

Hymns of the Faith: “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art”

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 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 Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas, with you today for “Hymns of the Faith.” We have been loving our study of some of the great hymns of the Christian church over the last almost two thousand years. Today we come to what is actually for the English language a relatively modern hymn, but it is one of my favorite modern hymns. It was only translated into English probably at the end of the nineteenth century by a very famous Scottish Presbyterian minister and it was published in a fairly well-known (for that period of time) magazine, as often seems to have happened in English and Scottish hymnody. We've run into a number of hymns, including *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*, that originated in the gospel magazine at the end of the 1700's, written by Edward Perronet.

But this hymn that we're studying today is *I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art*; and it seems, Derek, to come out of either Geneva or Strasbourg. Because of that, some hymnologists have attributed it to John Calvin, while others have attributed it to a man named Jean Garnier, who was the pastor of the French-speaking congregation in Strasbourg for a period of time.

It might be helpful, Derek, if you would orient us a little bit as to what's happening in Geneva and Strasbourg in that period, because those were two very fruitful cities with regard to the whole of Protestantism in the English-speaking world, as well as the French and German-speaking worlds. At the time of the Reformation, Geneva was an independent city and Strasbourg had been declared a free city, thus both became centers of refuge for Protestants fleeing religious persecution.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, in 1545, Calvin would be back in Geneva, having spent two and a half years in Strasbourg, from 1538 to 1540-something...round about 1540. So that two-year period he was exiled from Geneva in Strasbourg. The

Reformation came to Geneva probably around 1530-31 or so, Calvin arriving in 1536. Strasbourg may well have begun the Reformation a little earlier than Geneva, and was more advanced, I think, along Reformed lines than Geneva, and was more willing to accept Calvin in 1538, when he was banished from Geneva...until he went back to Geneva again.

It's interesting...this hymn — *Je te Salue, mon Certain Redempteur*, in French — appears in *The Strasbourg Psalter* in 1545, and then Calvin of course introduces another psalter, *The Genevan Psalter*, beginning round about that time — a work that would occupy the next fifteen or twenty years, translating and versifying all of the Psalms into meter and providing tunes for them (which I'm sure Bill Wymond will want to say something about).

I've been fascinated that the great collection of all of Calvin's writings (at least in the nineteenth century, all of Calvin's writings...other writings have come to light since then), the *Corpus Reformatorum*, edited by Edward Reuss and others, actually included this hymn, although the editor was skeptical — I think it was under the section “The Minor Works of Calvin” there. I would like to think it's Calvin. You made a comment earlier, that you were not surprised that Philip Schaff, the Swiss-German church historian during the 1800s, is very positive about attributing it to Calvin, not for any external reasons but for internal style. And there's something to say about that. I mean, there are a lot of Calvin-type sentiments and it's Calvin-esque in its piety.

Dr. Duncan: We were talking off-air, and I'm sure Bill Wymond has often read the journal called *The Hymn*. There are actually a number of important journals that were produced, especially in the twentieth century, that dealt with hymnody — and Bill, you may want to mention some of those in the course of your conversation with us today. But one that's of a more popular sort, almost magazine-like in its layout, is simply called *The Hymn*, and occasionally you can find some interesting researches in that. I remember my mother sending to me a copy of an article in that magazine, in which the researcher had done some work on this particular hymn, *I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art*, and had shown that it bore in its original language (and I'm assuming that it was written in French originally, not Latin and then into French, like some of Calvin's stuff was) — but that it bore in its French some resemblance to a medieval hymn of devotion to Mary, but that the focus on devotion to Mary had been of course removed, and the hymn totally focused on devotion to Christ, and that would be a very Calvinian thing to do, to take an example of medieval piety focused on Mary and focus it squarely on the person of Christ.

Dr. Thomas: Robbing Peter to pay...John...in this case, instead of Paul!
[Laughter] Yes, I think that's quite a likely story. I suspect that the attribution to Calvin has also gained emphasis by the “exclusive Psalm vs. inclusive Psalm” debate, and it's useful to say that Calvin wrote a hymn that was included and sung in Geneva when it sort of deals with a Geneva-exclusive Psalm.

Dr. Duncan: Well, let me raise that, because you've obviously thought about that a lot, and you mention the inclusion of this in *The Genevan Psalter*. Do we know whether the inclusion of non-Psalms in the psalter meant that they were using them for public worship, or were they being used for private devotion? Or was it a little bit of both? Do we know?

Dr. Thomas: I suspect...I've just come back from exclusive-Psalm-singing Dutchmen in Canada this past weekend, and at the beginning of the service, before the Call to Worship, we sang a hymn — a well-known hymn. But only before the Call to Worship. Once the Call to Worship, it was all Psalms. And I suspect that maybe something like that took place. I mean, certainly with both the Genevan liturgy and Strasbourg liturgy they sang things other than the Psalms. They sang The Lord's Prayer, for example, and *Nunc Dimittis* was there for a while, and the Ten Commandments, and the ... "Lift Up Your Hearts..." *Circum Corda*.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. Let me ask Bill to talk to us a little bit, and even to play this tune...because off-air, Bill, you were speculating that this tune may actually be a shortening or a corruption of another tune. I love this tune; I also love the other tune that this one may be based on, and I'll bet that this hymn, in both its tune and text, is less familiar to our listening audience than a lot of them that we've been studying, so it would be good for them to hear the tune and then to hear you tell them a little bit about the tune.

Dr. Wymond: So here is the original tune for this song, and then I'll talk about the related tune. [*Dr. Wymond plays.*]

Dr. Duncan: Now that tune is called TOULON in our hymnal, and apparently comes out of *The Genevan Psalter* from 1551, but it's related to another tune.

Dr. Wymond: It's related to what's called the OLD 124th, which is really the same tune that just has a little bit more in the center of the tune because the 124th Psalm had longer verses and so they needed more meter to cover that... and that little middle section goes like this...[*plays one phrase*]. That's all it is. That's just stuck into the middle of the tune. And of course, if I were really doing this right, I would sing it. I wouldn't be playing it if I were in the Genevan mode! But also, I would not be playing this in harmony. This appeared in harmony later in a hymnal that was published by Claude Goudimel in Paris. It was published somewhere around 1572 or something like that.

The interesting thing about this tune the way we just did it is that the melody is on the top, and heretofore, until Goudimel published it like this, the melody was in the tenor line, as it was in most of the hymns that were published at that time. He started this practice of putting the melody in the soprano — at the top. So I thought that was just sort of interesting when he did it. Otherwise, in Geneva it

would have been sung unaccompanied and melody only. So I think that this tune is simply the 124th with just that little middle section added to it.

Dr. Duncan: The 124th, with the addition of that section in it, has...I think there's a real strength to it in the middle of the 124th that gives it sort of a martial feel, and you're sort of steeling yourself for battle. You take that out and put it in this song...this has a much...it has a more devotional, reflective sort of feel with that middle line taken out. It's interesting how just one line taken out of a tune can have a dramatic effect on the feel of it. But this one is much more reflective, relaxed, and devotional; whereas the 24th, you could see a roomful of a thousand men sort of singing it to get fired up to do something brave.

Dr. Wymond: I think this tune is peaceful rhythmically, and some of the tunes that appear in *The Genevan Psalter* are very strong and a bit jerky because they have unusual rhythms to them. Some critics call them "Genevan jigs"—I think partly that reflected on the speed at which they were done, which was probably relatively fast, and also the fact that they had these rhythms that sort of made them uneven and a bit jerky-sounding.

Dr. Duncan: And of course, Queen Elizabeth I of England is often credited with that jab against the Genevan music as being "Genevan jigs," and if you listen to the English church music of that time, certainly the kind of English church music that Elizabeth liked personally, you think of...you get these long, elongated, almost "plainsong-y" kinds of melodies: so... "Hear my prayer, O Lord..." [*sings*]—very long. And so to come along and get something sort of jerky and fast-paced, I can see how she would have come up with the dig that it was a Genevan jig, although I don't think it strikes us that way when we hear it today.

Dr. Wymond: That's right. If this tune were done in that manner, it might have sounded like this... [*plays*]. That's the way that many of them go.

Dr. Thomas: Oh, I'd like to hear more of that!

Dr. Duncan: I'd just say it's not unlike what we know of some of the rhythms of the German pieces. Even *A Mighty Fortress* had a little bit more jerky, angular sort of rhythmic feel.

Dr. Wymond: That's right, and that's because they were rooted in dance forms, and maybe the "jig" came because...*A Mighty Fortress* goes, I think... [*plays*].

Dr. Duncan: It would have been very different from what Elizabeth and her courtiers would have been used to in English church music, which would have had a lot of influence still from the chant music of the Roman Catholic church, and which they preferred (I guess as more contemplative and mystical and such), and this was designed for congregational singing and to encourage vigorous congregational singing.

Dr. Wymond: I have to say, though, I sort of have been bemused thinking about the parishioners there in Calvin's church in Geneva, because they had not been singing until Calvin came. Can you just imagine what it would be like to introduce a whole new hymnal of tunes that nobody knew, because they were all original, and to try to get those people who had never sung to sing?

Dr. Thomas: You've done some research here. Is there any evidence of how they went about teaching them to sing those tunes?

Dr. Wymond: Well, what I have read says that Calvin took the children of the congregation and taught them these tunes, so that when he introduced them to the congregation the children could lead the parents.

Dr. Duncan: Oh, I know that something not unlike that still happens in the Free Church today, especially when children are taken out ... the youngest children taken out...at a certain point in the service, the people will actually sing Psalms with them to teach them the tunes so that when they come back in they're able to sing. So that's very interesting that that tack would have been taken.

Dr. Wymond: It's just a reverse of that...let the children lead the parents. And I think probably that it took a while to get the people really involved in the singing.

The tune is called, by the way, THE OLD TWENTY-FOURTH, that we were talking about. There are various tunes that we find in our tune reference in the back of hymnals, and they're called "The Old" because it means they came from *The Genevan Psalter*.

Dr. Thomas: It's a tune that is extremely well known, of course, in Scottish and Irish Presbyterianism. We would have sung that OLD 124TH probably once a month in Belfast. As a closing Psalm...it's a little bit like *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*...the words of Psalm 124 and Psalm 46 are similar, facing battle and conquest. And we'd have sung it to a quarter of the speed, I'd say, in a very solemn, grave, military sort of fashion.

Dr. Wymond: Well, I do have to tell you that in spite of the fact that these tunes here and then the German chorale tunes sometimes had very vigorous sounding rhythms, Burney, who was an eighteenth century music critic traveling all over Germany, wrote that when he went to Bach's church (this was after Bach was gone) that the people sang the chorales so slowly that he could go from that church to a church about two blocks away and come back, and they would still be singing the chorale! So their tempos are not always fast!

Dr. Duncan: That's fascinating! You know, this hymn, as both you and Derek have pointed out, since it was in that Psalter, may well have been utilized by Huguenots for many years, but as far as I know it comes into English-speaking

hymnody through the translation of the text by Douglas Bannerman, who Derek will know as a very famous Scottish Presbyterian theologian, the son of James Bannerman, ...D.D. Bannerman, for some of you who know his writings...who wrote a very important book on the doctrine of the church, the Scripture doctrine of the church. And he translated this for a journal that was produced in Scotland edited by Robert Rainey, who was a very famous end of the nineteenth century, early twentieth century Scottish figure — somewhat controversial figure, in fact — and the journal was called *The Catholic Presbyterian* — the idea of *catholic* being sort of a broad-spirited Presbyterian, a Presbyterian who wasn't just going to be narrowly sectarian, but was going to have a broad spirit of catholicity and cooperation with other Protestants and such, and this journal called *The Catholic Presbyterian* featured this translation. I'm guessing...well, our particular hymnal has this listed as a translation by Elizabeth L. Smith, from 1868. And frankly, I haven't compared it with the Bannerman translation. I'd like to go back and look at that.

But the words of this hymn, Derek, are just excellent, and very, very personal and passionate in their expression of devotion to Jesus Christ.

Dr. Thomas: Well, I've always been struck by the opening words: "I greet Thee..." It's not something that you'd readily think of as the opening of a hymn, that Christ is coming towards you and you are greeting Him. It's a beautiful way, when you think about it, that at the beginning of a worship service you are greeting the coming of Christ into your midst. It's not irreverent, but it's extremely intimate and personal. I love the closing line: "Our hope is in no other save in Thee; Our hope is built upon Thy promise free." I think that's a beautiful expression.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, I think you point out one of the things about this hymn that I like the most, and that is it stays in the second person throughout. So many of our hymns, and appropriately so, because the Psalms do, are in the third person. We're singing about God: we're singing about Him, though we are singing to Him. This one gives a direct address to the Lord Jesus Christ, and I suspect, again, if the song is modeled on a song that had been directed towards Mary out of medieval piety, that "I greet Thee" actually comes from the angel's address to Mary, "I greet thee," in the Gospels.

Dr. Thomas: I would love to know, given the extraordinary lines (and referring to Matthew 10, I suppose), "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness; No harshness hast Thou, and no bitterness." I can imagine that attributed to Mary in medieval Catholicism as the gentle woman, but attributing it here to Christ...

Dr. Duncan: And can you imagine how powerful that would have been to sixteenth century Genevans, who had been told (and their ancestors) for hundreds of years that Christ was this foreboding, inapproachable figure, but if you could get His mother on your side, you know, you could approach Him

through her? And now all of these things being attributed to Christ, and the beauty of Christ, and the tenderness of Christ, and the receptivity of our overtures to Christ by Christ...all of these things being emphasized in the text. It must have been an overpowering experience for people to sing this for the first time.

Dr. Thomas: You know, it's often said that Jesus rarely draws attention to Himself, or at least His own personality, except when He says, "I am meek and gentle in heart." I always find that very moving, that "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness; no harshness hast Thou, and no bitterness."

Dr. Duncan: The third line, Derek, I think could send you into the stratosphere meditating upon Calvin and the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, but it's a powerful line:

"Thou art the Life, by which alone we live,
And all our substance and our strength receive;
O comfort us in death's approaching hour,
Stronghearted then to face it by Thy power."

And I don't know the original French there, but in the first part of that when, you know, you hear echoes of Calvin's language about receiving the life of Christ as we feed on Him by faith, and receiving His substance as we feed on Him by faith...all sorts of stuff swirls around that in the history of early Calvinism. I'm sure that's another reason why Schaff is positive in his attribution of this text to Calvin.

But the whole song encourages the believer. It gives warrant to the faith of the believer in Christ. Take the second stanza:

"Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,
Reigning omnipotent in every place:
So come, O King, and our whole being sway;
Shine on us with the light of Thy pure day."

Thinking of Christ as the King of mercy and of grace just...as you say, as an opening hymn it's inviting you to entrust yourself to Him as Savior. It's giving you reasons why you ought to entrust yourself to Him as Savior. I just love the text. Every time I sing it, I think there's a different aspect that sort of grips me, and my attention is drawn to that particular aspect.

Dr. Wymond: I was just going to say — didn't want to interrupt your flow of thought here, but I've often thought about the fact that Calvin went to Strasbourg probably very sad and depressed, having been invited to leave Geneva for that short period of time, and yet that was such a formative time for him. He not only found a form of worship that he liked, Bucer's, and copied it pretty much for Geneva, but he found this hymn as well and brought it back, and it was included

in *The Genevan Psalter*, the second one that he published.

So it's time now for us to listen to this. *I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art.*

I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
My only trust and Savior of my heart,
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;
I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.

Thou art the King of mercy and of grace,
Reigning omnipotent in every place:
So come, O King, and our whole being sway;
Shine on us with the light of Thy pure day.

“Thou art the Life, by which alone we live,
And all our substance and our strength receive;
O comfort us in death's approaching hour,
Stronghearted then to face it by Thy power.

Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness,
No harshness hast Thou and no bitterness:
Make us to taste the sweet grace found in Thee
And ever stay in Thy sweet unity.

Our hope is in no other save in Thee;
Our faith is built upon Thy promise free;
O grant to us such stronger hope and sure
That we can boldly conquer and endure.

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