

## Hymns of the Faith: “Crown Him with Many Crowns”

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 Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.” And now with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

**Dr. Duncan:** Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas and “Hymns of the Faith” as we look at another of the great hymns of the English-speaking world, this one by Matthew Bridges, *Crown Him with Many Crowns*—one of my favorite hymns, and clearly probably one of the top twenty favorite hymns still in the English language; a great hymn of exaltation of Jesus Christ acknowledging His lordship. There's a lot of rich stuff.

In our hymnal this song has four stanzas; it has a lot of crowns in the original text. Godfrey Thring added yet another one of them. But, Derek, tell us just a little bit about Matthew Bridges, and then I want to take apart the text stanza by stanza, and then talk a little bit about the tune and meter as well.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes...good morning! We don't know a whole lot about Matthew Bridges. He spanned almost the entire nineteenth century: born in 1800 and died in 1894. He grew up initially in England in Malden in Essex, which is close to London, of course. And then in the latter half—I think he was in his forties or so when he immigrated to part of the British Commonwealth in Canada...to French Canada, to Quebec. He wrote in his early years a poem, *Jerusalem Regained*. He was twenty-five. And then three years later a book on the Roman Empire and Constantine the Great. And it was, I think, studying that period of history, that Matthew Bridges then became persuaded of Catholic views with regard to papal succession and an historical argument for that, and became a Roman Catholic. Now in the latter part of his...

**Dr. Duncan:** There's something about that that may interest — especially if there are Presbyterian ministers driving to their churches today...One of the favorite books on pastoral ministry that certainly has been used at Reformed Theological Seminary over the last twenty or thirty years is by a man named Charles Bridges, and Matthew was his younger brother. Charles Bridges' classic book on the

pastoral ministry has probably been read by many people listening to us this morning. And so this would give you an indication of some of the turmoil going on in Britain with what was called the “Oxford Movement,” or the “Tractarian Movement,” where many fine men in the Church of England began to yearn for the stability and the tradition that the Church of Rome could provide.

Let's face it: this was in the high-water mark of nineteenth century liberalism, and there would have been a lot of people in the Church of England unsettled by that kind of higher critical liberalism, and they looked to the Church of Rome as a place that they could go. But this was a thing of tremendous turmoil, and in the nineteenth century there were a number of strong reactions to this in England. So, the establishment of the Protestant Truth Society would have happened in the wake of this. The republication of all the works of the English Reformers would have occurred through the Parker Society in England. And then there was another society in Scotland that published all the works of the Scottish Reformers in response. John Henry Newman, of course, is one of these famous members of the Church of England that eventually left the Church of England, joined the church of Rome, became, finally, a Cardinal. And I have just heard that they are in the process of beatifying Cardinal Newman, and the Roman church will soon name him to be a saint. But Matthew Bridges would have been caught up in this time frame.

**Dr. Thomas:** And maybe a lesson on Henry Collins, who became a Trappist monk, I think. But the influence of John Henry Newman, of course, was *Lead, Kindly Light* (which still makes its way into some Protestant hymnals, but definitely not others!) was enormous. I can't imagine the upheaval in the Church of England in the middle of the nineteenth century by that Oxford Movement, as it was called.

**Dr. Duncan:** And so Matthew Bridges (we were talking off the air ahead of time) — he had a rather prominent post in Britain which he held for a long, long time, which was working in the Chapel of St. George's at Windsor. Do you want to explain to Americans what in the world that means?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, the Queen, of course lives in Buckingham Palace in London, but very often she is close by in Windsor — an hour's drive, I suppose, from the center of London...well, it depends on traffic!...but Windsor is just a delightful little place, and some of you of course will remember the fire in Windsor castle maybe ten years or so ago. And when she is there, of course, she will worship at the church in Windsor castle. And someone being the organist to that church would then be an organist for Her Majesty the Queen.

**Dr. Duncan:** It's the royal chapel in Windsor castle — is that right?

**Dr. Wymond:** Yes, and the tune writer here, Elvey, was the organist for that.

**Dr. Duncan:** Oh, it's the tune writer, not Matthew Bridges! I'm sorry. I misunderstood what you were saying.

**Dr. Wymond:** That's OK. I'll talk about that in a minute.

**Dr. Duncan:** Well, let's go right to that. Tell us a little bit about the tune, then I'll come back to Derek. I want to ask him some things about the text.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, that's a logical connection there. George Elvey, who wrote this tune, was actually baptized a Presbyterian — got off to a good start there, I would say! — and then he later sang in the choir of Canterbury Cathedral. And that probably doesn't mean that much to us as Americans, but the whole British system for training organists and directors generally worked through the choir schools that they had associated with the cathedrals, and many of the boys who sang in the choir also took organ lessons, or they took conducting. And so this was just a natural school to train their organists and their directors.

And so after he graduated from college, he was hired as the organist for the Queen's chapel at Windsor and he stayed there 48 years. And because it is the chapel for the Queen, a lot of important occasions happen at St. George's Windsor. Most recently there were a couple of royal weddings. I think Charles and Camilla were married there, were they not? And earlier, his younger brother was married there. And so in Elvey's time, he played for the wedding of Queen Victoria's daughter, Louise, and he was knighted for that.

But the most important thing that people say about him was that not only was he a good musician, but he was a godly man and a kind person. And his personality was infused into his music and music-making. And it's a nice thing to know about this man, that he had such character.

The tune is a pretty straightforward tune, and I wanted to say something about the meter of the tune, because I think that's an interesting subject. The poetic meter of the poem, rather, is designated as S.M.D., and that's just language that's used by people who are interested in meters of hymns to say that this was Short Meter that was doubled.

And there were three meters that were so common that they were designated by the term *Short Meter*, or *Common Meter*, or *Long Meter*. And they could double them, and so on like that, but these were so common that they were just designated that way.

And Short Meter means that the poetic feet are counted out as 6.6.8.6. ... *Crown Him with Many Crowns* is six feet; "Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns" is eight; and then, "all music but its own" is six.

And then Common Meter...I have to just go ahead and talk a minute about that,

since it's the most common...had feet of 8.6.8.6., and all of the poems in that had footage so that they would fit a tune like *Dundee*, which is one of the most familiar Common Meter tunes. [Plays tune.] I just start that tune off to remind people.

And then, of the Long Meter poems and tunes, probably the *Old Hundredth* is the most familiar 8.8.8.8. [Plays tune.] That's a Long Meter one.

Now all this sounds kind of esoteric in a way, but it's a very practical thing to know because sometimes there are words that are so good that we would like the congregation to be able to sing them, but the tune may not be known or it may not seem very appropriate. And so if one just goes back to the Metrical Index of the hymnal, in the back, and looks up the meter of the words, and then finds a common tune that has that meter, then one can take these unfamiliar words and put them to a Common Meter. And I really recommend that to ministers who want to broaden the musical fabric of their congregation. There are some churches that sing very few tunes — I call them “maybe twelve tune congregations” — and especially if they're in an area where they don't have a fulltime minister, they will sometimes not challenge themselves. So this is a way that they can expand their repertoire.

**Dr. Duncan:** The name of this tune, Bill, is *Diademata*. We were talking beforehand that there's another tune in our hymnal called *Diadem*. Tell them what *diademata* means, and let's talk a little bit about the hymn tunes.

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, it comes from the Greek, which means *crown*. So the tune was actually written for this set of words and it was given the term *crown*. And the tunes in the hymnal actually have a name like that; the name may come from the text, it may come from the street on which this tune was written, it may come from a church with which the poet was associated, it may be the name of the wife of the poet, or it may just be some literary illusion.

But we often call the tune by the set of words that we know it the best, but actually it has a name that lives beyond that, and so when we properly refer to tunes we ought to call them by their tune name. Now, not many people know those. Our friend Terry Johnson, I think, knows all the tune names! And he's so much better at that than I am.

But let me just say something about this tune now in itself. I think it's appropriate to the elevated text that it has. It's a very straightforward tune, it's a simple tune, it is recognizable from all other tunes, and it has some creativity. And those are my four criteria for what I think is a good hymn tune.

Let me just remind us of this tune [plays]. What I like about this tune is that it grows in its intensity as you go through the words, and the words have a way of moving to the end with a very exalted statement. So the way that it grows in its

intensity is that it starts moving up the scale, so you get higher and higher as you get emotionally more intense. And the third line goes [plays]....then it builds on that...more emotion [plays]...and then the climax line [plays]. I think that's a tune that fits those words so well.

**Dr. Duncan:** And it's got that regal English "mojo" that just comes...you can tell you're at the height of the empire at that point in time. Queen Victoria is the queen when this tune is written.

I was looking in some of the material we have, material that briefs us on this hymn that we try and study ahead of time, and there's a fascinating story told about the use of this hymn on a special occasion. It was at the centenary thanksgiving service of the London Bible Society held in November 1905 at Albert Hall. The presiding officer was the Marquis of Northampton, and he had read congratulatory messages from all of the Protestant rulers of Christendom, and then he said, "Now that we have read these messages from earthly rulers, let us turn our minds to the King of kings. We will sing *Crown Him with Many Crowns*." And, boy, the tune and the text would have matched that kind of an occasion!

**Dr. Wymond:** And especially in that hall! How many does that seat, Derek? You and I have both heard concerts there before.

**Dr. Thomas:** Four or five thousand, I think.

**Dr. Wymond:** At least. It's a wonderful place, and there's a very large, fine pipe organ in there that I'm sure sounded...

**Dr. Thomas:** It's been renovated in the last couple of years. There was a concert celebrating the new organ — I'm going to say last year...and maybe the year before. I must have been in that hall fifty or sixty times, I'm sure.

**Dr. Wymond:** Heard some wonderful...we're kind of getting off track here! Great emotions there.

**Dr. Thomas:** What is fascinating, though, is that that occasion that you referred to, in 1905, was a time of celebration for Protestant rulers, which then would have been (and still is) part of the British establishment in regard to monarchy. They are the defenders of the faith. But the Queen is the defender of the Protestant faith in law. I'm sure of some debate at the time. But this hymn was written three years after his conversion to Catholicism, in 1851, and he converted in 1848. And the original had a stanza which has been dropped:

Crown Him the virgin's Son,  
The God incarnate born,  
Whose arm those crimson trophies won

Which now His brow adorn.”  
But then it goes on:

Fruit of the mystic rose,  
As of that rose the stem,  
The root whence mercy ever flows,  
The Babe of Bethlehem.

And the objection was that Christ was being subordinated there to the “mystic rose” and the stem of the rose was Mary. So Mariolatry most definitely coming through in that stanza, and Victorian sympathies of course being thoroughly opposed to that, that stanza was dropped.

**Dr. Duncan:** And doesn't feature, I think, in any hymnal that I've ever seen this hymn used. But the text of the rest of the hymn is impeccably orthodox from a Protestant perspective. Let's just walk through each of the stanzas.

“Crown Him with many crowns,  
The Lamb upon His throne;”

It's an admission, it's a celebration, it's a declaration of the lordship of Christ.

“Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns  
All music but its own.”

Everything has to be subsumed under the headship of Christ.

“Awake, my soul, and sing  
Of Him who died for thee,”

This again — I love when this happens in a hymn, where suddenly the hymn writer and the singer starts talking or singing to himself, or to ourselves. Here we're exhorting ourselves not simply to see this spectacle of the acknowledgment and the coronation of the Lord Jesus Christ in His lordship, but to involve ourselves, to confess ourselves, to sing ourselves of Him who died for thee...

“And hail Him as thy matchless King  
Through all eternity.”

Derek, any comments on that first stanza?

**Dr. Thomas:** Well, it's just so uplifting, of course, and it's the way that it immediately throws you into the worship of heaven. There's something akin to that in the book of Revelation, that the worship on earth reflects the worship in heaven; so that our Sunday morning worship is a little glimpse of heavenly worship, not so much in the future, but heavenly worship as it is taking place right

now with angels and archangels and cherubim and seraphim.

**Dr. Duncan:** So the first stanza represents Christ's kingship in general, and it does echo the language of Revelation 19:12 — "...on His head are many crowns"; and Revelation 22:1, and Revelation 5:11-14. But it's a celebration of the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Then we go through a series of three attributions: "Crown Him the Lord of love," in the second stanza; "Crown Him the Lord of peace," in the third stanza; "Crown Him the Lord of years," in the fourth stanza.

Now. There were six stanzas of this hymn initially, as you have indicated. The second stanza is the one that you were just telling us about which really, apart from Mariolatry, could simply be read as referencing the Isaianic passages. But obviously those were read through a particular grid in the Tractarian Movement in the nineteenth century. But that's the stanza typically omitted.

And the third stanza is omitted in our hymnal: it's "Crown Him the Son of God." And it acknowledges His two natures. It basically acknowledges a Chalcedonian Christology. So our second stanza in *The Trinity Hymnal* is really the fourth stanza of Matthew Bridges' hymn, and it's a really good stanza:

Crown Him the Lord of love;  
Behold His hands and side,  
Rich wounds, yet visible above,  
In beauty glorified:  
No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,  
But downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright.

And it has a little bit of an echo of *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, Watts' great hymn...

"Behold, His hands, His side." It echoes that kind of language of the glorified Savior who still bears in His body the wounds that He received on Calvary. Thoughts on that, Derek?

**Dr. Thomas:** That worship must include an appreciation not just of the presence of Christ among His people, but there must be a transcendent aspect to worship. We're in the presence of someone who is far greater than we could ever imagine Him to be; and even the angels are bowing down their eyes because they cannot take in the effulgence of the glory of Christ.

**Dr. Wymond:** And I love that reference in The Revelation to the twenty and four elders bowing down and casting their crowns before Christ, and it sort of makes me think about what our perspective and our focus in heaven is going to be. A lot of times we sort of joke among ourselves and say, "Now, when I get to heaven

I'm going to look up Paul and ask this question," and all these other things that we are talking about settling. And I think that we will just be absolutely overwhelmed when we see the majesty of heavenly worship. And I like thinking about the fact that in our earthly worship we want to try to capture, not in some dramatic way that points to us, but in some way that points to Christ and His majesty.

**Dr. Duncan:** In the third stanza in our hymnal, which is Bridges' fifth stanza, you get a feel for the more flowery poetry of the Victorian era as opposed to a hundred years earlier, the more simple or plain style of writing in hymns:

Crown Him the Lord of peace;  
Whose power a scepter sways  
From pole to pole, that wars may cease,  
Absorbed in prayer and praise."  
And then here it really gets flowery:

His reign shall know so end;  
And round His pierced feet  
Flow flowers of paradise extend  
Their fragrance ever sweet.

That's a very Victorian bit of poetry.

**Dr. Thomas:** And he's living in Canada, part of the British Empire that then ruled the world, and I imagine some of that is there. And I can't but imagine that when this was sung in the late nineteenth century, especially in Britain and the Commonwealth, those ideas would naturally come to mind.

Our Postmillennial friends, of course, see something else here! "From pole to pole, that wars may cease, and all be prayer and praise," which I doubt is what Matthew Bridges was thinking of, but it's more of the new heavens and new earth that's in view.

**Dr. Duncan:** Bill?

**Dr. Wymond:** Well, we have now to sing *Crown Him with Many Crowns*, Victor Smith. Let us listen to *Crown Him with Many Crowns*:

Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne;  
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own:  
Awake, my soul, and sing of Him who died for thee,  
And hail Him as thy matchless King  
Through all eternity.

Crown Him the Lord of love; behold His hands and side,

Rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified:  
No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,  
But downward bends his burning eye  
At mysteries so bright.

Crown Him the Lord of peace; whose power a scepter sways  
From pole to pole, that wars may cease, absorbed in power and praise:  
His reign shall know no end; and round His pierced feet  
Fair flower of paradise extend  
Their fragrance ever sweet.

Crown Him the Lord of years, the Potentate of time;  
Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime:  
All hail, Redeemed, hail! For Thou hast died for me:  
Thy praise shall never, never fail  
Throughout eternity.

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