what this song has been sung to, but we sing it to a tune called GERMANY, and it's a good sturdy long-meter tune. Maybe that won't be ringing in all of your ears right now, so, Bill, why don't you play GERMANY for us and see if it pulls up anything? [*Dr. Wymond plays.*]

Dr. Thomas: Sounds like Beethoven.

Dr. Wymond: I must tell you I really do love this melody, and I think it's so well suited for this text. The melody of course is not a hard melody, but it has a beautiful creativity to me. What I like about it is that the hymn builds all the way to the very end. It starts out rather low... [*plays*] ...and it makes statements about

Jesus and His blood and righteousness, but then it talks in more dramatic terms about “ ‘midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head.” And as it says that, it starts going up the melodic scale [*p/ays*]...and the melody and the harmonies have a very emotional intensity about them. That's kind of a long phrase there musically, but I think it just fits the words so well.

This particular melody is entitled (tune-wise) GERMANY, as you said, and so it's just a German tune that probably has folk origins to it, but it was collected by William Gardner in a book that was called *Sacred Melodies*.

Dr. Duncan: And so would you assume then that the tune would have long pre-existed that particular time, Bill? Is that the case? In other words, this has been like some of the other collections that you've told us about...these people would go out looking for tunes that were circulating and they would gather them in a collection and transcribe them. Is that how that came about?

Dr. Wymond: I think definitely, because Gardner had several other tunes...one which we use called *O Worship the King* (LYONS) that was also in this collection, and several other tunes that are used. So I always think that you would predate a publication like this by at least a hundred years or more. So it's at least early eighteenth century.

Dr. Duncan: And so would he have given it that name, GERMANY? I mean probably it was a German tune, a Moravian tune, and so he just stuck the name GERMANY on it?

Dr. Wymond: Yes, in his collection that's what he did. I tell you, this is one of my favorite tunes because it's just a beautiful tune standing alone, but I've always loved it with this particular set of words.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, it really is associated in my mind with this set of words. And this is a song I've been singing since I was a child out of the old Southern Presbyterian hymnbook, and it's one that...I didn't realize this until I was reading the material leading up to the program today...that Wesley translated it a year after it was written. And Wesley was keyed into the Moravians. The piety, I think, of in the Wesleyan movement and the so-called Methodist movement in those days was very much indebted to the piety of the Moravians.

Dr. Thomas: Right. The It was written and translated 1739-40, right at the heart of the Great Awakening period.

Dr. Duncan: And Zinzendorf was a prolific hymn writer. He wrote a couple of thousand hymns that his followers utilized in their worship. So there was a real commitment to the theology and being worked out into the piety of the church. And this one, Derek, is just a great, great text on justification, so why don't you walk us through the flow of argument and these beautiful assertions that

Zinzendorf has translated for us by John Wesley.

Dr. Thomas: It begins with a very bold statement that is peculiarly appropriate right now:

“Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
my beauty are, my glorious dress;
‘midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
with joy shall I lift up my head.”

Now, Ligon, we can understand “Jesus, Thy blood,” and the blood speaks of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus went to the cross, died and shed His blood to forgive us our sins. But why “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness”? What's going on here?

Dr. Duncan: The language there undoubtedly is meant to capture what theologians call both the *active and the passive obedience* of Christ. It's not just that Jesus on the cross...and *passive*, by the way, there doesn't mean that He was only acting in a receptive and static sort of way; that *passive* refers to the bearing of the passion, the pain, the cross, the sorrow of the crucifixion and of all the events that surrounded it.

But the idea of the active and passive obedience of Christ is that Jesus not only bore the penalty due for our sins, but He lived the life of righteousness that we could not live. And so it is that He both perceptively obeyed the totality of God's law in a way that none of us could have obeyed it and have obeyed it (because of our sin we have not obeyed it; because of the desires and inclinations of our heart we've not obeyed it), but He also, having lived that life perfectly, bore the penalty for breaking that law. And it is not only that our sin is imputed to Him and He bears the penalty for that sin, it is that He has lived the life of righteousness on our behalf. And not only His bearing sin on our behalf, but His living the fullness of life perfectly in His Father is imputed to us (is credited to us).

Dr. Thomas: Now there are fairly strident voices in our time and in our circles — evangelical and Reformed, and Presbyterian and Baptist circles — that are denying the concept of the active obedience of Christ and what you've touched on, the imputation of righteousness. Which, I take it, is what it means when it goes on to speak of “my glorious dress.” Now what's going on here with the ...what's at stake with the denial of the active obedience of Jesus and the imputation of His righteousness?

Dr. Duncan: Yes, that's good, Derek. I mean, what's at stake is, the only thing that's at stake is heaven. That's all. And if you're ready to dispense with eternal life, that's fine. Dispense with those. But what do we need in order to fellowship with God forever? We need righteousness. We don't need a status. We don't need a justification that's based on our whole life lived. Our whole life lived is

filthy rags. We need righteousness, and we can't get it for ourselves.

Dr. Thomas: But some will say (as they're saying right now) that you can't impute someone else's righteousness.

Dr. Duncan: Then we're still in our sins. That's fine. If you can't do that, that's fine. We're still in our sins. But the whole of the testimony of Paul in the New Testament is that God does indeed impute to sinners righteousness, that because of His obedience we are counted righteous. That's Pauline language for counted righteous in Christ, and the whole point of that is that the basis of our being counted righteous is not in us, it's in Christ. It's Christ's righteousness. That's the basis of our being counted righteous, and that most certainly can be transferred.

Dr. Thomas: When Paul says in a very, very important passage in II Corinthians 5, "God made Him [namely Jesus] to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be reckoned [or counted] the righteousness of God in Him," what's he saying? What's this "being reckoned the righteousness of God"? What's that mean?

Dr. Duncan: Well, the point of it is that in and of ourselves we are all unrighteousness, and that if we are going to be reconciled there has to be some way for us to contract righteousness that we ourselves are incapable of producing. And the Apostle Paul tells us that this happens by Jesus both bearing the penalty due to our unrighteousness and by His living the life that we have not and cannot live, and by that being credited to us, counted to us, imputed to us in God's loving grace and purposes so that we are dressed, we are clothed in the glorious garment not of our own righteousness, but of His righteousness.

And this is, by the way, a theme that's rooted in the Old Testament. It's not a New Testament idea, it's an Old Testament idea. And one of the most striking passages of course is out of a book that I've heard you preach from before, and the story of Zechariah the priest standing before God dressed in these dirty garments, and he mourns because he can't minister in a state of uncleanness before God. And God takes away the dirty garments and gives him garments of righteousness so that he can carry out these administrations. And the whole picture here is of precisely that, except in this case our high priest is clean. He's clothed in the garments of His own perfect righteousness and He says to you and me, "Derek, I'm going to take your dirty garments on Me for you." And then He does that. And we're saying, "No, Lord. Don't take that dirtiness on yourself." And what does He do? He cleans up our dirtiness, having taken it upon himself both by the way that He has lived and by the penalty that He bears. And then He gives that garment back, and He says, 'Here's your garment, Derek, and it's perfect, it's spotless, it's clean.' And what does that mean for you? It means that you can fellowship with God forever, because otherwise you can't fellowship with God with your dirty garments. Even Jesus' stories of those being invited to the feasts

in the Gospels, they can't come in their own clothes — they have to be given wedding garments so that they can come — press home this particular truth: If you're going to fellowship with God, you've got to have righteousness. You don't have righteousness. How are you going to get it? You've got to get it from Jesus. And it's not enough for your sins to be forgiven; you've got to be righteous. Where's that going to come from? It's going to come from Jesus. So "Jesus' blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious rest." And you really are...what you say is true. These are stunning words. The very opening words, "Jesus, Your blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress," those are bold statements.

Dr. Thomas: In a previous century the Presbyterians would have asked the question, "Are you wearing the robe of Christ?" The language here is almost apocalyptic now: "Midst flaming worlds, with these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head." Describe that ...

Dr. Duncan: Isn't that Petrine? Isn't that Peter, and the world being consumed by this purifying fire? And with the whole world being consumed by fire, he's saying, 'I can lift up my head in joy, if I'm dressed in that dress.'

Dr. Thomas: And perhaps also the idea of the last Judgment.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, clearly connected.

Dr. Thomas: With these...with the blood of Christ and the righteousness of Christ, and wearing the garments of Christ, at the Day of Judgment I can lift up my head with joy.

Dr. Duncan: Absolutely.

Dr. Thomas: That's a very powerful way to begin...

Dr. Duncan: Well, and don't you see the connection between that and these people, these Moravians, being willing to go out and die on the fields of mission? I mean, if you believe that, what are you not ready to take on in this world? If you believe that because of the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ you will, in the midst of flaming worlds, be able to lift up your head in joy, you're ready to go to the West Indies and die of disease and to be martyred by the natives — which is precisely what these Moravians did. They were amazing in their bravery in going out into the world to tell people about the gospel. And not only that, you want to go out and tell people about this. You want them to enjoy the assurance and the forgiveness, and the confidence that you enjoy in Christ.

Dr. Thomas: But Satan comes to you and whispers in your ear, "You hypocrite, you! You're a sinner still. Shall I tell you your sins now, as you're saying all this?" And what's the second stanza?

Dr. Duncan: And so he answers that accusation:

“Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
for who aught to my charge shall lay?”

[That is, who anything against me shall lay as a charge, as a condemnation.]

“Fully absolved through these I am...

[What are *these*? Thy blood and righteousness.]

“Fully absolved through these I am
from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.”

Period.

Dr. Thomas: You know, folks say that you should preach the gospel to yourself every day (and sometimes I hear that as though that was something that came to us in the last ten years), but here is this hymn saying precisely the same thing — that against all the accusations of Satan you go back to the cross, you go back to the finished work of Christ, His active and passive obedience, which is preaching the gospel to yourself.

Dr. Duncan: Right. Which is why our friend Ian Murray (I think, rightly) has wanted to draw attention to the fact that in the foundations of piety in the early Methodist movement and in the Puritan movement and amongst Scottish Presbyterians and in the second generation of the Reformation there is a theological kinship of the piety that existed, because there is a theological commonality on which that piety was based. And you're right. It's based right here. It's based out of not just a doctrine of justification, but a doctrine of what justification is based on. It's based on God's action for us in Christ. It's based on Christ's active and passive obedience. It's based on God's imputing to us, crediting to our account, counting to us, reckoning to us the righteousness of Christ. So it's not just justification, it's the superstructure that goes along with that that's the whole basis of a way of living life. And by the way, it's not a way of life that leads you to self-preoccupation, individualism, selfishness, and indolence. It's one that energizes you to serve the world. As the Wesleyans did, as the early Methodists did, as the Moravians did, as those that went out like William Carey and others on the great expeditions of mission in the wake of the writing of this hymn, and within sixty years the world missions movement is exploding in Protestantism because of this kind of theology, not in spite of it.

Dr. Thomas: Stanza three takes us right to the Day of Judgment itself and the day of resurrection:

“When from the dust of death I rise
to claim my mansion in the skies,
ev’n then this shall be all my plea...”

Dr. Duncan: What? “Jesus hath lived, hath died, for me.”

And once again you see the combination of Jesus’ life, Jesus’ death. You remember two things about this. One, this truth is echoed in Augustus Toplady’s famous hymn, *A Debtor to Mercy Alone*, and also in another hymn that he wrote, *Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me*. What does he say? “When I soar to worlds unknown, see Thee on Thy judgment throne,” what’s going to be my word? “Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee.” So even when we’re totally transformed and glorified and purified from all our sin, our one plea is going to be “Rock of ages, cleft for me.” And so this truth is being driven home here as well.

Dr. Thomas: Let me ask you about this: “Jesus hath lived, hath died for me.” It’s the same thing, isn’t it, again? Active and passive obedience, only just reversed now. It’s not *blood and righteousness*, as much as *righteousness and blood*. I heard on a tape recently Don McLeod (the Principal of the Free Church College in Edinburgh). He was being asked the question, if he was forced to say what is the gospel...he said if he is forced to say that in the minimum amount of words, he says, “It’s for me. He loved me and gave himself for me.” It’s the idea of substitution.. It’s here Jesus hath lived and died for me, in my place, as my substitute, because that brings out so much of “it’s nothing of me, and it’s all of Him.” He has provided it all. It’s a gift. Just those simple prepositions...*for* me. Not *with* me; not partly Him and partly me...

Dr. Duncan: Yes. Not as an example to me, but *for* me. And that’s beautifully stated. He has lived and has died for me.

Dr. Thomas: Now there’s only one response after all of that, and that is glorious praise and worship.

Dr. Duncan:

“Jesus, be endless praise to Thee,
whose boundless mercy hath for me...”

[There’s that *for me* again.]

“for me a full atonement made,
an everlasting ransom paid.”

Dr. Thomas: Now there may well be some buzz terminology in the expression “full atonement” in the context of the eighteenth century. What do you think that might be? Why “full atonement”?

Dr. Duncan: Without speculating on Wesley's translation of that and not having the German in front of me, I don't know. But let's just put it this way. Calvinists certainly believe in a full atonement. I think we could argue above all a full atonement; that is, that Jesus' death is not something that God accepted in the place of what we owed Him, it is what we owed Him but could not pay. So the atonement is not a substitute for what we owed, it is precisely what we owed, so that in the language of John Murray, Jesus does not cancel our debts in His atonement, He liquidates them. And I think that's vital for us to understand, again for our assurance because we know our sin, to know that our sins have been dealt with as they ought to have been dealt with in Christ.

Well, Derek, we hardly have time to even say the final stanza before we hear this great hymn by Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, translated by John Wesley, sung by Protestants for over a quarter of a millennium now in celebration of what Jesus has done for us in His atoning death, *Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness*. Let's listen to it.

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
my beauty are, my glorious dress;
'midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
with joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
for who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am
from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

When from the dust of death I rise
to claim my mansion in the skies,
ev'n then this shall be all my plea,
Jesus hath lived, hath died, for me.

Jesus, be endless praise to Thee,
whose boundless mercy hath for me—
for me a full atonement made,
an everlasting ransom paid.

O let the dead now hear Thy voice;
now bid Thy banished ones rejoice;
their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness.”

Dr. Wymond: Singing for us this morning was Genesa Case. This has been “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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