

## Hymns of the Faith: “Spirit of the Living God”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

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

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill Wymond, and it's great to be with you and Derek here on “Hymns of the Faith.” Derek, good morning.

**Dr. Thomas:** Good morning.

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

**Dr. Thomas:** Very well, thank you.

**Dr. Duncan:** It's good to see you here and good to be in a conversation about not so much a hymn as a gospel-song or a gospel-chorus which has become very beloved to many evangelical Christians over the last, almost century. This is a song called, “Spirit of the Living God,” and we often use it, Bill, here sort of as a closing song, sometimes a response from the congregation. You can tell, and we'll talk about the background of it in just a little bit — I'll get Derek to tell us just a little bit about the background of the writing of the song — but you can tell that clearly a message that had been preached struck the author and moved him to write these words in response to the preaching of that word. And the author of this song is Dan Iverson. And that's a name that many Presbyterians and conservative evangelicals will know. Dan was a very, very faithful preacher, evangelist, and church-planter and well known all across the south eastern United States during the course of his ministry. We'll talk about him in just a little bit. For those of you who don't know the song we're going to play it in just a few second but for those of you who do, you've already got this tune rattling around in your mind. Once you hear it, you never lose it. You'll remember the tune. Bill, would you share with us the music of, “Spirit of the Living God”?

**Dr. Wymond:** Really very simple tune. It's an A-A-B-A form so you repeat this line three times in the hymn. It's a simple chorus, nothing particularly remarkable about it, but it is singable. And there is always a song, a popular kind of chorus song, that's current in churches and most of them last just a little while and then die out. I could name a number of them. “Pass It On” was one that was popular about twenty, thirty years ago that comes to mind. This one though has stuck and once in a while they do. And I think it's not so much for the music, although the

music is a good fit for the words, but I think it's because of the text which you all will talk about, the prayer to the Spirit. Let me just say something about Dan Iverson because Dan Iverson was highly regarded and appreciated in Presbyterian circles, especially in Florida, because he ministered in Miami which was not the kind of place that you would normally think Presbyterians would be. But because of his work in Miami, in his particular church, which was Shenandoah Presbyterian, but also because they founded about five daughter churches when he was there. He was responsible for that, so they got a very strong foothold in Miami and in Florida the Presbyterian church has actually been pretty strong. And I think due, a good bit, to what he has done. And I was in the Shenandoah Presbyterian church when I was much younger, our college choir sang there one time, and it was not long after he had left the church so there was a great fondness of him and a great appreciation of his ministry at the Shenandoah Church. Then the whole neighborhood changed after the Cuban exodus and so many Cuban people came into Florida. And these were some wonderful folks who came, immigrated — physicians, lawyers — really, really excellent folks as far as training is concerned. And so the neighborhood changed and the church didn't adjust initially to this and so they lost a lot of their membership. I think now they have ministered to the neighborhood and they have a different kind of strength. But anyway, the church itself for a long time was not only an evangelical and evangelistic church, but also a church that sent a lot of its young men into the ministry. So a lot of men who were of a certain generation came out of Shenandoah Presbyterian Church and so it had an unusually strong influence on the Presbyterian denomination.

**Dr. Duncan:** Florida was a very Presbyterian state and typically conservative. Same amongst the Southern Baptists. Florida Southern Baptists were very strong in the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1970s and 80s and remain so today. So it's very interesting. As you say, you don't think of Miami and south Florida as a sort of Christian stronghold for theologically conservative folks, but it has been and you're also right, a number of remarkable Presbyterian churches in the city of Miami and then on the outskirts and then all the way up to Fort Lauderdale you can think of a number of significant people who have ministered there over the years.

Bill, as you were talking about the song, a couple of things popped into my mind. One, it is a chorus but it is a chorus that sounds like a hymn. The structure of the very simple melody is hymn-like, more so than some choruses that you hear. You know the choruses that were written in the 1960's and 70's sound much less like a hymn than this chorus does. It's chorus you can see it and hear it being used in an evangelistic rally, you can see it under a tent with sawdust on the floor, but you can also see this chorus being sung in a very stately, traditional, Baptist or Methodist or Presbyterian church and fitting in perfectly with the hymnody being used in those particular places. So there's a sort of a hymnic quality, I think, even to the melody. But I also agree with you, I think the words of it have contributed to its staying power as well. It's simple. It's focused on the

work of the Holy Spirit. Anybody that's, you know, having the words dealing with their heart knows that the Holy Spirit is going to have to deal with their heart for the Word to get through and I think both of those things contribute to its longevity.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well musically, one thing that helps it compliment the words, or makes it compliment the words, it starts out with a prayer to the Holy Spirit to fall fresh on me. So it says that. But then when it gets to what you're asking the Holy Spirit specifically to do, it slows down. It has these four phrases — “break me, melt me, mold me, and fill me” — and so it's a useful musical device to slow down like that and to put emphasis on the essence of the prayer.

**Dr. Duncan:** Now apparently he wrote the melody. Is that your understanding, that the melody is something Iverson himself composed?

**Dr. Wymond:** Because he was inspired in a service, an evangelistic service, and then a Baptist came along, a very important one whose name is Balus McKinney. McKinney was important in Baptist hymnal circles and so he put the harmony to this.

**Dr. Duncan:** And so Dan wrote the melody in 1926 and then apparently modified the melody slightly in 1929 and then McKinney came on a little bit later and did the harmonization for it that finds its way into our various hymnals and such. But I imagine that it was a while before it got into hymnals. Do you know when it first appeared in a hymnal?

**Dr. Wymond:** I think fairly late actually. The hymnal that we use, which was done around 1990, is the first that I can recall actually using this otherwise it was in chorus books or just circulated around us.

**Dr. Duncan:** Yeah. I can remember singing this hymn in church in the 1960s and 70s, or this chorus at church in the 60s or 70s, and I'm trying to think how we did it — whether they just had the words printed in the bulletin and everybody sort of knew the tune to sing. I can't remember how we did it but I can definitely remember singing this song.

**Dr. Thomas:** Interestingly I think, in Britain in the 1970s, you know this was associated at least in the circles I moved in — Calvinistic, Reformed, either Baptist or Presbyterian — you know this was associated with the charismatic movement, a prayer for the Spirit to fall on us. And it was also associated with chorus singing that was not particularly approved of in some of the circles that I moved in, in the 70's. Nowadays in Britain you'll find it everywhere, but I do recall, you know, those who would criticize chorus singing if this one would be the one they would latch on to.

**Dr. Duncan:** Isn't that interesting.

**Dr. Thomas:** Because I think in Anglican circles it became fairly popular in the 70's and I certainly remember singing it at Christian Union meetings in university and this would have been '71-2-3-4 time. Did Dan Iverson write anything else or just this?

**Dr. Duncan:** I'm sure he did, but I just, nothing that I've sung.

**Dr. Wymond:** I've never seen anything.

**Dr. Duncan:** Derek, the information that we have on background of the chorus tells of the context in which Iverson wrote the music and the song and maybe you want to share with the listening audience a little bit about that.

**Dr. Thomas:** He had heard a sermon on the Holy Spirit during an evangelism crusade by the George Stephans evangelistic team in Orlando, Florida in 1926 — the text that's printed in the Trinity Hymnal, Ephesians 3:19, "That you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God," that's the text that's printed on it. And it's these four prayers, requests — "break me, melt me, mold me, fill me." I suppose first of all we should say something about hymns that particularly address the Holy Spirit. You know we talk about that in prayer sometimes. Is it right to address the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit separately. And of course the answer to that is "Yes" so long as we are thoroughly Trinitarian in the way that we do that. We can transgress in a heartbeat of course. There are some boundary markers here that we need to be careful of. But all of our hymnbooks have sections on God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And this one is a prayer. It's very personal. You can't sing this without intensely feeling, I think, the very personal nature of it.

**Dr. Duncan:** But Derek, even before we get to the four specific intercessions or petitions or requests that are lifted up in the middle of the line, let's go back to the first one and talk just a little bit about some of the suspicions that this was charismatic that you might have heard in the circles of Baptist and Reformed and Presbyterian and otherwise in Britain. "Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me" is the first request and talk about that. That obviously in some settings would sound like it was some sort of a request for another experience at Pentecost or some extraordinary gifting, but not necessarily, so tell us about that.

**Dr. Thomas:** There are two fairly distinctive movements in the twentieth century that we're very familiar with. One would be the Keswick Movement which has its origins in the nineteenth century, which has at its core, an idea of complete surrender, a definitive work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to another level of Christian experience and Christian obedience and Christian consecration. And certainly these words would readily tie in with that kind of thought that you're asking the Spirit to take me, to fall afresh on me, because my level of Christian experience has been a sort-of sub-par level and I just want it to go to something where the fight and the struggle is no more and I'm at peace and lost in the realm

of the Spirit. It was something of that nature and it was very common in the 1920s and 30s and 40s and there's no hint as far as I can tell that Dan Iverson is coming from that school of thought. Although I think holiness movements and consecration movements were certainly abroad in the 20s and 30s.

**Dr. Duncan:** And in the circuits of the Moody Bible Institute and of course Dan studied there before going to Columbia Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Thomas:** So any theological point of view that suggests that we can come to a state where we don't have to fight any more, where we experience whatever you call it — complete surrender in the Spirit — and I'm not denying that some Christians for a season do experience a measure of tranquility and peace with God and with their circumstances. But there were movements that suggested there were two kinds of Christians and there were the ordinary, run-of-the-mill kind of Christians and then there were the consecrated ones who had experienced this baptism of the Spirit.

**Dr. Wymond:** It's interesting how in later years there has sort of been a cyclical kind of thing that came almost every, maybe generation, where there would be a renewed attention on the Holy Spirit and special work that He was doing and so on like that. I remember when I was in seminary for instance, there was this kind of thing where whole services for days would be Holy Spirit focused and all the attention and talk would be of the Holy Spirit and so on like that.

**Dr. Wymond:** But because the Scripture specifically says that the Holy Spirit is not going to be pointing so much to Himself but talking of Christ and pointing to Christ, there's always that kind of a balance I thought that one wanted to maintain.

**Dr. Thomas:** And some of our listeners would be familiar for example with biographical, autobiographical statements from Jim Packer, you know that he moved in those circles as a teenager and young college student and it almost drove him to despair to try and find that second blessing, the tranquility, the consecration, surrender. And John Owen was the one who saved him and John Owen's magisterial treatment on the Holy Spirit.

**Dr. Wymond:** Who was John Owen?

**Dr. Thomas:** John Owen was a seventeenth century Puritan and a —

**Dr. Duncan:** Vice-chancellor of Oxford, which is, in the British system, the guy who's really the head. In America we would call him the president of the institution because the chancellor of all British higher education institutions is always some royalty. It's either the king or the queen or a crown prince or something like this, but the vice chancellors are the ones who really run things.

**Dr. Wymond:** And so John Owen's writings are still available?

**Dr. Thomas:** They are, and these days they're available in contemporary English, a number of his volumes, including a brief synopsis in contemporary English of his treatment of the Holy Spirit is available. And I think the main thing that Jim Packer saw in reading John Owen on the Holy Spirit was that we never ever get beyond the fight in this world, that to our dying day, I mean our final breath in this world will be one in which we will be caught in that spiritual warfare between the good that we would and the evil that we would not do. And there's this constant tension within us and we never get beyond that in this world, though we may, in God's mercy, experience times of great triumph over sin and times even of great tranquility in God's mercy.

**Dr. Wymond:** And so what are, if we're in a fight, what are the weapons available to us?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, one of the weapons is of course the ministry of the Spirit indwelling us and witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, as Paul mentions in Romans 8. But there are also the weapons of prayer, all prayer, and the weapon of the promises of Scripture, and the weapons of the means of grace, church attendance, listening to sermons, fellowship with other struggling, embattled Christians.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well let me ask you, let me direct you to the four specific requests with regard to the Spirit, given that the Spirit is that prime gift of God to us for sanctification in the battle against sin. Iverson has us pray four things in an interesting order, asking the Spirit to break us, to melt us, us mold us, and to fill us. And with the backdrop of Ephesians 3 in mind, let's talk about that just a little bit. Why would we pray to be broken by the Spirit?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well actually in 2010, the word broken in Christian circles is a very contemporary sort of word to use and we come across a lot of Christians who talk about having been broken, and the state of being broken, the state of being humbled, because Jesus spoke in the upper room to the disciples, the last thing He said to the disciples was the promise of the Spirit, the other Comforter — His personal representative agent who would minister Christ to the disciples when He had ascended. The Spirit who indwelled Jesus now indwells us. Who knows Jesus better than the Holy Spirit?

**Dr. Duncan:** Right.

**Dr. Thomas:** But He spoke of the Spirit as coming to reprove the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment, of sin and or righteousness and of judgment. And Peter seems on the Day of Pentecost in his Pentecost sermon, to actually take those words and say, "That's what the Spirit has done today in Jerusalem." That would take me too long to explain, but I do think Peter is

remembering those three things and I think you see them in the sermon that he preaches on Pentecost.

**Dr. Duncan:** Individually, experientially, especially if someone has been in the grips of a sin, there has to be at some point — it's not necessarily dramatic and punctiliar and one time; sometimes it can happen very gradually — but at some point you have to be broken of that sin and you have to recognize your own brokenness by it and your own rebellion against God. And that's really so often where great spurts of spiritual growth begin.

**Dr. Thomas:** Right. I noticed that you are interpreting it in a very reformed direction.

**Dr. Duncan:** Hahaha!

**Dr. Thomas:** I suspect that most people interpret break me in the surrender mode — break me in my pride, break me so that it is no longer I but You, break me so that I disappear and everything becomes You. It's, "Help me surrender to You." I suspect that's what most people think when they say break me. I do think that it's a perfectly valid and much needed prayer on any day of the week to ask the Spirit to break us of our pride. And I think that's how I would view it, to break me of my pride, my belief in self competent and self salvation.

**Dr. Duncan:** Right. Now let me switch to the end because we're almost out of time. What about fill me? Now that's language right out of Ephesians 3. What's the best way for us to understand that petition, for the Spirit to fill us?

**Dr. Thomas:** I do think the New Testament teaches us that all Christians, in one sense, are filled with the Spirit. So it's not that some Christians only have half of the Spirit or three-quarters of the Spirit. I think it's the picture of Psalm 23 — "My cup overflows." And it's a constant filling. Keep on filling me with the Spirit. But what does the filling of the Spirit do? I think that it enables us, it encourages us, it strengthens us, it enables us to live out our Christian lives in gratitude to the grace of the Gospel that we've experienced. It's a prayer that the Spirit, who represents Jesus and represents to us what Jesus has done, it's Gospel-centered. It says bring me back to the Gospel.

**Dr. Duncan:** Let's let that be the last word, Bill. It's time for us to hear, "Spirit of the Living God" by Dan Iverson.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me;  
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.  
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.  
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.  
Spirit of the living God, move among us all;  
make us one in heart and mind, make us one in love:

humble, caring, selfless, sharing.  
Spirit of the living God, fill our lives with love.

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

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