

## Hymns of the Faith: “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

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

**Dr. Wymond:** Good morning! This is “Hymns of 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.” Here with “Hymns of Faith” now is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Good morning, Bill. Good morning, Derek. It seems like a millions years since we've been together to record Hymns of the Faith and I'm so delighted to be back with you today and with a wonderful, wonderful hymn, *I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*. It's a hymn written by one of the bright lights of the constellation of Scottish Presbyterian Evangelicals from the nineteenth century. The name Bonar is well known and well respected from that time. We think of Andrew Bonar who I think did *The Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray McChesney*, the great Scottish pastor, the story of his life.

This is his brother, Horatius Bonar, who some have called the “sweet singer of Scotland” like we refer to David as the sweet singer of Israel. And this is a beautiful hymn of his. And maybe to start off Bill, you just play it for us — “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say.”

Bill, the tune is named *Vox Dilecti* and it has two voices to it. There's this somber sort of mode at the start and then it brightens at the end. Tell us just a little about that.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well the tune name means “the voice of the beloved” and I agree entirely. This hymn is divided into two moods or two sections, the first called the invitation and the second part they call the acceptance. And the first two lines of the hymn, the invitation part, are in a minor key and minor keys are much more serious sounding to us. And this hymn starts off sort of tentatively. It's emotionally not too strong. It starts like this. “I heard the voice of Jesus say, ‘Come unto Me and rest.’” And then in the second line it gets a little bit more emotionally strong as it says, “Lay down your burden.” Right here. [Plays tune]

So anyway, the appeal gets stronger emotionally in the second line because there's a larger leap in the melody. And then when you come to the point where

there's a response to Jesus, an acceptance of the invitation to come to Him, then it moves to the major key and it gets much more exciting emotionally. What adds to that excitement is the very first leap. I've noticed that when the emotions are revved up in a hymn it's done by having larger and larger leaps, usually in the melody. Of course, the major key is a bright happy sound and so that certainly adds to the emotion. Also there are faster notes in here which give, toward the end of that line, which give a little bit more excitement to it.

And then in the last line where it says, "I found in Him a resting place," we have a lot of leaps, very dramatic melody there. I think this is just a great tune. So these leaps, these changes of keys, all of these things add to the sense of excitement and so I love this melody a lot and just think there couldn't be a better marriage of tune and words.

**Dr. Duncan:** Is the melody a nineteenth century melody, Bill?

**Dr. Wymond:** It is. It is a melody that was done by John Dykes. And John Dykes, the date for him is 1868.

**Dr. Duncan:** And I'm trying to think, do we have other John Dykes melodies in our hymnal? I seem to remember a couple of John Dykes tunes but I'm not recalling their names right now or what hymns they're attached to but the hymn tune was written a few years after the hymn text and I guess associated with it some time later. I'm not sure what tune, perhaps, Bonar would have used with this when he originally sang it.

Derek and I were laughing a little bit before we came on air that it would not have been typical for the Scottish Presbyterians to sing these hymns in worship services initially. They might have been used in private worship or family worship or they might have been quoted in the midst of a sermon or a service, but not sung. In those days it was most common, not necessarily by law or principle in the Church of Scotland and maybe even in the Free Church initially, that you would only sing psalms, but it was the common practice. Derek read me a note about a couple of elders being upset with Bonar when he violated that rule. Do you want to read the little snippet that you have there, Derek?

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes, this would have been the period when Bonar was in Edinburgh in a church in Edinburgh, and it was towards the end of his life when he introduced a couple of his hymns into the church, and two of his elders, in a dramatic protest, walked out of the church. I chuckled because I could imagine that happening today in at least some of my friends' contexts where they sing unaccompanied psalms.

**Dr. Duncan:** And Bill, did you find any John Dykes tunes?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well I just confirmed that he did Holy, Holy, Holy.

**Dr. Duncan:** Oh, I should have known that, but I knew there was some tune of his that came into mind. But this is interesting to go from the minor to the major. I can think of a couple of other hymns that do that. There's an old eastern hymn that we do, *Christian, Doest Thou See Them?* that does that sort of a thing, two different voices. But there're not many hymns that do that, are there Bill?

**Dr. Wymond:** No there aren't and I think this is what makes this tune special for us. Also, I was just going to say that this is not the tune that first we used for the hymn, but the practice was loose back before the publication of *Hymns, Ancient and Modern*, that great standard hymnal of the Anglican Church, where tunes and text were more permanently wedded together.

**Dr. Duncan:** And of course, I would guess that the production of hymnals really would have exploded in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, and especially through about the mid-twentieth century, that period from 1875 through 1950-60-70, that was a golden age for the production of hymnals in the English speaking world.

**Dr. Wymond:** I think so, partly because more people were going to church. There were of course revivals in the early part of the twentieth century, but also in the Victorian period a lot more people went to church.

**Dr. Duncan:** And hymns were a very important part of the expression of Christian devotion. Not to say that they hadn't been before, but you have all of these people going out — and I've been struck as we've done this over the last year, I've been struck at how many of either the authors or the composers literally made visits to different parts of Europe to discover tunes, to find out what they were singing. People were doing research in hymnary and hymnody and they were interested in finding out what was sung in different regions and bringing back songs. So you have these English composers going to Germany and finding out what the Germans are singing in their churches and bringing back some of their best material and translating it into English and then sort of infusing it into the English choral singing tradition. And you've got that going on in the nineteenth century. Maybe it's part of the Romantic Movement. I don't know all of the reasons why, but it really, suddenly expands the literature that people are familiar with in hymnody and so I don't know how long — how long as the BBC been doing the broadcast where they go into the churches and listen to people sing and do hymn-sings and such? How long as that been going on, Derek?

**Dr. Thomas:** Oh, forever and a day but about to end. Just this year, emphasis now to secularism and the BBC being a nationally funded organization there's a lot of pressure on that.

**Dr. Duncan:** But that would stretch back before the days of television probably?

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes, I mean during the Second World War the daily service was suddenly going. And I suppose we need also to remember that hymns were written not just for the purposes of being sung in church. Probably initially some of the hymns were written so that they would be sung at home and I imagine in the nineteenth century most homes had a piano and somebody able to play it. You know, my wife for example, that was her upbringing more or less in her childhood. Sunday afternoon was sitting around the piano with her mother singing hymns.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well I think it's interesting, too, that Bonar himself was keen for people to have tunes that were singable and that he found those and put them to his verse, especially for children.

**Dr. Duncan:** Tell us a little bit about Horatius Bonar, Derek. He's a great Scottish evangelical leader in his day, part of a series of young men born between about 1800 and 1807 that ended up having a huge impact on the Scottish church.

**Dr. Thomas:** He was born in your wonderful city of Edinburgh in December of 1808, the son of a solicitor. He was raised, educated, went to school in Edinburgh and then was ordained to the ministry in Kelso. Now your geography of Scotland will be —

**Dr. Duncan:** Kelso is directly south of Edinburgh. It's one of the border towns. It has a beautiful abbey. Kelso and Jedburgh - there were some beautiful, medieval abbeys in those cities and Kelso has the impressive ruins of its abbey right in the city center.

**Dr. Thomas:** I have never been to Kelso. Bonar loved his time in Kelso. Apparently he made that statement that some folk will make that he planned to spend the rest of his days in Kelso. That was not the case. He ends up back in Edinburgh and he's there, of course, during that very important time for Scottish Presbyterianism in 1843. He's part of that movement along with Thomas Chalmers that founded the Free Church of Scotland.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well the short story is, when Scotland and England agreed on the union of the parliaments - the crown of England and Scotland had been united since James back in the early 1600's — but in 1707 when the parliaments united and Scotland ceased to be an independent nation from England and from Wales, one of the agreements that the Scots secured was that there was not supposed to be the kind of interference in church affairs from the nobility in the state that existed in England.

**Dr. Thomas:** And especially in the appointment of ministers.

**Dr. Duncan:** Right, because what happened in England typically was if you were the Earl of Warrick and the parish church was open that your home was in, you

had, if not just veto power, sometimes you had the right of conferring with the bishop to determine what vicar or pastor would be the pastor of that local congregation. And the Scots did not want that kind of interference. They felt that it violated the independence and the spirituality of the church and so they secured an agreement.

But what happened from the very beginning is Scottish nobility would be mingling with their English friends south of the border and they liked the fact that their English friends were able to interfere with that and they wanted to be able to interfere with that too. And they especially didn't want pastors who would stick their noses in their business during their preaching and such and so it became more and more common.

And so for a century Scottish Presbyterian pastors had really voiced their disapproval with the government for this kind of practice and had warned them and warned them and warned them and warned them that this was a violation not only of church law but even of the agreements that had been secured in 1707 in the Treaty of Union. And it came to a head in the 1830s and finally in 1843 Thomas Chalmers lead a march of almost half of the ministers of the Church of Scotland out of the church of St. Andrews on George Street in Edinburgh and down the hill to Cannon Mills where they held the first general assembly of the Free Church of Scotland.

Basically these men were leaving their homes and their stipends and their congregations because they believed in the freedom of the church to be able to call it's own ministers and appoint it's own ministers. They felt that was important for the ministry of the church, for the independence of the church upon state control, and Bonar was one of those people.

**Dr. Thomas:** And it should be said that some of those who left on that principle of state interference weren't all evangelicals and another split would take place at the turn of the century that would produce what we call the Free Church of Scotland, and there've been more splits since then. But Bonar, of course, would have been very young. He would have been thirty-three, thirty-four in that period, so he would have been one of the young pups marching behind Thomas Chalmers who had been the great leader of that walk out. One of the most dramatic moments, I suppose, for Presbyterians.

**Dr. Duncan:** It is true. There's a story of a Scottish nobleman who was standing on the mound looking across what is now Princess Street Gardens — what then would have been I guess still Nor Loch — over Princess Street and then he could actually see George Street as these ministers filed out and turned down the hill to go to Cannon Mills. And he was not in favor of the division of the Kirk. He wanted the Kirk to stay together. But as he watched these men walking out and realizing that they were leaving their salaries and their manses and their congregations to who knows what, he turned to a colleague and said, "Today I am proud to be a

Scotsman.” He was moved by the display of principle, that these men were ready to lay down their lives and their vocations and their ability to care for their families and everything that they had been trained for on principle and it was deeply moving to him. And so it was one of those noble times in the history of the Kirk.

But the text of the hymn itself is remarkable. It has some amazing phrases, phrases that I love. The final phrase of the hymn is one of my favorite phrases in all of hymnody — “till trav’ling days are done.” And you know, you get the sense of rest that comes out of that thought. No more wandering, no more pilgrimage, finally home.

And Bonar had a way of turning a phrase like that. For instance, I think Bill so beautifully described the hymn as invitation and response. And the first response line is one of those great phrases — “I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad.” And it’s just so evocative, the poetry that he wrote, and it is a wonderful invitation and response kind of hymn that displays the Gospel. And it’s really not surprising, is it Derek, that you would get that from those evangelicals. They were very much Gospel-minded. They were constantly pressing home the claims of the Gospel on their congregants. It characterized their whole ministry as opposed to what they would have seen — the deadness and the spiritual frigidity of moderatism in Scotland at the time.

**Dr. Thomas:** It’s based of course on Matthew 11:28 — “Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” This was the text through which I was converted. I read this text not in a Bible as such. I actually read the text in John Stott’s, *Basic Christianity*. I didn’t possess a Bible but I came across this text and it was reading in this text and John Stott’s explanation of it back in 1971 that I was converted. So the hymn itself is very precious to me.

What I like about the hymn — you know some hymnody can cross the line from hymnody to poetry. There are some hymns, I remember looking at Geoffrey Thomas’ pulpit hymnal one time — and this is thirty years ago — and he had gone through the entire hymnal and there would be a line through some exquisite piece and it would be written on the bottom, “too poetic.” In other words, the metaphor is —

**Dr. Duncan:** Too flowery.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah, it was just way beyond being understood by the ordinary person. But the language here is very simple. “I heard the voice of Jesus say, ‘Come unto Me and rest; lay down, O weary one, lay down your head upon My breast.’”

**Dr. Duncan:** And I love that because it extends the invitation of Matthew 11:28 and following and it combines it with a picture of John, the disciple, in close fellowship with the Lord Jesus at the Last Supper. And so what that ends up

doing, it ends up making so clear that Jesus' invitation to us is an invitation to communion with Him. It's close fellowship, it's shared life, that we're being invited to and I think that's so beautiful.

**Dr. Thomas:** The second stanza, "I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Behold, I freely give the living water; thirsty one, stoop down and drink, and live.'"

**Dr. Duncan:** And that takes you to the woman at the well. And so again it's starting out of Matthew but again these guys they bled Bible, so suddenly you're in John 4. You know you've been in Matthew 11 and then you're at the Last Supper — that's John 13, 14, 15 — and now suddenly you're in John 4. And then the third stanza —

**Dr. Thomas:** "I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'I am this dark world's Light; look unto Me, your morn shall rise, and all your day be bright.'"

**Dr. Duncan:** And there you hear John 1 and maybe even Malachi. You know it's just amazing the Scriptural illusions that come out. So those are the invitation lines of the hymn. Walk through the response lines of the hymn.

**Dr. Thomas:** "I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad. I found in Him a resting place, and He has made me glad."

**Dr. Duncan:** Talk to us about the theology of that in terms of what is entailed in that description of a response to Christ.

**Dr. Thomas:** Well of course it's picking up the language of Matthew 11:28 — "Come unto Me and I will give you rest" — but for somebody like Horatius Bonar that rest would be synonymous with the rest of the Gospel, the rest of not having to earn out way into a right relationship with God, but by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone the rest of which in some ways the book of Hebrews speaks of. So there's a dual sense here of rest — the sense of peace and calm and serenity and contentment that comes in knowing Christ but also the rest of justification by works. So at the same time this is a Gospel hymn to sinners.

**Dr. Duncan:** So not unlike the hymn — is it Charlotte Elliott who writes "Just As I Am Without One Plea"? Again, it's not "Clean yourself up and come to Jesus," it's, "No, you can't clean yourself up. Only Jesus can clean you up. Come to Jesus as you are."

**Dr. Thomas:** And there's a sense of the complete satisfaction, there's something "Piperesk" about this language. "I came to Jesus and I drank of that life giving stream; my thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him."

**Dr. Duncan:** And it goes along with the idea of "He has made me glad" in the first line. So it is satisfaction in Christ and you do hear that theme in John Piper

all the time. Well you know I think it's time for us to hear this hymn.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"Come unto me and rest;  
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down  
Thy head upon my breast."  
I came to Jesus as I was,  
Weary and worn and sad,  
I found in him a resting place,  
And he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"Behold, I freely give  
The living water; thirsty one,  
Stoop down and drink, and live."  
I came to Jesus, and I drank  
Of that life-giving stream;  
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,  
And now I live in him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"I am this dark world's Light;  
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise,  
And all thy day be bright."  
I looked to Jesus, and I found  
In him my Star, my Sun;  
And in that light of life I'll walk,  
Till trav'ling days are done.

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