

Hymns of the Faith: “How Firm a Foundation”

Isaiah 40–42

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, for “Hymns of the Faith,” a program in which we have the joy and privilege of talking about the great hymns of the Christian church — a true deposit of faith and of joy that we enjoy together as we sing Lord's Day after Lord's Day in Christian congregations. These, of course, are English-speaking songs that English-speaking congregations all over the English-speaking world will utilize some of this rich treasury of theological devotion and doxology. We've just had a joy the last number of months studying some of the great English-speaking hymns that have been used, not just over the last 500 years, but even longer than that — hymns that were originally written in Latin or some other language, that have been translated into English and used in congregations like ours, the First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, and dozens and dozens of other different traditions.

Today, we've got the joy, Derek, of looking at a wonderful old hymn that dates from the later part of the eighteenth century, *How Firm a Foundation*. We often think of this song as a song about the word of God, and certainly the first stanza gives a wonderful declaration of the believer's faith being based on, founded on, the sure and certain word of God and upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. But really, the song as a whole addresses the believer's security in a variety of biblical truths, and I'm looking forward to talking with you and Bill about it today. But first let me just say, Good morning!

Dr. Thomas: Good morning! I actually was thinking in that wonderful introduction you gave . . . my mind went to not just English-speaking, but our Korean friends, you know; a sizeable, sizeable church in South Korea especially. You know they've translated many of these English hymns into Korean, and actually sing

them to Western tunes.

Dr. Duncan: Oh, and they have really taken to them. I remember a friend, an acquaintance of ours in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania — an English-speaking person — telling his Korean students, “You really must scrap these English hymns and write your own,” and they said, “Why would we want to do that? We like these!” And they were probably as ardent supporters of what you and I will know as the old blue *Trinity Hymnal* as any English-speaking congregation around! It really is an interesting exercise in how these things sometimes transcend cultures, because certainly the native music in Korea would be very, very different from sort of the English-speaking hymn tradition, and yet they've taken to it.

Dr. Thomas: You know I teach among the Koreans a couple of times a year. They not only have translated the hymns, but they use the same tunes, so that when they sing I can sing the same hymn in English, and my Korean brother next to me sing it in Korean. But I don't have to stand there not knowing what's going on; I just sing it in English! It certainly does challenge the contextualization gurus about the translation and integration of so-called “Western” text into an Eastern mindset.

Dr. Duncan: Well, I'll tell you...in that context, too, Derek, I was just talking to a mutual friend of ours, Dr. Kim, a couple of weeks ago about this very thing, and he was saying when Korea came to Christ (and there was a massive coming to Christ, as you've already indicated, in Korea, beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century and extending into the early part of the twentieth century), he stressed that Korea came to Christ from paganism, from real honest-to-goodness paganism, so there were no cultural artifacts that could be sort of redeemed (as we hear so many of our friends speak of theologically) to be put to use in the Christian churches. So they were ready to grab hold of robust, monotheistic, explicitly Christian, exalting the uniqueness of Christ, affirming Christian doctrine over against the dominant pagan culture.

Dr. Thomas: For anyone interested in pursuing that a little, there was a marvelous little book published probably 25 years ago now, called *The Korean Pentecost*, written by somebody called Hunt...first name escapes me now. It was published by The Banner of Truth, but it's just a little paperback describing the extraordinary revival (in the biblical sense of that term), the outpouring of God's Spirit on South Korea.

Dr. Duncan: Well, Derek, I want to go ahead and jump into the text of this song, because we've got a whole range of theological doctrines on which the believer's assurance is based in the text of this song. And I want Bill to tell us a little bit about the traditional American melody to which we sing this hymn, and also about an alternative tune to which this hymn is often sung, both in Britain and America. But I want to start with you, Derek, if you could tell us about this

gentleman.

Dr. Thomas: Oh, yes. John Rippon was — I guess he was an eighteenth century Baptist.. You know, if you studied English Baptist history, for example, Dr. Rippon would figure largely in that. But in his gathering of hymns...and I guess he's one of a number of people who in the eighteenth century, and Bill Wymond will know more on this than I will, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, various collections of hymns were published. [*A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*, by John Rippon (1787)].

You know we think of hymns as being in hymn books, but these were printed in magazines as hymns that weren't necessarily sung on any wide basis. They had to be collected together, and Dr. Rippon is well known for having collected a number of hymns, from which the popularity of some of them, like this one, I think, emerges.

Dr. Duncan: And this collection of hymns included Watts' hymns, and then this one. We really are not absolutely sure who wrote the text, but we think that a man named Keene wrote the text. But Rippon is the one who gathered these things into a hymn book that apparently was widely used in the Baptist churches into the nineteenth century.

Dr. Thomas: Right. And I said "English Baptist" history, but Rippon's selections of hymns immediately became popular in places like Philadelphia and New York; and interestingly enough, this particular hymn, "*How Firm a Foundation, ye saints of the Lord...*" is not a very popular hymn in Britain. It may be...don't let me be mistaken! It *may* be in Baptist circles in Britain; that's possible. It certainly isn't in any Anglican hymnbook in Britain. For example, in a collection of the most popular hymns in an Anglican text, this one is not going to appear there.

Dr. Duncan: That's so true. The American tune fits at a couple of points that I think help the singer to emphasize to himself a couple of the comforting truths that are set forth in this passage. There's a place in the tune where it allows you to sort of re-emphasize a phrase that you've previously stated.

Dr. Thomas: The tune — I'd actually never sung it to this tune until I came here — We would have sung it to the Christmas carol tune, ADESTE FIDELIS, but it's also called PORTUGUESE...something like that. Whenever I sing this tune, I'm actually reminded of Dvorak's *Ninth "New World" Symphony*, which has that American folk tune...that if I were to sing it, which I won't now...but it would be very familiar to you. [Dr. Wymond plays tune.] That's it! And it sort of goes back to an early American history for me, as I sing this tune.

Dr. Duncan: Well, the tune must have been used on the frontier in the early part of the nineteenth century during the revivals, Bill. And I know the particular hymn text that I have in front of me dates it to a compilation of hymns from 1832. But

that's a good segue for you to tell us a little bit about the tune and about some of the things that the tune enables us to emphasize in the text.

Dr. Wymond: Well, the tune name is FOUNDATION, but it actually had another name, which was BELLEVUE. It appeared in a pamphlet compilation called "The Cluster of Spiritual Songs, Divine Hymns, and Sacred Poems" that was put together by a Baptist minister whose name was Jesse Mercer, and he published that first in 1817. So this is sort of that magazine or pamphlet that you're talking about that was done frequently, not only with texts, but with hymn tunes.

Dr. Duncan: Is that the Jesse Mercer for whom Mercer University is named?

Dr. Wymond: I was wondering that myself.

Dr. Wymond: But anyway, I think that's an interesting phenomenon that was happening during that time. But the tune is such a basic American folk song kind of tune that has a minimum number of notes in it, and it resembles the tune that you were talking about — the spiritual that was in the Dvorak that we were talking about. But just listen to this tune... [*Plays tune.*] I just played that much to show how simple it is. That's why it resembles the "Going Home" [*plays*]...very, very simple kind of tune, and it does get more intense as it goes up in pitch toward the end, where the text also gets more intense...[*plays*]...and so on. And then it just finishes out to the end.

I like this tune because I'm pretty sure that it is one of the Sacred Harp tunes. The Sacred Harp (<http://www.fasola.org/>) was an interesting phenomenon in the life of our country, and affected the church so much. The Sacred Harp denotes both a kind of musical notation, but also a group of people who still to this day in our part of the country get together and sing these old hymns and these old tunes. They had a unique musical system that used shaped notes. Now, some folks may have seen hymnals that had these kind of fancy-looking notes (diamond shaped, round, ice cream cone shaped, various shapes like that), and that was a system that was based on the do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do system of seven different kinds of shapes, so that if people didn't read pitches they could read the shapes of these notes.

Dr. Thomas: I have never heard this!

Dr. Wymond: You have not?

Dr. Thomas: I am "gob-smacked," as they say! I must see this!

Dr. Wymond: I must show you a shaped-note hymnal. Some only had four different shapes and they just repeated the shapes, and that's probably more common in the Sacred Harp tradition. But these Sacred Harp folks would get together and they would practice their shapes first, so they could get the tunes,

and then they would add the words, and they would sing all day long. Sometimes they would sing as many as ninety hymns! You had to be rather athletic to get all the way through this... and these were in four parts, unaccompanied, and they would sit around oftentimes in a square shape and then a leader would be in the center and would lead them through. And they had schools where they taught this kind of reading of music, so that people could pass it on and could participate. It was really just a very wholesome kind of thing.

Sacred Harp is often found in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Florida (parts of Florida), and so on like that. I remember as a boy reading announcements about how the Sacred Harp folks would get together on a Sunday afternoon in the courthouse, or something, and sing. So it's very much a part of our tradition.

This tune undoubtedly was a tune that they used. They used the OLD HUDREDTH tune [*plays*] that we have probably already talked about, and used a lot of the tunes that are more folk-like. And this tune certainly would have been a favorite of theirs. They sang lustily (or should I say strongly?) and had a lot of energy in their singing.

Dr. Thomas: And yet this tune is an evening tune. I imagine them sitting around a campfire...you know, sort of “Home on the Range” kind of idea...in Montana, barbecuing beef, and beans, and....

Dr. Wymond: It's a Southern tune! I'm sorry! You're going to have to get another image seeing them sitting around on their verandas fanning themselves, or something like that! [*Laughter*]

Dr. Thomas: But I can imagine, you know, in an evening, folk singing this tune. It has a folksy element.

Dr. Wymond: And I like the simplicity of it. It has a happy sound to me. It has to do, I think, with the main intervals that are there — a lot of thirds, which I think are very, very happy intervals — and so it's just a very pleasant thing.

Dr. Thomas: And the text is just exquisite, mainly because a lot of it is taken from Isaiah 40, 41, 42...that section. “When you pass through the deep waters, they shall not overtake you; when you pass through the fire, it shall not hurt you or consume you,” and especially the last stanza:

“The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes.
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.”

Dr. Duncan: Yes. I love hymns that preach the gospel to us, and that just press home the basis of the soul's security in Christ — and boy! does this hymn do it!

Dr. Thomas: I think there's something very moving about that triple “never” in the closing line, about the security of the believer.

Dr. Duncan: Yes, and there are several powerful repetitions, and of course it starts in the second line of that last stanza: “I will not, I will not desert to his foes.” And the music helps with this traditional American hymnody, because you've just sung “The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,” and then “I will not, I will not...” and the music just lets you do that. It lets you repeat that and assert it again. Like so many of the hymns that we've seen already, this hymn involves the believer preaching to himself, even as he or she lifts up a prayer or a praise to God.

Let's just walk through the text real quickly, Derek. If you look at the first stanza, the firm foundation of the believer's faith is based on the word of God, “...in His excellent word,” and on the Lord Jesus Christ:

“What more can He say, than to you He has said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?”

So the word of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But then we move to the second line, and here's where you hear the echoes of the prophet Isaiah — (or, as those of you who speak the King's English say, “I-sii-ah”):

“Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed;
For I am your God, and will still give you aid;”

[...which is virtually a rendering of the text in a slightly more poetic form]

“I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.”

So, there, Derek, what's the security the believer's based on?

Dr. Thomas: Well, on the Lord and not on ourselves! You know when we pass through trials (which is where it's going to go to), we may be at an end of ourselves, and our own strength may be failing. But our strength is in the Lord. But there are covenantal overtones, of course, to the language, aren't there? “I am with you.” That refrain goes through Scripture: “I will never leave you nor forsake you”... “Emanuel, God with us”... very covenantal expressions.

Dr. Duncan: Not only is there explicit trust in the Lord to preserve us in the midst of these difficulties, but at the end of that stanza is the affirmation that we are upheld by His righteous, omnipotent hand. So we're being asked to remember

that God is not only just and righteous, but He is absolutely all-powerful and unmatched in His might by anyone or anything in this universe, so that the believer's faith and confidence is founded upon those realities.

Dr. Thomas: You know, theoretically one can imagine a deity who may have the will but lack the power, or may have the power but lack the will; and in this case both His will and power are determined to save. But the use of the word *righteous* seems to imply that if God were not to do this, He would be doing something unrighteous and immoral; that having committed himself to our salvation through faith in Christ, He cannot therefore break His word.

Dr. Wymond: And it's interesting to me today to see how people turn to a contrary thought when they are supposedly giving comfort. You'll go to a funeral today in a tragic situation, and the minister will say, "Well, God is so sorry that this happened. He wouldn't have had it happen for anything, and He grieves with you," and so on like that. But there's no real comfort in His lack of power, if that were the case.

Dr. Duncan: I think that's an important observation, that the move the Bible makes and the move that this historic hymnody...which interestingly still persists in a day and age, Bill, where that happens all the time.... In other words, you'll have a sermon that says God was not involved, and then what will they turn around and sing? They'll turn around and sing something that actually is sort of standing up and directly contradicting what the preacher has just said. The preacher will say, "Oh, God couldn't do anything about this; He's really sorry. Now let's turn in our hymnals to No. 94 and sing *How Firm a Foundation*," in which we affirm that God's righteous, omnipotent right hand is upholding all His people!

Dr. Thomas: There's another side, of course, to the theology here, and that is its effect on us. The fourth stanza uses in the very close of it...let me pick it up:

"The flame shall not hurt you; I only design
Your dross to consume and your gold to refine."

In my head is "The Refiner's Fire" from Handel's *Messiah*, and the reference to John the Baptist, perhaps. But to the Hebrews 12 passage, probably, that trials are a discipline meant to remove the dross, impurities, so that what is left is the pure substance.

Dr. Duncan: Well, and that theme has started in the third stanza, which comforts us in the midst of our trials by saying "I will be with you." It's a promise of the presence of God; God's nearness; God's watchcare over us not at a distance, but near us. And, then listen:

"Your troubles to bless, and sanctify to you your deepest distress."

So that God's purposes in sanctification are operative even in the most difficult of our trials.

I don't think any of the three of us can hear those words from Isaiah (and these are just following through God's word from that great prophet) without thinking of Paul Stephenson, because we sang from that passage in Isaiah at Paul's funeral. And to see hundreds and hundreds of young people out in the congregation for that funeral affirming exactly what this hymn is affirming here was a heartening sight to me, and I'm sure it was...in fact, I've talked with Paul and with Jennifer and the family, and they've affirmed how encouraging it was to them to hear these words, these truths. Bill, when do we need to sing this?

Dr. Wymond: We need to sing this in every situation, that's for sure! But even in old age...this stanza says:

“Even down to old age all my people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love...”

And when they have gray hair, still like lambs they will be borne in My bosom.

Dr. Thomas: It's more indelicate than that, and it's very sensitive to me, because it speaks about “hoary hairs shall their temples adorn”; not the crown, because there's no hair there at all! [*Laughter*] It's only on the side of their heads that they have gray hair.

Dr. Wymond: Well, with that very deep thought, why don't we turn now and listen to this wonderful hymn. Ben Roberson will sing for us, *How Firm a Foundation*.

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,
Is laid for you faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He has said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed;
For I am your God, and will still give you aid;
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call you to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with you, your troubles to bless,
And sanctify to you your deepest distress.

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply;

The flame shall not hurt you; I only design
Your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

E'en down to old age all my people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn
Like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne.

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.

Dr. Wymond: This has been "Hymns of the Faith," brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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