

Hymns of the Faith: “For All the Saints”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
With
Dr. J. 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: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is “Hymns of the Faith,” and I'm Ligon Duncan with my good friend, Derek Thomas and with Dr. Bill Wymond to discuss great hymns of the Christian faith.

The Christian faith is a singing faith, and we have had a delightful time over the last number of months studying together some of the greatest hymns of the last 1900 years. And today we are looking at a hymn, the text of which was written in the 19th century; and the tune that is probably most associated with this text now was written in the early part of the 20th century by one of my favorite modern composers. *For All the Saints* is the name of this hymn.

I guess, Derek, that this has come to be very much associated, in our congregation, with funeral services. It's very often sung at services where Christian believers are being laid to rest, and their families are singing with hope in their hearts about that which is to come. And it's a song which really stretches over the whole of the Christian life, looking at the trials and tribulations and labors and struggles and all the way to the end, the consummation—not only the coming of Christ but the establishment of his reign. And it was written by a great Anglican bishop, William Walsham How. Tell us a little bit about the background and the writer.

Dr. Thomas: Well, yes, I'd be glad to do that; but before I do that...This is your favorite hymn.

You quote this a lot. And although this is a hymn that is well-known to me, and I've sung it many, many times in Britain; it wasn't until I heard you quote it often that it become (for me) perhaps my most favorite hymn now. I just think it spans a redemptive, historical timeline from the martyrs and the apostles in one of the

stanzas and all the way through to heaven, and that gorgeous description of the saints marching into heaven.

Dr. Duncan: And describes Christian experience in such an evocative way, including in some stanzas that we don't have in our hymn book that I'm sometimes jealous to sing.

Dr. Thomas: William Walsham How, lived almost, spanned almost the entirety of the 19th century—a bishop. By all accounts, a very archetypal Anglican bishop is how I think of him—sweet and tender and a little portly, perhaps. I have no idea what weight he was, but that's my impression of William Walsham How. He was often called “the poor man's bishop.”

Dr. Duncan: And there's a reason for that.

Dr. Thomas: Because of his love and concern for the poor.

Dr. Duncan: He spent a great portion of his ministry apparently laboring amongst the urban poor in his district.

Dr. Thomas: He was born in Shrewsbury.

Dr. Duncan: Which is where for people that don't know English geography? They're in London...

Dr. Thomas: North Yorkshire, north of...Think *All Creatures Great and Small*, if you can think of the veterinaries in *All Creatures Great and Small*. There is Shrewsbury—it's right there. Either his mother or his father (and I haven't been able to work this out)—but one of them, I think, came from County Mayo; so there are Irish connections, of course in the 19th century when Ireland was still part of Great Britain. He was ordained in 1846. He had curacies in Kidderminster, which is the place, of course, that we associate with...

Dr. Duncan: Richard Baxter. I didn't know that. I did not know that.

Dr. Thomas: And he became a rector in Whittington, a rural dean in Oswestry (south of Manchester, north of Birmingham), and an honorable—Is it an honorable canon of St. Asaph? These are all very famous...

Dr. Duncan: He's moving up the, sort of the chain of command in Anglican polity—from a smaller charge to larger charges and to higher positions within those charges.

Dr. Thomas: Eventually moving to Bedford which included east London and eventually became the bishop of Wakefield. It is said that he was totally without ambition in the worldly sense—declined the offer of the See of Manchester

(position of bishop) without even mentioning it to his wife. And later refused also one of the most distinguished posts in the Anglican church, the bishopric of Durham, the third ranking bishopric, with an income, it was said at least double and maybe treble of what he was currently earning.

He was a master, it is said, of the pastoral art. His bishop's staff had engraved on it "Pasce verbo, Pasce vita"—"Feed with the Word, Feed with the Life." But it's his hymns—and there are many, many hymns that we associate with William Walsham How: *Soldiers of the Cross Arise, O Word of God Incarnate, We Give Thee but Thine Own*. These are all some of his hymns.

Dr. Duncan: And still sung today with great appreciation. And this text is not only glorious but the tune that Ralph Vaughan Williams wed to it is glorious.

Dr. Thomas: Well, yes if this is my favorite hymn, certainly Ralph Vaughan Williams' music would be very high up there for me, quintessentially English. His nine symphonies—I think the 5th is my favorite. His music to *Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) is a kind of opera. It's not really an opera. His settings of Walt Whitman's poetry, which you don't like...

Dr. Duncan: It's not one of my favorite tunes.

Dr. Thomas: But this tune once heard is just unforgettable. And I'm not sure why that is. I'm waiting to hear Bill Wymond on that.

Dr. Duncan: Weigh in, Bill. Tell us about the music.

Dr. Wymond: Well, Ralph Vaughn Williams was a master of melody as well as, I think, symphonic form. And, as you have said, he is considered just quintessential English.

Dr. Thomas: And as we speak, I should add that Ursula, his wife, died this week. I saw her obituary yesterday.

Dr. Duncan: When we were in London for the Furman singers' summer tour in 1981, several of our folks looked up Mrs. Vaughn Williams in the phone book and rang her up and asked if they could just come by and meet her. And she was very gracious to have these music students come by her house and entertain them with tea and told them stories about her husband. She was very, very gracious. I don't know how old she would have been there. She wrote some of the libretto for some of his pieces. And, of course, I love his Christmas piece, *Hodie*; and she wrote some of the verse for that particular musical piece. But at any rate, Bill, tell us about...

Dr. Wymond: Well, what I was thinking was that his interest in the folk songs of Great Britain which he collected assiduously and also his interest in specifically

carol tunes. He published a whole book of those with Gustaf Holst. Probably all of these things informed his tune writing. But what is interesting to me about this tune is it is very much a 20th century tune. It's not contemporary in the sense that it has unusual harmonies or odd intervals or anything like that. But compared to the tune that was first wedded to these words, it is so very strong. I'm going to play just a little bit of...

Dr. Thomas: Before you play the first note, it comes in on the second beat. Is that right? I mean the organ always plays a note and then you sing.

Dr. Wymond: There's a down beat, and then you come in. So it doesn't come in on the strong beat, but I think maybe that's because he wanted to emphasize the word "saint"—"for all the *saints*," and that comes on the first beat of the measure which is the strongest beat.

And so let me just do a little bit of this tune. And I want to compare it to the tune that originally it was sung to.

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

That's a little strong.

[Dr. Wymond continues to play.]

So that is the tune of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

But let me show you what it originally was sung to. This is a Joseph Barnby tune.

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

I won't do the whole tune. Very 19th century; very "Barnby," because he is the one who wrote *Now the Day is Over*. And his tunes are very safe and not really exciting.

Dr. Duncan: Not to say boring!

Dr. Wymond: But Vaughan Williams' tune is wonderful. And it is not particularly easy. Congregations take a while to learn this tune, partly because of that down beat. That always throws them until they get used to that. And it has a pretty big stretch of intervals. It goes at least an octave or more, but the tone is so marshy and so uplifting that once a congregation gets hold of the tune then it becomes one of their favorites.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, in the left-hand, there is a running, flowing marshy line. Play that for us.

Dr. Wymond: There is a marching line:

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

And I have to tell you when you play this on the organ, it's fun to do that because you can slightly detach that and add to the effect and the feeling of marching right along and progressing...

Dr. Duncan: Right. But it flows all through, and it's almost connected—As you cycle through each of the stanzas there is a connectedness to it. It's almost like that line keeps on going even though you have this very, at some points, almost a syncopated feel in the right hand. You have this very steady thing going on in the left hand. And it does give that feel of a march which I think is so appropriate to the text, because you are walking through the whole. You're marching through the whole of the Christian life all the way to the consummation. And so the very motion that's going in the left hand gives you that feel.

Dr. Wymond: I agree with you. And it propels the song on and is the connecting musical link, I think, to keep it moving so that this makes a wonderful procession. And so often is sung as the first hymn or even an entrance hymn at funerals.

Dr. Duncan: So true. Now tell us why does it have a 20th century sound to it? I mean you've given us a musical demonstration of a very standard kind of Victorian 19th century English hymn or tune and this one. But tell us why does it have a 20th century sound?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I don't want to over-dramatize this, but it is sort of daring in the way that it starts, because it starts on a high note and descends down the scale.

[Dr. Wymond plays tune.]

And it has such a memorable and strong tune to it as well, that that is more adventuresome than the (as I had already said) Victorian hymns which proceeded it which were very safe melodically—or the very strong corral tunes which do have a boldness about them but generally don't have these very large leaps, or do not ascend and descend down the scale the way that this particular one does.

Dr. Duncan: Now Vaughan Williams had—I mean he had an agenda in writing hymns. He had some complaints with some of the tunes that were wed to what he thought were outstanding texts in the Anglican hymnals. And he wanted to contribute some tunes that would be of a matching quality to those outstanding texts. And he felt like that there were a number of tunes that were being utilized that were not sort of showcasing the text or helping the text or helping the congregational singing in the way that they ought to. And so this is one of those

tunes that he wrote to try to improve sort of what tunes were being used in Anglican hymnody.

Dr. Wymond: I think that the hymn originally was probably published around 1864. I'm not sure of that date. But then Vaughan Williams contributed this tune when he was putting together a new hymnal around 1906. So this is an early 20th century tune.

But the thing that sort of fascinates me about this is that he would have such a zeal for hymns, because (as we know) Ralph Vaughan Williams didn't manifest a real interest in the life of the church. He loved the music of the church and liked to write music for the church, but didn't seem himself to want to partake much.

Dr. Duncan: And that really is remarkable. It's always struck me that this has happened from time to time where composers show an uncanny ability in their selection of text to grasp exactly the theological thing that you would want to emphasize, even though they themselves are not invested. They don't personally embrace that theology. Yet they are extremely gifted from an artistic standpoint. They are musically gifted, and they are able to wed that text with just what it needs in order to emphasize the very thing that a consecrated Christian would want to emphasize. And Vaughan Williams is one of the very first ones that comes to mind when I think about that phenomenon. I'm not sure that I can explain it, but I certainly see that happening over and over in musical history.

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think that there might be two explanations and you certainly can check me on this. One of them is common grace—that God gives great gifts of music both to the believer and the non-believer. The rain rains on everyone, you know, graciously. So he gives these gifts, and even unbeknownst to them (or sometimes beknownst) their gifts are used for his service in the church. And so I would argue that even though he did not manifest an interest in Christianity that his gifts came from God and were used in spite of him; and therefore we ought to accept these as gifts to ourselves for worship.

Dr. Duncan: Surely that's true. Even as you spoke, I thought too—no doubt Vaughan Williams himself was the benefactor of a tremendous musical legacy that had been bequeathed to him by the church in his own experience growing up in England. I mean in England there is—you know even today you have the hymns program on the BBC, and that lots of people that never darken the door of a church.

Dr. Thomas: Sure, sure. And, of course, he was educated in Trinity College, Cambridge where as an undergraduate he would have been attending worship services with one imagines choirs singing the Cranmerian texts (from Archbishop Thomas Cranmer). And then at the Royal College of Music in London—And there are Stanford and Perry—all are noted again for writing music for the church to some extent—Perry especially. And I suppose there is that love for—and this text

is the *te deum* behind it. And part of Cranmer's liturgy had prayers for the martyrs and the evangelists and the apostles and so on. And they appear, not in all the stanzas that we sing, but in the original text of this hymn. So it was a classic text that stood behind this hymn; so maybe that...

Dr. Duncan: Well, that—certainly that—but I was just thinking too of the musical legacy that he had absorbed. I mean not only as an outstanding musician but just as someone nominally attending Anglican services in those days. You would have been treated to—you know, all the way from those incredible Elizabethan pieces of music that would have been sung certainly in the larger churches and cathedrals in England, but there was a rich musical heritage. And I think that's one reason why he felt that some of the late 19th century stuff fell short of the quality that it ought to have risen to in light of the longer history of English hymnody and of English church music. And so not only do you have outstanding musicians—and those like Perry who himself was writing fairly daring tunes for his time. But you just have this legacy of the church. It does remind us, doesn't it, of some of the residue that Christianity gives to a culture even if the culture doesn't embrace the fullness of the gospel. There are all sorts of side benefits that are being given to a culture, and in this case it came back and benefited the church, I think.

Dr. Wymond: I think so, and one of the last things to go in a liturgical church, for instance, would be historic liturgy based in the Scriptures and based on good solid theology. So a church may have long ago abandoned a belief in orthodox Christianity but still every Sunday members will hear that Christianity because of the retention of the text.

Dr. Duncan: And be tremendously attached to it, as well. The text—we've been referring to the text over and over, but we haven't given you many of the words of it. So I do want to draw attention to just a few of the stanzas, because there is some extraordinary lines in this hymn.

It begins “For all the saints who from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed, Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest. Alleluia! Alleluia!” And so it is a hymn of thanksgiving to God for the saints—for all the saints. And it stresses—it stretches through the whole earth, and as you said, Derek, it takes the root of the *te deum*—taking us all the way back to the apostles and the prophets and the martyrs and all the way up through today and our own struggles, and then points us to the great consummation and the coronation of Jesus Christ. And who better to write a coronation piece than an Englishman! I mean there's no one that does pomp and circumstance better.

And so you move through—“Thou was their rock, their fortress, and their might; Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight,”—Another of my favorite lines in the hymn. You are reminded of that Hebrews- theidea of the Captain of our salvation in that passage in Jesus Christ —“Thou, in the darkness drear, their

one true light. Alleluia! Alleluia! O may Thy soldiers faithful, true, and bold, fight as the saints who nobly fought of old, and win with them the victor's crown of gold. Alleluia! Alleluia!"

A stanza, that is not found in our hymnal, reminds us that when our arms are weak from battle, that stills in our ear a distant triumph song, and hearts are strong again, and arms are strong. It's a beautiful picture of the way certain truths that the Scriptures tell us—that we learn in the gospel—strengthen us for the fight.

The final two stanzas are among the most uplifting in modern hymnody. "But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day; the saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of Glory passes on His way. Alleluia! Alleluia!"

And so he's asking you to picture the scene of consummation in which the King, the Lord Jesus Christ, is marching in triumphal procession in victory in that great day.

And then he finally describes that scene with these words: "From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia! Alleluia!" "Praise to the Lord!" those words say from Latin, out of the Hebrew.

And so it's a tremendously uplifting hymn. It's no wonder that Christians love to sing this hymn at funerals when they are thinking of the last things; when they are thinking of their departed loved ones. But it's also a hymn, I think, that instills in us a tremendous energy and comfort for the living of these days as we fight our battles in the Christian life.

Dr. Thomas: I like it too, because it's a very Puritan, Bayan-esque theme, masculine, Mr. Great-Heart going to do battle. There's a stanza that's missing in our own version of it. "And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long; stills on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. Alleluia! Alleluia!" And those lines are, from a literary point of view, so evoking of all kinds of things—and *Lord of the Rings* comes into mind. But that depiction of Christianity as a fight.

Dr. Duncan: Mr. Great-Heart and the sword that's cleaving to his hand that we've just recently covered as we've gone through the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Dr. Thomas: Right. And as Mr. Valiant for Truth is on the edge of the river, he hears the triumph song from the other side—the horns of victory. And I just think that's a very masculine, but also biblical portrayal, of what the Christian life is.

Dr. Duncan: Let's hear this great hymn, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: This morning singing *For All the Saints*, we have the choir of Trinity College, Cambridge.

For all the saints who from their labors rest,
who thee by faith before the world confessed,
thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might;
thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;
thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

O may thy soldiers faithful, true, and bold,
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
and win with them the victor's crown of gold.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave, again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blessed.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
the saints triumphant rise in bright array;
the King of glory passes on his way.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

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