

Hymns of the Faith: “If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee”

Psalm 55

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 First Presbyterian Church. The minister of First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan, and I give you now Dr. Ligon Duncan for “Hymns of the Faith.”

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, here with friends Bill Wymond and Derek Thomas to continue our discussion about the great hymns of the faith.

You know, Derek and Bill, it's often said — in fact, it's become a dictum in the history of the church — that how you pray reflects how you believe, and so there's a little saying, “*Lex orandi, lex credendi*” that floats around, and has floated around in the church for a long time. But it's no less true that how you sing reflects how you believe, and even affects how you believe. So not only are the great hymns of the faith something which recall to our mind treasures that have been given to us over the last 2,000 years of Christian history (oftentimes with deep attachments of personal meaning in our own history of walking with God), but they also have shaped to some extent the way we believe, and reflect in worship what we think is most important in this world and what we believe about God as we learn it in the Bible. And so the hymns of the church often are faith-shaping as well as faith-reflecting. Am I right or wrong about that, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Oh, you're always right! This is so very true. And it reminded me of something that you say I quote a lot. I can't remember the first time I heard it, but John Owen, the Puritan, once wrote that one of the indicators of our spiritual condition of our communion with God is often what do we think about when we're not thinking about anything in particular...what is the default? And if our default is singing, and singing God's praise, singing hymns...you find yourself walking along and you're whistling a tune, but it's a very famous hymn tune. And we've all had those wonderful experiences of coming out of church and this glorious hymn tune and its accompanied words is just stuck in our head. It's a wonderful experience to have, I always think.

Dr. Duncan: We've talked about the texts, and the history of the author and composer of the hymn, and we've looked at the music, and that's what we're going to do today for an outstanding hymn of the Christian church. We recently looked at *Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven*, a hymn that was written in the 1680's, and so we're going to turn the clock back about forty years to a hymn that was written in 1641. The text was written in 1641; I think the tune may have come a few years later. And it is one of those interesting hymns where the text, or the lyric or the words of the hymn, are composed by the same person that composed the music. And Martin Luther did that, and there are a number of notable hymn writers over the history of hymnody that have done that, but not that many. Most hymns come up by way of collaboration — someone writing a text and someone writing a tune.

But this is an absolutely outstanding hymn that has comforted I don't know how many tens of thousands of Christians in the German-speaking and English-speaking world, and no doubt in the Christian world even beyond those. It's called *If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee*. Derek, tell us just a little bit about the author and composer of *If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee*.

Dr. Thomas: Yes. The author is Georg Neumark, the son of Michael Neumark, a clothier. He is German, and some of you may already be humming the tune in your heads. *If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee* is married to a well-known tune, and it has that very Germanic feel to it.

It's an astonishing story. It's one of these hymns based on an incident in his life, and a demonstration of God's providence in his life, that the text is taken from. It's from that very wonderful text in Psalm 55, "Cast your cares upon the Lord, and He will sustain you." He's on his way. He's a young man studying in school, in what would have been called a *Gymnasium* in Schleusingen and another one in Gotha. But he's evidently going to what we would call college or university, and he's making his way there with a group of, probably, young men.

It's fascinating. His father was a clothier, so his money — at least most of his money — has been sewn into his clothes, which is an interesting little detail demonstrating how risky a process it was, just moving about. And he is set upon by thieves...bandits, robbers. It's 1641. In British history, that puts it right smack in the middle of Puritan England, Westminster Assembly (1643). In American history, just after the Pilgrim fathers, if you want to put it in some sort of context here. And it's Christmastime. It's Michaelmas Fair in Leipzig, and he's set upon by these bandits. He's robbed of everything that he has except this money that's sewn into his clothes and his prayer book.

Now he doesn't have enough money to go to where he was going, and so he goes back and seems to wander from friend to friend, from town to town, just trying to get a job. And eventually he comes across a family in Kiel (which we

think is on the coast of Germany). And the tutor of this family has absconded. We're not quite sure why, but he's gone, disappeared. And Neumark gets the job of tutoring this family. His intentions, we think, were to study law, and it's out of this process, out of this account of God's providence in his life...God kept him, provided for him...kept him for a good while without employment as he went from place to place trying to find a job. And he composes this marvelous hymn based on this text, *If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee*.

Dr. Duncan: Go ahead and read the first two stanzas of the hymn, because many people remember that opening line. It is memorable. That's not the way we talk now, but that language beautifully conveys to us what he's saying. And when you read those first two stanzas in light of the story you've just told, it gives a whole new perspective on this great hymn.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, and we know it of course in the English translation by Catherine Winkworth, and some of our listeners may well remember it from Mendelssohn's setting of the text in the oratorio, *St. Paul*:

If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
And hope in Him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days:
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the Rock that naught can move.

What can these anxious cares avail thee,
These never ceasing moans and sighs?
What can it help, if thou bewail thee
O'er each dark moment as it flies?
Our cross and trials do but press
The heavier for our bitterness.

Dr. Duncan: So the opening stanza expresses trust in God in the midst of trials and the importance of it, but the second stanza gives you an insight into what the heart struggles were he was having in the midst of this. I mean, you can imagine! You're on your way to university; you lose all your money that's going to allow you to be educated. This is going to have a dramatic impact on the whole of your life. And he's wrestling with bitterness. And I think for people that are in the pews on Sunday mornings who are very tempted to think, "No one understands the struggle with bitterness that I'm having right now," to be able to open up your hymnal and say "Here is a friend in Christ who knows the struggle with bitterness." He's arguing with his soul about it, and he's pouring that out to God and he's asking for help. He's preaching to himself, he's exhorting himself to believe and trust in God, but he's honest in expressing the anxious cares, the struggles with bitterness, the moaning and the sighing and the grumbling and the complaining and the murmuring that so often goes on in the course of the trials

and tribulations of life. And we'll work through the text a little bit more, because it's very, very rich. But I'd like to ask Bill Wymond if he'd tell us just a little bit about this wonderful tune. It's got this minor sound that's got real weight and power to it.

Dr. Wymond: Well, you said it. The hymn starts off in a minor key, or minor mode, and I'll talk about that in a minute.

But what I wanted to point out was just the form of the hymn. It's a really simple form. It has this melody that is laid out in the first line, and then it's repeated again. So we say it's an "AA" kind of form. And then the second part of the hymn, which provides a different perspective or response to what is said in the first part, is the "B" form, we would say, and that takes a slightly different melodic approach.

But what I wanted to reflect on just a minute is just this melody. The thing that I like about this melody is that it is so closely matched to the thought that it's expressing. It is one of the wonderful German tunes that obviously has roots in the folk songs of the day. You know, it's interesting that today...well, from time to time I have people come to me and say, "I've written a song" or "I've written a tune." And when they play the song, or I play the song, it just sounds like every other song of the day! And for the most part there is nothing unique about the song, nothing memorable. Yes, it just sounds like every other song or every other hymn that they've heard all of their lives. And so there's nothing that I can see there that will make that tune stand out or will last.

But it's interesting that in these tunes, such as this particular one for *If Thou Suffer God...* it does sound very much like other tunes of the day. But as with any good tune, there is something there that is unique about it, first of all; a slightly different turn of the melody, or one unexpected note...something in it that makes it stand out from all other tunes, and also it has a memorable quality about it. If you sing the first part of this tune, and if people know that hymn, it immediately brings to mind the whole hymn to them. [Sings a phrase to demonstrate.] It's just like *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, or *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*. Immediately sounding just the first notes of it tells you that it is that tune; and yet, the tune is not really all that different from other tunes of the day. But there is uniqueness about it; there's something that is memorable about that tune.

Now this tune, as with most of the other tunes of this era, moves in what we call a "step-wise motion." There aren't a lot of unusual jumps in the melody, as you find in nineteenth and certainly in twentieth century hymns such as *For All the Saints*. That has some pretty big jumps...and we'll talk about that hymn some day.

But the hymn, as we were saying, starts off in a minor key — that means a minor

mode. The scale is different from a major mode, which makes the hymn have sort of a serious and somewhat sad or melancholy sound to it, and that is in the A form. And the seriousness of the questions posed really makes this minor key appropriate. In the folk songs of the day, there would have been a serious love song, for instance, that would have had a sadness about what was happening in the love life of the composer. And so they would choose to use a minor key to reflect that seriousness or that sadness.

But in the last part of this hymn, it actually moves to a major key, and you get the brightness of the response that comes from this. Perhaps in the first part it will be a proposition, 'If you just allow God to guide you.' And then in the last part it will say 'God never forsakes those who put trust in Him,' and so it's in a major key. It reflects perfectly the turn of thought there, the turn of phrase, and the promise that you can count on. It is just underlined by the major key.

In the very last part it goes back to minor because it has to, but it still has a very solid, reassuring feel to it. I'm just fascinated by what makes a good tune; and again, what makes a good tune I think, in these hymns and in all hymns, is that it is not all that different than any other tune, but it has something that is creative or something that is different, or something that is unique about it.

Dr. Duncan: You know, Bill, it strikes me, because as we talked about *Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven*, and the roots that that tune may well have had in the folk tradition and this one as well, very often people will make a jump that since hymn writers of old would often pull in tunes from the folk tradition around them, that therefore all of our singing in the church should follow the style of popular music in our own time. And that is, I think, a categorical mistake that's being made today.

It's one thing to adopt melodies and patterns from the folk music of your time and then adapt them to a tradition of congregational singing, where certain rules or laws or guidelines are being followed by the composer in order to make that musical line maximally useful for a congregation. It's another thing to say that we're going to sort of copy the style of whatever's going on around us. Anything you want to comment on about that?

How is it possible at the same time to utilize the best things that are happening around you in your own contemporary context of composing, but also making sure that you're writing something musically that's helpful for congregational singing?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I don't want to venture too far off from what you're saying, but I do want to make this observation. To write a good tune or a good melody is the most difficult thing for a composer to do. And many composers will cite certain other composers who they think have a special gift for melody, and it goes across the spectrum of musical eras. A lot of people thought that Schubert

had a unique ability to write wonderful melodies. I think Bach did, for sure. In the Romantic era, Rachmaninoff is another one. His melodies are so memorable.

But nevertheless, we are children of the era in which we live, and if we are writing melodies, our melodies are going to inculcate some of the melodic phrases that are used often. But I think to copy a style just to be copying the style of the melody of a contemporary melody is a mistake. I think that your melody ought to come out of the uniqueness of your own creativity, which will be influenced by the style of the day. But we have a big difference musically in our church music today from the era of this particular hymn. Back in the Baroque period out of which this came, there was little differentiation made between sacred and secular music. It all sounds pretty much alike. Bach wrote a lot of cantatas that were sacred; he wrote a few that were secular. One of them is called *The Coffee Cantata*, and if I played that without your knowing what the text was, you would just think it was another one of his sacred cantatas.

Dr. Thomas: Bach actually did write a cantata based on this tune.

Dr. Wymond: Yes. And so many of the others, absolutely. So we have to be careful because people, who know a little bit about music history, will point out the fact that for instance Luther used probably what was a popular song of the day for one of his serious hymns. And I think we have to inform ourselves with the information that they did not differentiate between secular and sacred as we do today, and so the effect on their hearers was not the same as it would be today. For instance, if we put Amazing Grace to the tune of *The House of the Rising Sun*, everybody immediately would know that there was something out of kilter with doing that.

Dr. Duncan: Well, as you say, it's been a common practice for composers to utilize melodic patterns from other works in the context with their own work, and that has nothing to do with using the style, *per se*. For instance, there is a very popular song that was sung in the late 1970's that was done in a pop style with a pop band behind it, but the melody was borrowed from Rachmaninoff. And the borrowing of that melody had nothing to do with borrowing the style of the orchestral arrangement that Rachmaninoff had set that melody in. On the other hand, if you're a *Star Wars* fan and you've listened to John Williams' compositions, you can go back and listen to Dvorak symphonies and see lines that John Williams has just ripped right out of Dvorak symphonies to write the melodic lines to some of the more famous songs from the sound track to *Star Wars*. And so borrowing melodies, that's a time-honored practice.

Dr. Wymond: That is, but the key for our generation is that we have to be more sensitive to the associational aspects of that. Herman Bavinck, in his book on missions, talks about how missionaries to South Sea Islands people were taking tunes out of their culture and using them with Christian words, and the natives...the folks came to them and finally said, "This is not working. We can't

do this, because those tunes were associated with pagan rituals and things, and we can't get that out of our minds. So it won't work for us.”

Dr. Duncan: This hymn has five stanzas to it, and roughly how long does it take to sing this hymn? Is it a five minute, four minute...?

Dr. Wymond: I would guess it's about three and a half minutes.

Dr. Duncan: In most of our hymnals, we don't have all the stanzas. There were something like seven stanzas, or maybe one more of that written to it. And so in between the second and third stanzas there are some other — by the way, beautiful — lines that Catherine Winkworth translates out of it. In fact, I'll share with you just a couple of those lines that you don't typically get in your English hymnbooks:

He knows the time of joy, and truly
will send it when He sees it meet.
When He has tried and purged thee throughly,
and finds thee free from all deceit,
He comes to thee all unaware,
and makes thee own His loving care.

By the way, you notice, just as Bill was talking about the AAB pattern, where you have this minor mode followed by a major mode. The minor mode reflects that first section where you're going through this trying and purging, and then suddenly the major mode comes in:

“He comes to thee all unaware,
And makes thee own His loving care.”

And so the musical pattern sings the song for you. It helps you sing those words with meaning. And Neumark, because he's writing the tune that goes along with this, is reflecting his text so helpfully.

Dr. Thomas: You know, forty years later he records in a diary this incident of the robbery, and he says about the writing of this hymn:

“Which good fortune coming suddenly, and as if falling from heaven, greatly rejoiced me. And on that very day I composed to the honor of my beloved Lord this hymn.”

And then he says,

“I had certainly cause enough to thank the Divine Compassion for such unlooked for grace shown to me.”

Dr. Duncan: Ah, and so you can see that line... 'it comes upon you all unaware.' You're not prepared for the blessing or the lesson or the encouragement that He comes with, and he's speaking this out of personal experience—the personal experience that he can remember forty years later, vividly. The text which says “If thou but suffer God to guide thee” is basically saying “If you will only allow God to guide you in these trials, in these hard places, in these difficult circumstances, He will ‘give you strength, whatever betide thee, and bear thee through the evil days.’”

He exhorts himself and you in stanza three,:

Only be still and wait His leisure
In cheerful hope, with heart content
To take whate'er thy Father's pleasure
And all-discerning love hath sent;
Nor doubt our inmost wants are known
To Him who chose us for His own.

It's a beautiful, beautiful text, and you're going to get the opportunity to hear the whole hymn right now:

[Soloist sings]

If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
And hope in Him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days:
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the Rock that naught can move.

What can these anxious cares avail thee,
These never-ceasing moans and sighs?
What can it help, if thou bewail thee
O'er each dark moment as it flies?
Our cross and trials do but press
The heavier for our bitterness.

Only be still, and wait His leisure
In cheerful hope, with heart content
To take whate'er thy Father's pleasure
And all-discerning love hath sent;
Nor doubt our inmost wants are known
To Him who chose us for His own.

All are alike before the Highest;
'Tis easy to our God, we know,

To raise thee up though low thou liest,
To make the rich man poor and low;
True wonders still by Him are wrought
Who setteth up and brings to naught.

Sing, pray, and keep His ways unswerving,
So do thine own part faithfully,
And trust His Word—though undeserving,
Thou yet shalt find it true for thee;
God never yet forsook at need
The soul that trusted Him indeed.

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