

Hymns of the Faith: “Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder”

Lamentations 3:22, 23

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 the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.”

Dr. Duncan: Thanks, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan with “Hymns of the Faith.” Good morning, Derek!

We’re continuing our study of some of the great hymns of the Christian church as we plunder our hymnal, this repository of the devotional treasures of the ages, on “Hymns of the Faith.” We’ve been able to span several hundred years now already in the first number of hymns that we’ve looked at. We’ve looked at a couple of hymns from the 1600’s, a couple from the 1700’s; we jumped all the way into the 1800’s and into the nineteenth century with the beautiful, beautiful Swedish gospel song, *Day by Day and with Each Passing Moment*. But now we’re back a few years. We’re back into the eighteenth century. We’re back into the 1700’s, actually towards the end of the 1700’s, the year 1774, with a hymn written by a great, great Christian who has had not only a tremendous contribution to our hymnals and to the Christian life, but a very important part of our Christian history, John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*. There will be very few people listening today who haven’t heard or sung or wept to *Amazing Grace*. John Newton wrote that hymn.

We’re going to be looking at his hymn *Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder*. It’s a wonderful hymn text set to a vigorous and joyful tune called ALL SAINTS OLD, which comes out of a very old German song book. We were talking off air before we came on this morning...no telling how old that tune is, and Bill Wymond will talk to us just a little bit about it in a few moments. I think you’ll recognize the tune, even if you’ve never sung it before, and even if you find it a little bit challenging to pick up, I think you’ll recognize the tune. But maybe it would be good to start with Derek telling us a little bit about John Newton, just in case you don’t know about John Newton. You may have learned a little bit about him if you

went and saw the movie *Amazing Grace*, about William Wilberforce and his lifelong quest to abolish the slave trade and then eventually slavery in Britain. Tell us a little bit about John Newton, Derek.

Dr. Thomas: Yes...where to begin and where to end in John Newton?! John Newton is by far and away one of the most important hymn writers, born of course right in the midst of what we would call The Great Awakening period, both in Britain and in New England in America. And we know him because of the collaboration that he eventually would undergo with another very famous hymn writer, William Cowper [*“God Moves in a Mysterious Way, His Wonders to Perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm”*]. Together Cowper and Newton wrote what we famously now know as the Olney Hymns. It was a period of about twenty years or so, maybe a little more.

This one that we're looking at today, *Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder*, seems to fall outside of that collaboration. We believe that collaboration ended in 1773 when Cowper experienced a terrible, terrible depression and tried to take his life.

Dr. Duncan: Can I just interrupt you and make the observation — and no doubt Bill Wymond will talk about this at some point — but it strikes me already that just with the number of hymns that we've looked at that the Lord has from time to time brought together really interesting collaborations between people that are really good at writing hymn texts, and people that are really good at either composing or combining really excellent tunes with those texts. We've seen it with Lina Sandell in Sweden, with Ahnfelt writing his tunes; we've seen it with the perfect combination of these hymns and tunes of some of the great German hymns; and now we're seeing it again with Newton and this collaboration with Cowper in the Olney Hymns, and we saw it with Watts as well. It's just interesting to see how the hymns that survive have been the product oftentimes of these sorts of collaborations that have been very fruitful with bringing texts and tunes together. Do you have any thoughts on that, Bill Wymond?

Dr. Wymond: Well, just last night I was reading about a very young hymn writer who was an American. His name was Palmer, and he wrote *“My Faith Looks Up to Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary....”* He was accosted on the street by Lowell Mason, who is a very famous American hymn tune writer, and he was asked to write a verse by Lowell Mason, and Lowell Mason said if you will do that, I will put a tune to it. And so that was kind of a freaky way that the two were joined together. More often it happened as with Phillips Brooks. When he was pastor of the Congregational church, I think, up in Massachusetts, and he wrote these words to the very familiar Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, he just turned to his organist (whose name was Redner) and asked him if he would write a tune for it. And so the collaboration came because of the close proximity. So that's another way it happened. But then there were those really fruitful combinations, especially in the gospel hymn days when you had men writing numbers of verses and then working with someone close to them to produce the

tunes.

Dr. Thomas: Newton, of course...you know we know him for *Amazing Grace* more than anything else, and *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*, and the hymn that I want sung at my funeral: "*How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds in a Believer's Ear*...it calms his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear."

He was born in 1725 and died — well, this is the year of the anniversary of his death, so he died in 1807. At about eleven, I think, he took his first journey on a ship with his father. His relationship with his father was difficult and tense, and by seventeen or eighteen he is ready to launch into a career. His father had all kinds of ideas for him, none of which transpired.

There is the extraordinary love affair that he has with his wife, Mary, whom he adored. It's one of those extraordinary stories of courtship and eventual marriage, and the things that he did even as an unregenerate foul-mouthed blaspheming man, there's a tenderness in his affections for Mary. God seemed to have prepared him, even in his unconverted days. And her loyalty to stick to him when there was very little, it seems to me, attractive about John Newton as an unconverted man.

We remember, of course, the famous incident—was it in 1746? When he's on his way back on a slave ship, having in his lifetime captured and brought to England thousands of slaves, many of whom of course would die in the journey from Africa to England, and being caught in this storm. And how he wakes up — the ship is breaking apart. He's been at sea for about eighteen months, it's not seaworthy any more, and they're in danger of breaking apart and drowning at sea. And as he's making his way up to the galley, the captain orders him back down again to get something or other and another man goes up, and a wave comes and takes this man away and he drowns. And that incident awakened in him...for the first time he cries to the Lord for mercy.

You know, on his tomb — of course this is all that needs to be known about John Newton:

"John Newton, cleric..."

—[I'd say "clark," but you'd say "clerk"]...

Dr. Duncan: ...Meaning cleric, meaning minister.

Dr. Thomas: Yes.

"...once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa,

was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy.”

And that's what's on his tombstone.

Dr. Duncan: The song is *Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder*. The text is beautiful.

“Let us love and sing and wonder, let us praise the Savior's name!
He has hushed the law's loud thunder, He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame:
He has washed us with His blood, He has brought us nigh to God.”

The first four stanzas are an exhortation from one believer to others to consider the gracious works of God and to respond to them accordingly.

The first stanza calls on us to love and sing and wonder at the work of the Lord Jesus, who has hushed the law's loud thunder. In other words, He's quenched the penalty of the Law. And judging from that description that you've just given us of John Newton, this is not something that is theoretical or abstract to him. It is deeply concrete and personal. God has quenched the penalty of His Law, which he deserved, for the death of His own Son on the cross. And so the final thought of that opening line is that Jesus has brought us near to God, and that theme will be repeated throughout the hymn but just in different language.

The second stanza takes up the first of stanza one's three imperatives, so the second stanza has us saying “Let us love...;” the third stanza, “Let us sing...;” the fourth stanza, “Let us wonder.” So it picks up love, sing, and wonder, and then works it out in each of the stanzas. Five things are mentioned in the second stanza to supply motivation for our appreciation of Christ, because we are asked to focus ourselves on the task of displaying our love to Christ in that second stanza. So we're reminded that He pitied us when we were still His enemies; that He was gracious in calling us to salvation; that He taught us the truth, giving us the ability to understand; that He cleansed us by His blood; and, that He presents our souls to God. So no doubt each of these thoughts are suitable for kindling our love to Christ. So when we're asked, “Let us love,” reasons are given for us doing this.

And isn't it interesting? In every hymn that we've studied so far we've seen that. Reasons are given for praising God. We're never just sort of praising God in the abstract. There are biblical reasons given for praising God.

In the third stanza, we see the second imperative picked up — “Let us sing.” And that line asks us to sing to the Lord even in the midst of severe trials. And notice again trials are coming up in this song. Contrast that to so much of the material that was written for praise especially in the 70's and 80's and early 90's. I'm happy to say that with some of the contemporary material that's being written

now, that's beginning to change. But for about thirty years, trials dropped out of all of the sung praise that was being used in the majority of the English-speaking Protestant churches. But here it is. This line asks us to sing to the Lord, even in the midst of trials:

"Though fierce temptation threaten hard to bear us down!"

How can you sing at such a time? Well, Newton has the answer for you:

"For the Lord, our strong salvation, hold in view the conqu'ror's crown:"

And isn't that a picturesque line? You can see the Lord Jesus Christ at the right hand, holding up the conqueror's crown. Indeed, we must sing, because Jesus "soon will bring us home to God." We thus persevere in our trials with joy and song because of the future grace of the victory of Jesus Christ and our nearness to the Lord.

The fourth stanza chimes in and tells us to wonder...let your minds reflect upon God and His truth and His plan of salvation, and be in utter awe of what He has done. What provokes that awe? The thought that God's way of redemption...in God's way of redemption, grace and justice work together to secure our salvation. God in His grace freely saves us by His mercy as we trust in Christ, and so simultaneously He saves us by His justice in meting out upon His own beloved Son the precise punishment due to us. And so "when through grace in Christ our trust is, justice smiles and asks no more." What a beautiful phrase that is! And that leads us to wonder at the awesome goodness and wisdom and love of the One who has secured our way to God.

Bill Wymond, the hymn is ALL SAINTS OLD, or at least that's what it's called in English hymnody, but it comes from the German song book. Tell us a little bit about the tune.

Dr. Wymond: I'd like to, but I was just struck about a theological point you were making. I've noticed that in contemporary preaching in a lot of churches there's a fear about talking about the justice of God or, even more dramatically the wrath of God, as the Psalms so often do. And the thought is that if we talk about that kind of thing it will scare people away and they won't want to embrace Christ. But the strength of a hymn like this is that it faces square on the most serious thing we ever confront, which is the justice of God. And it gives a wonderful grace answer to it.

Well, you asked about the tune, and that's what I ought to be doing! This was an instance where there was not a collaboration between the writer of the words and the tune. A good tune was found, evidently, for this hymn. And this happens to be an older tune. As you said, it came from a hymnal that was in Darmstadt, Germany. Most locations, important areas in Germany, had their own hymnals. There were Leipzig hymnals, there were various hymnals of the towns or of the region that were compiled, and Darmstadt was an important principality. It was

an independent state at one point in Germany.

Anyway, this tune is dated 1698, so it's older than the words and undoubtedly older than that date, too. Who knows exactly when it came into being? The thing that interests me about this particular tune is that it has a sense of joy. It talks about serious matter, and in certain places it takes a serious turn, but it has a joyful sound to it. Now what makes it joyful-sounding to me? Well, I think it's because it starts on a high note and goes low. To me, I respond emotionally to that in a joyful way. It's sort of like a peal of bells. You know, in Derek's homeland they have all these bell-ringing societies. And if you remember, most of the peals start high and go low. The most famous one would be [plays example]...but most often when they're ringing bells in Britain they do just a scale now. But then they change the rhythm [demonstrates]. So this tune goes down the scale, and it goes [plays first phrase], so that descending passage sounds joyful to me. It almost sounds like bells. And so often when people want to introduce a bell theme in music they'll use those intervals like that—interval of a fourth down.

The tune is simple, again. It doesn't have a great range to it; it also repeats the pattern. It does the same thing that I just did for you, twice; and so in learning the hymn, you only have to learn two lines of music.

I'm going to do the whole hymn through one time and just talk a little bit more about it, but you'll notice this A-A-B pattern—[plays]. Here's the repeat—[plays]. Now it takes a turn—[plays]. So when it gets to the high point theologically in what is being said, which is “He has washed us in His blood,” it stays on a note to kind of drive that in—[demonstrates], and it goes up higher than the rest of the tune had been, so it really makes that little phrase stand out, and then it goes back to the same sort of sound for the very last of it [plays last phrase]. So it's a great tune. It's memorable, it's not like other tunes, it immediately stands out when you hear it as distinct and unique, and yet it is simple in its combinations.

Dr. Thomas: There are two things I wanted to ask about the last stanza. One is “Let us praise and join the chorus of the saints enthroned on high,” the fact that when we worship, we worship both as a church militant here on earth but also along with the church triumphant in heaven, picking up Hebrews 12 and the general assembly of the church of the first-born and so on, but I'd like both of you to comment about that...about the corporate sense of the body of Christ worshipping, but not just the body that you can see, but the invisible body of angels and archangels and the saints who have gone before us. And why does it end moving from the third person to the second person: “He who washed us with His blood” now becomes “You have washed us with Your blood, You are worthy Lamb of God.” Why does it end with that note of affirmation and almost like a statement of faith?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think that's probably what it is. And it moves from talking about the fact to addressing the Lord Jesus Christ. It gets more intimate and

more personal as you go along, and makes it a prayer—very much a prayer, not just a discussion of a theological concept, but it actually addresses Christ at the end.

And I think it's worth just pausing on the two terms that you used for the church: the *church militant*. That's a theological concept. We talk about the church here on earth as being the *church militant*. It's the church active, fighting the great fight, the church involved very much in the world here. And then the *church triumphant* is another term that's used for the eternal church: the church of the victorious who have gone to be in heaven. And the Scripture makes it clear that from the beginning of the beginning of the beginning there has always been worship in heaven. You get the picture in Isaiah 6 of these creatures, the seraphim and the cherubim bringing praise to God and crying out, "Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord!" So even before there were people to do that in heaven, there were these heavenly beings worshiping God. And then, the activity of heaven is worshiping God, and it's wonderful! If somebody gets bored in church now, they need not fear going to heaven where church is going on all the time, because it's the most exciting and wonderful thing!

Dr. Thomas: The thing I like about this hymn is it begins with this exhortation to one another — and we've been talking about that in Colossians and Ephesians, how we actually minister to each other and in a sense preach to each other by singing — but this hymn is ascending, because as we're talking to each other, then we look up and we see there's a whole innumerable company singing God's praises that fill the sky, and then ends looking straight, as it were, into the eyes of Jesus and saying directly to Him, "You have washed us with Your blood, You are worthy, Lamb of God."

Dr. Duncan: Well, Derek, you already have mentioned that great Hebrew passage about coming to Mount Zion, and isn't that what's in the background of his mind here? Because after showing you the picture in the third stanza of Christ holding high the conqueror's crown, he's ushering you, the worshiper in your local congregation, into the present experience of the reality of the saints who have gone before us who are praising Christ in heaven even now, so that in every worship service we are to be conscious that we are part of a multitude that no man can number not only here on earth praising God from the time that the first dawn rises on the Lord's Day as the sun circles the world with light, so also we are joining in with this heavenly chorus that is singing. So I think two ideas are going on here. One is we are joining in with the saints enthroned on high, because just as they trusted on Jesus here before we ever arrived on the scene, they're still trusting Him and praising and adoring Him in heaven above. And so when we're worshiping, we're actually joining with those who have gone before us who are praising Him on high.

And then the second thought that you've highlighted is this direct address to the Lord Jesus. As you say, for four stanzas all the exhortation is horizontal. It's to

brothers and sisters in Christ. Now suddenly it is direct address, just like in Hebrews....

Dr. Wymond: Sorry to interrupt your thought, Dr. Duncan, but now we will hear this hymn, which is sung for us by Ben Roberson.

Let us love and sing and wonder, let us praise the Savior's name!
He has hushed the law's loud thunder, He has quenched Mount Sinai's
flame:
He has washed us with His blood, He has brought us nigh to God.

Let us love the Lord who bought us, pitied us when enemies,
Called us by His grace, and taught us, gave us ears and gave us eyes:
He has washed us with His blood, He presents our souls to God.

Let us sing, though fierce temptation threaten hard to bear us down!
For the Lord, our strong salvation, holds in view the conqu'ror's crown:
He who washed us with His blood soon will bring us home to God.

Let us wonder; grace and justice join and point to mercy's store;
When through grace in Christ our trust is, justice smiles and asks no more:
He who washed us with His blood has secured our way to God.

Let us praise, and join the chorus of the saints enthroned on high;
Here they trusted Him before us, now their praises fill the sky:
'You have washed us with Your blood; You are worthy, Lamb of God!'

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