

## Hymns of the Faith: “Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart!”

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 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:** Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan and it's a delight to be with you, Bill and with you, Derek for “Hymns of the Faith” this morning. Good morning, Derek.

**Dr. Thomas:** Good morning.

**Dr. Duncan:** How are you today?

**Dr. Thomas:** I am well, thank you.

**Dr. Duncan:** I'm so glad to be with you both and looking at a wonderful hymn, *Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart*. This is another one of those great nineteenth century, mid-nineteenth century texts that was set to a tune that was written towards the end of the nineteenth century but it's a good solid tune. It's not sing-songy like some of the late nineteenth century tunes that you get. Maybe even before we start on our discussion this morning you would like to hear this tune so that you can get it in your head and then we'll talk a little bit about, *Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart*.

Bill, we were talking off-air about the author of the music, or the composer of the music to this particular hymn and you had a little interesting information about his background.

**Dr. Wymond:** His name is Arthur Messiter and he was born in England and he was born in Somerset County. Is that right? I've never heard of that before Derek. Where is that? How did I miss that?

**Dr. Thomas:** Oh, southwest. Down by Devon, Cornell, Somerset — the foot of England.

**Dr. Duncan:** Not far from Penzance.

**Dr. Wymond:** Where all the good cream comes from.

**Dr. Thomas:** Exactly.

**Dr. Wymond:** What interests me about him, born in 1834, is that he had an education similar to that that many people had. He studied under tutors, he took music lessons and so on like that, but he didn't get a university degree and yet he was extremely well educated. He came to the United States, sang for a little while in the TrinityChurch choir in New York, then he went to Philadelphia and served as an organist there, and then he came back to New York to the TrinityChurch which was a very prominent church. I think that's Trinity on Wall Street. And there was a comment in one of the musical papers saying, "We hear that the authorities of TrinityChurch have appointed an organist from Philadelphia. We suppose that the next vacancy they'll try Coney Island."

**Dr. Duncan:** You can see the New York snobbery there in spades can't you?

**Dr. Wymond:** Isn't that something? But he actually was a very good organist and director. He built up the choir there in the English cathedral tradition. He wrote several books about the history of the church and the choir, so he obviously was well qualified for what he did. The tune that he wrote for this, which we just played, is called Marion — spelled with an "o" — and that was his wife's name. And so he wrote this tune in the late eighteen hundreds and it's been a really good tune. It works well for processions. And I like the tune because it's marshal and it sounds like a march almost and it so fits the joy and the aggressive character of the text.

Let me just say something about the tune. It starts off with what I call a very strong and happy interval, a leap like that, a fourth. And it just marches right on through. And then it has this little refrain — "Rejoice." And that is such a happy sound and just the kind of thing that you can really get your heart into to express the joy that these words are talking about. And so that is what I wanted to tell you about this particular gentleman.

**Dr. Duncan:** The tune does sound marshal and yet at the same time the tune almost smiles. It is a very happy, uplifting kind of tune and that's not a common combination. You can get regal and marshal but marshal and happy and upbeat are hard to pull off at the same time and it does have a march feel to it. Why is it able to do that?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, I think it's partly because it's built in short little musical, strong musical phrases. It starts out with this interval. [plays tune] I was talking about that interval — that's a fifth — which is a pretty strong interval. A lot of

really marshal songs like that, “From the Halls of Montezuma” uses a one, three, and a five. And so I think that both composers chose those because of that but it's because of these really short musical phrases that are very strong in themselves. That's the first one.

**Dr. Duncan:** And yet in the second, what about the fourth stanza into the song, you'll get this very lyrical - dun, dun, da, da, dun, dun, da, da, da, da, dun. Yeah, and it still flows.

**Dr. Wymond:** It does. It flows and it's interesting musically because all of the material is new. There's hardly anything that is repeated and so that third musical phrase right there — “Your festal banner” — is very smooth.

**Dr. Duncan:** The refrain is also strong. You get this “bam-bam” and a nice answer from the base line and from the tenor line and as an organist I'm sure that would have been fun to have written the accompaniment to that.

**Dr. Wymond:** Having the women go, “Rejoice” and then the men answer like that. That's not uncommon in nineteenth century music. A lot of the gospel hymns would use that kind of thing.

**Dr. Duncan:** And yet it doesn't have the feel musically of the gospel hymns. It's got the refrain but you can tell an Anglican or an Episcopalian wrote it.

**Dr. Wymond:** It's more sophisticated.

**Dr. Duncan:** Right. It doesn't have kind of campy sort of sound that some of the gospel music, especially that which was being written out of Chicago at this time would have had, and I find that fascinating. Derek, tell us just a little bit about the author of the text to *Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart*.

**Dr. Thomas:** Dean Edward Hayes — and I assume it's pronounced Plumtree — with only one “e” at the end. I'm not sure if a French pronunciation would be in order, but I'm going to call him Plumtree. 1821-1891 and my notes here say, “Anglican, comma, high.” An Anglican and then some. Very classical education at Brasenose College in Oxford which I know. I could get you there. Chaplain, later professor of New Testament Exegesis at King's College, London. Could also get you to King's College, London, too. Dean of Queen's College Oxford and prebendary. I have a dear friend, Mark Johnson, whose father is a prebendary.

**Dr. Duncan:** Now explain that to the multitudes.

**Dr. Thomas:** I have no idea. I remember asking him one time, I'd hear the news and I called him up on the phone and said, “I hear that you're a prebendary.” And I said, as a non-Anglican, “What exactly is a prebendary?” And he said, “All I can say is you don't get paid anymore.” Prebendary of Saint Paul's Cathedral London

and then rector to two parishes at different times and then Dean of Wales Cathedral. And so he really — apart from being the Archbishop of Canterbury — he reached the heights of Anglicanism for sure. A scholar — translations of Sophocles, and Dante among other things. And then a wide range of interests hinted at by the hymn collections. And then the evangelical church latched on to some of these hymns including this one. And I've probably sung this hymn throughout my consciousness of singing hymns for sure. It's a wonderful hymn. Bill, I wanted to ask you, some of my notes here referred to this specifically as a processional hymn. Now what does that mean?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, not this tune, but this text was written for a choir festival at Peterborough Cathedral and I think it had about ten or eleven stanzas because they say that sometimes those processions actually took ten or more minutes to do, and so they needed a lot of stanzas to the hymns and so that's what it was. And so it's used a lot in processional occasions because of both the music, the original music, and also this tune lend themselves to that — and the text.

**Dr. Duncan:** Derek, looking through the text itself it clearly has a sort of festival processional feel to it even though this tune that wasn't written for that occasion.

But Bill, looking at the text maybe there are some words and expressions along the way that would be helpful to explain to people that know the hymn, maybe even people that have sung the hymn for many years. It begins, "Rejoice ye pure in heart, rejoice, give thanks, and sing." Very straight forward. "Your festal banner wave on high, the cross of Christ your King." In that particular phrase, the festal banner is the cross. What does he mean by a festal banner though?

**Dr. Thomas:** Presumably a reference to the procession in which, at least in high-Anglicanism, there would be various liturgical banners.

**Dr. Wymond:** They would be led by banners and flags and a cross, all of those things. There's a biblical allusion isn't there? Just the whole idea of waving banners and so on like that.

**Dr. Duncan:** Certainly Old Testament processions into the temple on which, of course, Anglican processions would have been modeled, but here the interesting thing is the festal banner is identified with the cross, in this case, which is a good thought even if you don't believe in processing and high-Anglican tradition, to have the cross.

**Dr. Thomas:** Now the second verse, I have to say that I always chuckle when I have to sing this because it's so Victorian — "Bright youth and snow-crowned age, strong men and maidens meek."

**Dr. Duncan:** Hah! And it continues on — "Raise high your free, exulting song; God's wondrous praises speak." The first two stanzas are very exhortative.

They're exhorting us to a particular posture, an attitude, an activity in our worship. Then in the third stanza we're invited to join in with the angel choirs — "With all the angel choirs, with all the saints on earth, pour out the strains of joy and bliss, true rapture, noblest mirth!"

Now there's a usage of the term "rapture" in its more proper older English form. That name brings to some Christians thoughts of a doctrine actually that wasn't held in the Christian church until about 1875 but in this context rapture just means what, Derek?

**Dr. Thomas:** Joy and then some, being exultant perhaps in joy. I remember hearing John Murray — you're referring of course to the doctrine of the so-called "secret rapture," the view that Jesus could return at any moment.

**Dr. Duncan:** In which the word rapture there functions as being enwrapped and taken away. But here it means I guess more enveloped by joy as you were indicating.

**Dr. Thomas:** And it's a perfectly good word although I would assume that a lot of people, as they would sing that, might associate the word rapture incorrectly.

**Dr. Duncan:** It's interesting because in our hymnal in a couple of the Fannie Crosby hymns where rapture has been used — Bill you worked on that hymnal — the editors of the hymnal deliberately changed the word I think to keep from confusing people.

**Dr. Thomas:** And yet, I remember hearing John Murray, and the only occasion that I ever heard him, say about that Fannie Crosby hymn that we're referring to, that rapture was a perfectly good word in that context.

**Dr. Duncan:** As it is here. It's a good term as long as you understand its meaning. Then the fourth stanza goes on — "Yes, on through life's long path, still chanting as ye go" — and the text retains the "ye" — I love that. "From youth to age, by night and day, in gladness and in woe." Now that line manages to say a lot in a very few words. It acknowledges that life is a long journey and yet it exhorts us to continue with this rejoicing, this chanting, this singing, this praising to God following the cross of Christ our King "from youth to age, by night and day" and then I love the last words, "in gladness and in woe." Why is it important for us to sing about that Derek, that we're going to continue to praise God in gladness and in woe?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, I think the first thing I'd say is that's precisely what believers did in the Old Testament in the book of Psalms. I think that's one of the consequences of not having the Psalms on a regular basis in our worship because they are, as Calvin says, "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." And we do incorrectly associate Christianity with good things and then find ourselves

asking all kinds of questions when we find ourselves in difficulty and in trial. And I think if, we're exhorted on a regular basis to expect trials and difficulties and to rejoice in and through those trials, I think those trials will have less of a debilitating impact upon us.

**Dr. Duncan:** You know, I am invariably helped in our hymns when we sing acknowledgment of the hard things in life, and I'm able to sing that with the congregation. We sang in staff meeting earlier this week, *Be Still My Soul*, and when we got to the line, "Be still my soul, when dearest friends depart," it was deeply comforting to me to be able to sing about losing a dear friend and there are hymns like that that we sing that are by and large very uplifting hymns but they'll have a line in them where they refer to losses and crosses, trials and tribulations, death and partings, and it's always helpful to me, even in the midst of a hymn of praise, to acknowledge the hard side, the valleys, the toils, the cares of this life alongside of these good things. And so I'm very appreciative for a line like that that exhorts me to continue to praise God, to continue to rejoice in gladness and in woe.

The fifth stanza has us looking for the finish line and it says, "At last the march shall end, the wearied ones shall rest; the pilgrims find their Father's house, Jerusalem the blest." That's a beautiful line and an important sentiment in the Christian life. What thoughts do you have about that theologically, not only how it functions in the song, but how we need to think about that in the living of the Christian life, Derek?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, there's a whole range of metaphors in those four lines. First of all that the Christian life is a road trip, a march, a journey, a pilgrim's progress, that at the end of which there is rest. There are allusions to "In my Father's house there are many mansions" from John 14, and then Jerusalem is in the Bible often depicted as a symbol of that blessed state in which Christians will find themselves in the life hereafter, a city, a golden city.

The last book of the Bible and the last chapters of that book close with a picture of Jerusalem in contrast to Babylon.

**Dr. Wymond:** It's interesting, too, because this is sort of an allusion to the Psalms of Ascent, where the children of Israel were anticipating going up to Jerusalem and to the Lord's house and so on like that.

**Dr. Thomas:** And the whole hymn, of course, is set presumably on Psalm 24 and that question, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart." — Made clean and pure by the Gospel of course. But the hill of the Lord is in this case Mount Zion where Jerusalem is and that becomes symbolic then of the believer's final rest.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill is right to draw our attention to the fact that you have parallels

with the Songs of Ascent, you have Psalm 24 which is asking “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?” It isn't a Psalm of Ascent but it certainly points to the kind of pilgrimage that would have been in view in the Psalms of Ascent. This is sort of a Christian version of the Psalms of Ascent.

You mentioned that language, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart,” but the very phrase “pure in heart” comes right out of the Beatitudes and when Jesus speaks about being pure in heart what does He mean?

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah, what does He mean, Ligon? (laughter) Pure in heart by the Gospel, that sin cannot enter into heaven, God is too holy to behold iniquity, and the believer in union with Christ is washed and cleaned and has clean garments. I'm intrigued by the reference to “pilgrim” in verse 5 that that is how the church has viewed the Christian life, as we are pilgrims. We are making a journey towards a blessed city.

**Dr. Duncan:** I love the images of the wearied ones, the picture of the pilgrims, but then the way the sentence ends, “They find their Father's house.” That's a beautiful image there. And then the reference to Revelation, to take it out of the Psalms of Ascent and put it into Revelation, the New Jerusalem, here just called Jerusalem the blessed, it is a city that has foundations whose architect and maker is God, that we're looking for. That's a point in the book of Hebrews and it's illustrated graphically in the book of Revelation.

And then the sixth stanza, Derek, asks us to live life in light of that goal that has been introduced in the fifth stanza. “Then on, ye pure in heart, rejoice, give thanks, and sing; your glorious banner wave on high, the cross of Christ your King.” So it comes right back to the first stanza again, it repeats it except for the first word being changed — “rejoice” is changed to “then on” — and I think the “then on” captures the idea that we need to live life in the light of that truth of stanza five, that we need to live life now in light of the end.

And that's a profoundly important concept in Christian piety, in Christian experience. You see it in Calvin; you also see it in the Puritans. You also see it in Jonathan Edwards. In the experiential tradition of reformed piety, living in light of the end is very important. Why is that important?

**Dr. Thomas:** Because, I'm thinking of what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 is not eternal, that which is seen is passing away, it fades. And if we build our lives on that which is seen and felt and touched, all of those things are subject to the ravages of decay. What Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, that moth and rust corrupt everything and that which is of true value, in Paul's language, “cannot be seen.”

**Dr. Duncan:** And I think, don't you think, that ties in to something of what Jesus was talking about when he talked about being pure in heart, having your heart

fixed and set on the one thing, the most important thing? Well Bill, why don't we hear this wonderful hymn, "Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart."

Rejoice, ye pure in heart,  
Rejoice, give thanks, and sing:  
Your festal banner wave on high,  
The cross of Christ your King.

Rejoice, rejoice,  
Rejoice, give thanks and sing.

Bright youth and snow-crowned age,  
Strong men and maidens meek,  
Raise high your free, exulting song,  
God's wondrous praises speak.

With all the angel choirs,  
With all the saints on earth,  
Pour out the strains of joy and bliss,  
True rapture, noblest mirth!

Yes, on through life's long path,  
Still chanting as ye go;  
From youth to age, by night and day,  
In gladness and in woe.

At last the march shall end,  
The wearied ones shall rest,  
The pilgrims find their Father's house,  
Jerusalem the blest.

Then on, ye pure in heart,  
Rejoice, give thanks, and sing;  
Your glorious banner wave on high,  
The cross of Christ your King.

**Dr. Wymond:** This has been "Hymns of the Faith," brought to us by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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