

Hymns of the Faith: “We Gather Together”

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 Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: It's great to be with Bill and with Derek Thomas this morning, again talking about hymns. “Hymns of the Faith” celebrates the great hymns of the Christian tradition — two thousand years of life, and singing rich theology...biblical teaching wrapped up in beautiful texts that have been sung by the people of God in the best of times and in the worst of times.

And today we're looking at a hymn that is both old and new. It's old in that its origins and its original composition date to the 1600's and to a very significant victory in the history of The Netherlands. The Dutch people are a people that are famous for the strategic role that they played in the days of Europe's height of power and influence in the world. The Dutch East India Company stretched around the globe, perhaps even before the British Empire stretched around the globe influencing cultures far and near. But all along, beside and under those great historical events in The Netherlands was a religious story that was going on: a fight for religious freedom. And in The Netherlands in particular there was a very strong Calvinistic church, and this particular hymn celebrates a victory and acknowledges God's providential hand in the life of God's people.

And here in the United States — I say it's an old hymn and a new, because this hymn probably did not come into the tradition of being well known in American churches until the twentieth century. It was translated first from Dutch into Latin, but it wasn't translated into English until the end of the 1800's, and it probably didn't find its way into American hymnals until maybe the 19-teens or -twenties.

I can remember singing this hymn in a public state elementary school in probably first, second, third, fourth grade, around Thanksgiving time. This hymn, for whatever reason, has in the American psyche and in the twentieth century been a hymn that you sing at Thanksgiving time. I think part of that probably stretches back to the way it was used in its own early days amongst the Dutch peoples, when there were Dutch immigrants to America. I think this song was probably

brought with them in their own traditions and associated with harvest songs and thanksgiving times. It's very appropriate for that, although when Derek tells you the background of it, you'll understand a little bit more of the significance of the specific language.

Maybe that will be helpful. We're talking about the song, *We Gather Together*. I just want to play through it one time, and then Derek can tell the audience a little bit about the background of this great hymn. [Hymn played on piano.]

Dr. Thomas: Well, I just smelled pumpkin pie in the air! And for Americans I suppose that tune just evokes all the memories of families gathering at Thanksgiving. I think for you Americans it's much more important for you than Christmas, which would be the case in Britain. I don't ever remember singing this hymn the whole time I was in Britain. I know the tune extremely well; I know the hymn well, but I associate it with Thanksgiving. It's a hymn that was written in 1625, in Holland; and it's a very important year in Holland, because it's the year that one of the Williams of the Orange Order, the Orange dynasty in Holland, came into power. He was the son of William the Silent, who was assassinated, I think, just months before this William was born. This is the William who is the grandfather of the famous William of Orange (in British terms "King Billy") who fought in the so-called Battle of the Boyn in 1690 in the Catholic/Protestant wars of aggression in the seventeenth century. This period, 1625, when this hymn come into being, is a period when in Dutch politics they would have just won a victory over the Spanish.

Dr. Duncan: ...who had been occupying that part of Europe for some years...

Dr. Thomas: For a while...and also, of course, emancipated from the Roman Catholic Church. And before them lie now thirty, forty, fifty years of perhaps the most prolific period. It's the time of Vermeer and Rembrandt, and Dutch Protestantism, and so this hymn takes on, I think, in 1625, all the tones of...I suppose, like *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*...

Dr. Duncan: Or *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*. You were telling us that it was really almost a second national anthem in Britain. And you get the feel that it's got that kind of thing going for sort of the Dutch and Dutch-American tradition.

Dr. Thomas: Right. And my understanding is that when Dutch immigrants came across to America, they brought this hymn with them.

Dr. Duncan: There is a fascinating article about this, for people who like to go and look at these things, on the internet. If you go to *The Wall Street Journal* on November 22, 2005, go into their *Archives* and look at their *Opinion* journal. There is an article called *A Hymn's Long Journey Home* that sort of places the origins of this particular song.

Dr. Thomas: You know, anyone who has spent any time at all in the company of the Dutch, knows the saying, “If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much!” I've just come back, in fact, this past week, from spending a few days with a group of Dutchmen, and they're very proud of their history, and they're very patriotic. They have a language and an identity and a culture that is very unique, and it's not difficult to imagine this hymn in Dutch gatherings at thanksgiving with pumpkin pie with lots of Gouda cheese and the rest of it, and they sing *We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing*. And it takes on another hue for a blessing on the family, and maybe thanksgiving comes to mind as you think of those opening lines.

Dr. Duncan: Well, apparently (I'm told by the people that have written about this hymn, both in some of the hymnology books as well as in this article) one reason this hymn took off in the United States was its association with Thanksgiving, but another reason was it was translated during the time of the First World War, what we call World War I — which you would have called the Great War, I guess, growing up. And Americans, I think, began to think in terms of the text of the song about themselves and their own experience in the ways that I'm sure that the Dutch folk had thought about themselves in the words of this song in a time of great conflagration and conflict and war. The text is very robust. It talks about things that you don't hear many songs today, even sung in Christian churches, talk about. And to think of a nation as a whole identifying with these terms...I mean, listen to the very first phrase:

“We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;”

[Well, that's relatively innocuous, until you get to the next line]

“He chastens and hastens His will to make known.”

So, in the song, before you've gotten through the first full phrase it's already acknowledging God's chastening hand on the nation, on the people, in the course of His providence; in this case, the chastening being suffering the oppression of the Spanish Roman Catholics that were restricting religious liberty and persecuting and oppressing the native Hollanders and Netherlanders in that part of the world.

Dr. Thomas: It has some of the most beautiful turns of phrase: “Beside us to guide us...” — once you say that, you'll carry it with you for hours. Just like the opening line, “We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing.”

It has the advantage of a really good tune. You can't think now of this phrase, “We gather together,” without the tune coming immediately to mind. We were talking earlier about how folk tunes just have to be sung.

Dr. Duncan: And I'm struck. We've done a handful of songs now, together...a

couple of handfuls of songs together...on "Hymns of the Faith." We've just started out on this project, so we've done maybe ten or so. And I am struck, Bill Wymond, by how many of these started out as folk tunes. And this is apparently even another one. This tune was coming into being in, say, the late sixteenth century, the late 1500's, before it becomes associated with this particular text, but it's a great tune.

Dr. Wymond: There is something that interests me about this, because it's a robust tune. I think that very robustness that you find in the folk tunes is what attracted folks to them and had them appropriate those and put Christian words. Because the tune is older than the hymn, older than the text.

Most of the church tunes were based on the Gregorian chants, which came from the very early life of the church — even back to 600 — and most of those were based on older modes that were a bit more serious and didn't have quite the energy that the folk songs have. So I think that's why this particular tune, as we'll be talking about it, is so energetic and just seems to supply the words with the kind of vigor that you would want.

Of course, the Dutch were not singing this in church, as you've already said. In fact, it was first published in a book of patriotic songs in Holland, and so it interests me, as you're talking about the text, that this is what the people were singing as patriots, and the Dutch were so (at that time)...so aligned with interest in spiritual things.

Dr. Duncan: Well, walk us through the tune, then, itself. We've talked before about how some of the tunes more influenced by the Gregorian chant will run their way up scales and down the scales in a relatively uniform sort of way. How does this song operate? Because it is a little bit different from what they would have been using for melody lines in their Psalters at that time. Talk to us a little bit about the tune.

Dr. Wymond: Well, let's say that we're comparing this with the Gregorian chant. A Gregorian chant tune might go [demonstrates on piano]...all the notes very close together and staying within the same range pretty much. The interesting thing about this hymn that gives it its particular vigor is that as you progress through the tune, it goes higher and higher up the scale. You start out at a very comfortable range [demonstrates]...and as you get more intense, you start moving up the scale [demonstrates]...and so on [demonstrates]. So what happens is that you have a wedding here of emotional intensity that goes along with the increasing fervor of the words, I think.

Dr. Duncan: And that's exactly right. I mean, the words... We talked about the first line, "He chastens and hastens His will to make known"... and then it continues to crescendo into "The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing." And this, Derek, in its original context, is probably an allusion to that

liberation from the occupying Spanish forces in The Netherlands, and it evokes this phrase, “Sing praises to His name, He forgets not His own.” So it's an acknowledgement of God's providential hand in the history of that nation.

Dr. Thomas: Yes. It's very Psalm-like in its allusion to “the wicked oppressing”—it doesn't mince any words! And I think in an age where the Psalms were sung, that kind of robust language, facing the reality of political and religious oppression, was something they sang. But it's a very *Mighty Fortress Is Our God* kind of hymn, in that it's extolling God as the mighty deliverer, warrior, fighting on behalf of His people. And I love the way it closes:

“Let Thy congregation endure through tribulation;
Thy name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!”

I sort of wonder, is that why the Americans really took to this hymn? Because the notion of freedom is so much at the heart of the American psyche—the land of the free, and so on.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, and you know, it's interesting, though. The line that you quoted is an emendation to this hymnal (which our friend Bill Wymond worked on), and I wonder whether Bill or whether Ed Clowney made that emendation, because in the Theodore Baker translation, it goes “Let Thy congregation *escape* tribulation.” And this is a much more Calvinistic, I might say, rendering of the text:

“Let Thy congregation *endure* through tribulation;
Thy name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!”

And as you say, there are so many powerful lines in this song. The beginning of that stanza, for instance...it is so Dutch!

“We all do extol Thee, Thou leader triumphant....”

In Dutch and in German the name “leader” resonates way back, you know, three, four, five hundred years in terms of the ...whether you're talking about Wilhelm or the Bavarian princes or whatever else “...pray that Thou still our defender wilt be.” And then, as you say, “Let Thy congregation....” This is a patriotic...it's a national hymn, and yet the language of the church is being used to describe the people as a whole.

It does remind you of how much in both the American, the Dutch, and the British tradition, there would have been a blurring of language of Christendom (or the language of the church) for the language of the nation in the public discourse and in the public singing. Like I say, I grew up singing this song in public school. You couldn't conceive of singing this song in a public school today.

Dr. Wymond: I do think that's a great loss, because in our schools we had strong

music programs, right from the elementary years all the way through, where children were taught the folk songs of the country and a lot of the main hymns of the country, and we are seeing the results of not doing that now in our church choirs, because the youth and the children don't have the background for singing that they used to, unless they happen to go to a school that defies that trend. It's a real loss that people just don't sing so much, and that they don't know our culture — much less the hymnody — that used to be sung there. So I would make a great argument for public school music education that would put some of these songs back into the hearts and minds of the people.

Dr. Duncan: For sure! And I can remember in my music education classes being taught things like this. Of course, I was singing in church as well, but they were being taught. The background of them was being explained, and we were learning a little about the music itself. I was struck by a phrase that Melanie Kirkpatrick in this *Wall Street Journal* article says. She says, "Folk melodies have a way of wanting to be sung." And I was struck by that, because music today doesn't necessarily "want" to be sung. It wants to be listened to, or it wants to be downloaded, or it wants to be purchased, but it doesn't necessarily want to be sung. In fact, some of it is utterly un-singable by an ordinary mortal! And yet folk melodies have this way of making us want to sing them, and this song does that, don't you think, Bill?

Dr. Wymond: I think so. And even some of the popular music of the sixties, which some will remember, still had folk origins. "Peter, Paul and Mary" and so on...everybody liked to sing those. But as we move into an age even in our churches where we are observers rather than participants, we are finding people singing less and less. They are watching people sing, and not really joining in heartily into the singing. And so all of this mitigates against folks knowing how to sing and wanting to sing.

Dr. Thomas: I think it's interesting the way this hymn picks up on a very Puritan theme, right in the seventeenth century. Of course, it's Dutch Puritanism, but the idea of the Christian life being a fight, a struggle, a pilgrimage...

"Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
Ordaining, maintaining His kingdom divine;"

Dr. Duncan: By the way, is that not just gorgeous! I mean, this line is just so rich!

Dr. Thomas: Beautiful...gorgeous...

"So from the beginning, the fight we were winning:
Thou, Lord, wast at our side: all glory be Thine!"

And Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* comes to mind readily, as we think of that. That's an aspect of the Christian faith that's important for health — Christian

health: to remember as you gather together that this is a fight; that here we have no continuing city, and that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. I think of how Bunyan especially portrays Christian and Faithful fighting against Apollyon (Satan). And you know, it's about this time during the seventeenth century that William Gurnall, that great Puritan, wrote that massive book that was so popular among Christians in Britain, *The Christian in Complete Armor: An Exposition of Ephesians 6* — “Put on the whole armor of God...” and I think that's so health-giving.

You know, our worship tends to become so very self-centered, and people get so distressed because they find themselves in trouble, whereas, I think in this era trouble is what you should expect, and you should be distressed if you don't have trouble. And I think this hymn, like the fighting song of *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, is redolent to me of how Christians see themselves engaged in a struggle in this life, but armed and equipped with spiritual armor and God at their side.

Dr. Wymond: Well, Derek, I don't want to pick on any particular church, but the trend today it seems in churches and in preaching is to see how quickly we can get out from under the burden or the problem, which is so contrary to what's being talked about here today — seeking Christian comfort by not having any burdens.

Dr. Thomas: I was reading yesterday in John Owen — who again is in this period — and he was exhorting Christians not to duck out from the trial, but to see that trial as God's providential opportunity to enable you to grow; that unless you pass through this trial, you're not going to grow into the maturity that God wants you to experience. And I think there was a robustness to Christianity that sang these hymns and identified them as emblematic of what the Christian life is all about.

Dr. Duncan: I was in a meeting not long ago in Atlanta with some leaders of the Presbyterian Church in America, and our friend Tim Keller, from the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York City — right in the shadow of the two towers of the World Trade Center that came down on September 11, 2001, that's right where he ministers — and he was saying to us that that whole experience had caused him to do a lot of reflection about American Christianity. One thing that he had become convinced of is that we were not doing a good job of preparing our people to suffer. And it seems to me that one of the things about this text is that it assumes the very framework of a life of fight and trial and tribulation and suffering.

Let's hear this song, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: This morning, Dr. Duncan, Kay Eduardo will sing for us *We Gather Together*.

We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;
He chastens and hastens His will to make known;
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing:
Sing praises to His name; He forgets not His own.

Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
Ordaining, maintaining His kingdom divine;
So from the beginning the fight we were winning:
Thou, Lord, wast at our side: all glory be Thine!

We all do extol Thee, our leader triumphant,
And pray that Thou still our defender wilt be.
Let Thy congregation endure thro' tribulation:
Thy name be ever prais'd! O Lord, make us free!

Dr. Wymond: This has been “Hymns of the Faith” brought to you by First Presbyterian Church. The First Presbyterian Church is located on North State Street, just a block north of the Mississippi Baptist Medical Center. Our worship services are at 8:30, 11:00, and 6:00. We'd invite you to come and worship with us today.

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