

Hymns of the Faith: “The Sands of Time are Sinking!”

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. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.” ... And now here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Good morning and thank you Bill. I'm delighted to be with you and with Derek for “Hymns of the Faith.” Good morning, Derek. How are you?

Dr. Thomas: I am well.

Dr. Duncan: We're going to look at one of my all time favorite hymns. It comes out of the nineteenth century but it has roots that stretch back into the seventeenth century. Samuel Rutherford was one of the great Scottish theologians, sometimes ranked alongside Thomas Halyburton as the two finest theologians in the history of Scotland, certainly in their century.

Dr. Thomas: In a place called Anwoth.

Dr. Duncan: Anwoth, a tiny little parish down near the Solway. I've been to Anwoth on many occasions. I've walked through the ruins of the church, I've looked at the place where his manse was and walked the area. I've been to his gravestone, to his grave, many times. He's buried in the cathedral graveyard of Saint Andrews in Scotland near the famous golf course and near the castle. He is in the ruins of the Saint Andrews Cathedral and he's buried right next to Halyburton.

Dr. Thomas: And what is it that we remember most about Rutherford?

Dr. Duncan: Well, we remember a lot of things about Rutherford. Rutherford, of course, was a Scottish theologian during the time of the Westminster Assembly of Divines and was enormously influential in his own day and age. He was, almost, almost mystical in the quality of his description of Christian experience in his very famous letters which were edited and produced with an introduction by one of the Bonars in the nineteenth century. And I'm thinking that it may well

have been one of the Bonar brothers that made the comment that Rutherford's prose was so poetic that it would not take much to turn it into poetry. I think that is what actually influenced Anne Cousin, the author of this hymn, to attempt to turn some of his prose into a hymn. And then we'll talk about this later, a lady in our own time, a lady who is still living, a pastor's wife in Hull, England, has versified a lot of Rutherford's letters and put it into a book. Bill let's hear the tune to *The Sands of Time Are Sinking* and then we'll talk about Rutherford and Anne Cousin and Chretien — I don't know how to say his last name — Joe Urhane, who was the hymn writer.

The tune itself was written apparently in 1834 and then arranged in 1867 and it's named Rutherford so was it written for this particular text, Bill?

Dr. Wymond: No, it was written for a French hymn or song which said, "O Lord we ask for Your mercy" and the melody was similar. It went something like this. [plays tune] So it's similar. Just some variations, but it was written earlier. And then this gentleman named Edward Rimbault, who was an English organist, found it in a French hymnal and then adapted it for this. It was written by a guy who wrote and worked in opera orchestras and it was arranged by a man who wrote operettas and so on like that.

I'm going to be candid about this tune, I was telling Derek earlier that I think it is appropriate to a certain extent for the hymn because it's a sobering thought to think about how life slips away, the sands of time are sinking and so on like that, and this is a melancholy tune I think, and the hymn has a lot of joy in it, and the last part of it brightens up a bit to express the joy and anticipation of glory where it goes [plays tune] right there it talks about glory, glory, glory dwelleth, and so on like that. But I would love for it to have a lot more joy in it because I think the overall effect of the words is a joyful one.

Dr. Duncan: I think you're right. It's interesting that our friend Mark Dever and Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. just celebrated his fifteenth anniversary as pastor of that congregation, and this is his favorite hymn, and his wife Connie wrote a new tune to it. I think for reasons very similar to the ones that Bill just described. I haven't heard that yet. I think it's actually available on YouTube somewhere but I want to hear what she's come up with in terms of a tune. But there is a sobering effect to the repetition and to the fairly limited range.

Dr. Wymond: There is a very narrow range to the hymn and very small leaps. Usually you use larger leaps for more expansive thoughts and smaller intervals and so on like that when you're just sort of talking on.. Derek, what were you telling me? Is this actually sung in Wales, this tune, do you know?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, but then the Celts have a thing for tunes in minor keys. I have to say I absolutely love this tune. It is mournful for sure but not in the dour sense. I just think it evokes a certain sobriety in singing it.

Dr. Wymond: It does. It's actually still in a major key. It's not absolutely minor but it's minor in its spirit if you know what I mean. Here's what it would be in a minor key. [plays tune]

Dr. Duncan: That's pulling your Welsh-ness out, isn't it? You've opened up new vistas for him! Derek, tell us about Anne Cousin and anything you want to tell us about Samuel Rutherford. You know Samuel Rutherford still enjoys, in our circles, considerable popularity. I suppose it's his letters more than anything else that we remember. He wrote a great deal and a friend of ours has been studying Rutherford's systematic theology, because it had never been translated from the Latin into English.

Dr. Thomas: Right, and I look forward to the day when that becomes more generally available for sure. He actually did have some very powerful ideas, and not all of the perhaps acceptable. In the Westminster Assembly he records a few, very stratospheric thoughts on the nature of God and the necessity of the atonement which are things still discussed theoretically in classrooms for sure.

Dr. Duncan: You've recently mentioned a book that he wrote that really got him into trouble and the book was called *Lex Rex* — the Law is King. Which, he wrote it in 1650 and in 1660 that became a very controversial thing because it was written against the tyranny of monarchs.

Dr. Thomas: Right, it was used to other ends in the 1980s here in the States by those who wanted to advocate a return to Old Testament civil law which was not, I think, what Samuel Rutherford was arguing for. I think you have to put it in the context of he was a Scot — and that means he was anti-English and he was particularly anti-English kings. And in that context one needs to read the powerful book, *Lex Rex*.

Dr. Duncan: Well, from the time that Charles I was born, almost, his father King James the VI of Scotland, who was also King James I of England, schooled him in the concept of absolute monarchy and of course Charles lost his head over trying to get that through, but his son would eventually come to the throne after being reared in exile and he came to the throne in Scotland first. And one of the first things he did as king was issue a warrant for the arrest of Samuel Rutherford because James had taught his son, and his son had taught James' grandson, that the proper understanding of the order of things was *Rex Lex* — the King is law. And so Rutherford's book, *Lex Rex* — the Law is King — was seen as a direct assault upon the authority, the independence, the superiority of the monarchy.

Dr. Thomas: Which is was.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, which it was. And when Charles came to power in Scotland he

wanted Rutherford dealt with. Rutherford was already old and he was in, for his day and age he was sixty years old, he was in poor health, and he was clapped in irons and put in a carriage and they started the journey to Edinburgh and he died on the way. And his last words were something to the effect that “tell him that I have received a greater summons and soon I will be where few kings and great folk come.” And so Rutherford died before he could ever be put before a trial in Edinburgh and no doubt executed for what the king considered to be treason. So he's a very powerful, popular figure in Scotland because of that sort of — in the tradition of William Wallace and others, sort of the resistance to tyrannical monarchies.

Dr. Thomas: He's a theological Braveheart figure.

Dr. Duncan: Right. He spent a lot of his life in exile. He was in a tiny little parish in the southwest of Scotland, near the Solway Firth, a little parish church called Anwoth, and he was exiled from his congregation and sent almost to the opposite end of the country in Aberdeen and I've never quite been able to figure out what castle it was that he was sort of quarantined to during those times but many of his letters were written from Aberdeen to people in these congregations — quite remarkable conversations.

For instance, there was a local noblewoman named Lady Kenmure who he clearly had tremendous regard for spiritually and she was married to a less than mature Christian man, who, although he was able to provide for her many wonderful things from the standpoint of worldly goods, was not able to give her spiritual company and as Lady Kenmure had children and lost children at early ages, Rutherford would correspond with her and give her comfort from God's Word and there are some terrifically, tender, pastoral words from him to her and others in the congregation that are recorded in his letters. But it's Anne Cousin who actually put this particular hymn to verse. Anything you want to tell us about Mrs. Cousin?

Dr. Thomas: She was the daughter of a minister and I guess he would have been a minister before the formation of the Free Church in the middle of the nineteenth century but she would expand that period when a momentous event took place in Scottish Presbyterianism, once again over the similar issues to Rutherford himself, that the interference of the state into church life and law. She's known, of course, for more than one rendering of hymns and this versification of Rutherford's thoughts, Rutherford's prose - often thought to be perhaps among the last things that Rutherford wrote?

Dr. Duncan: You know, I am so bad on my Rutherford timeline. You're probably right.

Dr. Thomas: I had a notion, and maybe because the hymn itself speaks about death, but I've always thought this represented something Rutherford had written

towards the end of his life.

Dr. Duncan: And I know that this, in its original — and Bill you may know — had something like twenty-one or twenty-two or twenty-three stanzas to it. It's long. And I'm under the impression, and this impression may be entirely wrong, but it was not just drawn from one source but it was drawn from multiple letters. Now where they came from I don't know exactly. That's not something I've studied closely.

Dr. Thomas: Now tell us a little about a modern work of —

Dr. Duncan: Yes, I was mentioning this to you off-air before we came on this morning. Faith Cook, who is the wife of Paul Cook — I think is his name — who is a minister in the Uniting Church or the United Reformed Church or what's it called in Britain — it's the union of the old Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. It may be United Reformed Church or something like that, but at any rate it's the United Reformed Church or something to that effect in Hull which is on the east coast of England about half way down, something like that.

Faith has done a lot of books with the Banner of Truth over the years and I'm not sure whether this is the first one she did, but she wrote a book in which she put a number of Rutherford's letters into verse and the title is called *Grace in Winter*. And what she does is she quotes the snippets out of the letters on which she bases the poem and then she turns that prose into poetry.

And again it's on the premise of whether it was one of the Bonars or someone else who said it wouldn't take too much effort to turn Rutherford's prose into poetry. That was the premise for her book and it is an excellent book pastorally. If you're a pastor and you're trying to figure out how to talk to somebody who's lost a child or who's going through some tragedy in life then a terrific resource for how a pastor could talk to a congregation member and at the same time wonderful poetry to meditate on. It's rich, it's deep, it's biblical, it's theological, it's pastoral, it's experiential, it's devotional — just excellent material. It's a slender book. You could sit down and read the whole thing through in one evening but it's best savored for a long time. I've kept it near my desk for many years just so I could reach to it and look for particular things. But it's called *Grace in Winter* and it's published by the Banner of Truth Trust. It's in a little hardback and it would be a great gift to give at Christmastime to someone, especially someone who's going through hardship or trial.

Dr. Wymond: Isn't it amazing how these women really deserve a lot of credit because they're the poets really here. I was just reading that the daughter of Mrs. Cousin was talking about her mother working out the patterns of the lines of the poetry as she was sewing in her manse there. And I know you're going to get to the text, but she called her book of poetry, *The Last Words of Samuel Rutherford*. I was noting that the great Spurgeon used this hymn at his last

service that he preached.

Dr. Duncan: And you must be right Derek. This must come from the very end of his life. That's why she would have named it that. You'll be right about that. I'll go back and see if I can find that out some other time. We don't have much time so let's sort of rifle through the text here.

Dr. Thomas: I guess the metaphor, the sands of time, refers to an egg timer or something similar in which sand is passing from one bulb to another and time is passing by.

Dr. Duncan: Or the pulpit hourglass. You know, you can see Rutherford looking at that thing and then thinking not just that the time for the service is drawing to a nigh but thinking —

Dr. Thomas: Now you're giving Bill an idea!

Dr. Wymond: I just assumed that in Scotland there were no clocks in the pulpit.

Dr. Duncan: You know I think there very likely would have been an hourglass there. The preacher could have watched that going down.

Dr. Thomas: But there was an hour for the sermon! (laughter)

Dr. Duncan: That's right! I believe he begins to think of life in this metaphor. But what is it, Derek, that he's longing for? He begins to talk about the "summer morn I've sighed for." What is he talking about longing for?

Dr. Thomas: Emmanuel's land and last time I think we were speaking about *Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart*, Edward Plumptre's hymn, and with a reference to looking forward to Jerusalem, pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. And this one is to Emmanuel's land.

Dr. Duncan: And it's a very similar metaphor to that of the Negro spirituals that refer to crossing the Jordan and coming into campground as *Deep River* speaks of. And so there's this picture of coming into the experience of the new heavens and the new earth and the fullness of all that God is preparing.

But the focus is not just on the place. It's especially on a person in the place. So in the second stanza we read, "The King there in His beauty without a veil is seen; it were a well-spent journey though sev'n deaths lay between." That's a beautiful line. It's worth it all he was saying, even if he had had to die seven times to see the King without a veil. "The Lamb with His fair army doth on Mount Zion stand, and glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land." That "glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land" features in our hymnal three times and no telling how many times in the full verses of Anne Cousin's versification of this poetry.

But the focus of the last three stanzas is all on the King. It's all on Christ. "O Christ, He is the fountain, the deep sweet well of love! The streams of earth I've tasted more keep I'll drink above: there to an ocean fullness His mercy doth expand" — and don't you love that line — "there to an ocean fullness His mercy doth expand, and glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land."

And then finally the stanza, "The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom's face" — the metaphor changes there doesn't it? Now we're at a wedding. And "I will not gaze at glory, but on the King of grace; not at the crown He gifteth, but on His pierced hand; the Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel's land."

That's my favorite line, favorite stanza in the song. It just points out that it won't be the gifts that we're gifted that will take our breath away. It will be the Lord Himself.

Dr. Thomas: Well yes, and unless we get embraced in sentimentality, right at the very end — "on His pierced hand." Just a reminder that the only reason we will get to Emmanuel's land and see the beauty of the King is because of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Dr. Duncan: And it's a mystery, isn't it? Paul makes a lot out of the fact that in the new heavens and in the new earth that we will have glorified bodies, bodies that are utterly perfected with no defect. You know I think of some of the precious Downs children in our congregation who will, in their physicality, be absolutely perfect in glory. There won't be an imperfection amongst all of humanity and yet the Lamb Himself will still bear the marks of His immolation. And Rutherford meditates upon looking into those hands and being transfixed by and fixated on the Lamb Himself. And that's again a picture of Christian devotion that it's all about the Savior. It's all about Jesus.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, it's so thoroughly Christ-centered in its focus and to a cracking good tune.

Dr. Duncan: And that'll be the last word. Let's hear "The Sands of Time Are Sinking."

The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of Heaven breaks;
The summer morn I've sighed for—the fair, sweet morn awakes:
Dark, dark hath been the midnight, but dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel's land.

The King there in His beauty, without a veil is seen:
It were a well spent journey, though seven deaths lay between:
The Lamb with His fair army, doth on Mount Zion stand,

And glory—glory dwelleth in Immanuel's land.

O Christ, He is the fountain, the deep, sweet well of love!
The streams of earth I've tasted more deep I'll drink above:
There to an ocean fullness His mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel's land.

The Bride eyes not her garment, but her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory but on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth but on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel's land.

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