

Hymns of the Faith: “God, All Nature Sings Thy Glory”

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. Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond! Good morning, Derek! I'm looking forward to talking with both you and Bill about a very modern hymn text, and a not quite so modern hymn tune — a hymn tune that will be very, very familiar to the people in the listening audience, but probably not associated with this particular hymn text. In fact, Bill Wymond, if you would play this hymn tune everyone in the listening audience is going to know this tune. [*Dr. Wymond plays.*]

Now every single one of us, I think, at least those of us who sing hymns at all, will recognize that as the tune to a hymn that was written by Henry van Dyke at the beginning of the twentieth century, called *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*, which was an upgrading of some really bacchanalian lyrics that were used to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, and we'll talk about that in a little bit.

But the hymn that we're actually going to study with that wonderful tune is *God, All Nature Sings Thy Glory*, which in terms of robust biblical lyrics is a significant advancement on Henry van Dyke's *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*. And it's a hymn, the text of which was written in 1960, by David Clowney, and David was the son of a man who became the president of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. His sister, Rebekah, is well known to us. She and her husband, Peter, have been long-time missionaries supported by our congregation. Peter is from Liverpool, England; went to grammar school with a young guy named John Lennon; was a missionary in France for about twenty years, and then came back to the United States to teach at Westminster Seminary in California, and is now a part of a wonderful organization called Christian Witness to a Pagan Planet (and I think they've just changed their name to Truth Exchange). But we'll talk about this text in just a little bit, but with two fantastic musicians in the room, we've got to talk about Beethoven and the background to this text that he used to the tune. So, Bill, tell us a little bit about *Ode to Joy*.

Dr. Wymond: Well, this very, very famous tune comes at the end of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, and I know Derek, being so well-schooled in that, will tell us more about it. And Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, which was the text that Beethoven used. But just as a phenomenon, I think this tune stands out especially in the twentieth century because it's been used in such important times. I remember that after the Berlin Wall fell down that Leonard Bernstein went to Berlin and conducted a concert right there at the Brandenburg Gate, and they did this *Ode to Joy*. And now in Europe every New Year's this is one of the things...the *Ninth Symphony* and the singing of this tune at the end of it is just sort of one of their necessary rituals.

Dr. Wymond: It is, and the whole symphony just sort of builds up in tension and relief preparing for the bursting forth of this tune, and the tune is done vigorously first by just a few instruments and then the whole orchestra joins in. They do it kind of with a slight rhythmic change from we do. They do [*plays*]....

Dr. Duncan: Yeah, which we slow down so that it can be sung by a congregation.

Dr. Wymond: And also, though, the theme comes in one beat early where you have ... [*plays*]...like that. Or actually it doesn't repeat, it just goes...like that, and it's a kind of interesting, jazzy way of handling the tune that just propels it forward and adds extra vigor to it. So it's a great tune, and it really mainly has secular associations.

Dr. Duncan: And Beethoven never heard this tune.

Dr. Wymond: As far as I know, because of his deafness.

Dr. Duncan: At least played in his symphony; he may have heard the tune before the time he wrote the symphony, but what an amazing piece of music. Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Oh! Yes, well, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* is perhaps *the* most important piece of music to have ever been written. I think that all music since Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* has to be judged by it. Many composers were terrified of writing a ninth symphony: Bruckner, Mahler...Mahler's *Ninth Symphony* was his death symphony because of his tribute to Beethoven. Some composers tried to label their ninth as the tenth, or their symphony number zero... [*laughter*] ...because of superstition that it could not be equaled. And that's probably true. There was never a symphony like it before, the inclusion...just its monumental scale and size. The use of Schiller's *Ode to Joy* [*An die Freude*] ...it's a piece of German poetry extolling nature, basically. It has no specific religious connotations. And, yes, I think it is true there was a female B-minus composer who [*laughter*]....well...Beethoven was less than

complimentary about her! But she was the one who kept him in beat during the first performance of *The Ninth Symphony*. He would look down to her and she conducted at his feet, sitting on a chair. And at the end everybody was on their feet and applauding and shouting, and he couldn't hear it. And somebody had to come and turn him around because he had no idea what the response to his symphony was.

I have (and this is just me, I suppose)...but I have enormous problems with tunes of this caliber and importance being robbed for hymn tunes. I don't like that! [Laughter] There's a Brahms symphony that we sing occasionally which I don't like; there's Dvorak's *New World Symphony* that we sing... [Dr. Wymond plays...]...yes; Saint-Saens' organ symphony that we sometimes sing...

Dr. Duncan: Let me ask you this. You heard the *Ninth Symphony* before you heard this used as a hymn tune?

Dr. Thomas: Oh, yes!

Dr. Duncan: Yes, you see, there's the difference, because I grew up with this as a hymn tune long before it was Beethoven's *Ninth* to me.

Dr. Thomas: I can't sing this tune without Schiller's words in my head, and therefore I find it utterly distracting. And the tune is so important musically. It's just monumentally important musically. So I personally think that worship music should compose its own music. That's where I am. And only because I cannot disassociate this music from the context of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

Dr. Wymond: You know, that's an interesting argument, I think, because everyone will cite the fact that back in the time of Luther he was comfortable in taking popular love songs and setting hymn texts to them and so on like that, and something happened. There was an evolution somewhere along the way in the way that we look at the sacred and the secular and mingling them for worship. That radically changed, because in Bach's time, in Luther's time, it was not a problem. But by our time or even before our time, it did become a problem.

Dr. Thomas: I think Calvin was better in hiring and paying musicians to write music for the church, and for me it's not a distinction between secular and sacred; I'm not sure what that means. [Dr. Duncan laughs]

Dr. Wymond: Well, in Luther's time it didn't mean much of anything!

Dr. Thomas: Right! But to me it's purely association, and I...

Dr. Duncan: It really doesn't matter whether it's high culture, like Beethoven, or folk culture like *Danny Boy*. People try and set hymn tunes to *Danny Boy*, and I'm with you on that. I'm hearing *Danny Boy*, I'm not hearing....

Dr. Wymond: Or *Amazing Grace*, set to *The House of the Rising Sun*.... [Dr. Duncan laughing...]

Dr. Thomas: If I'm singing this tune, you know, I'm in the Albert Hall in London, or in Chicago, or New York, or somewhere listening to a fabulous performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, and that to me is distracting.

Dr. Wymond: So I would say at the least, we really have to be careful if we borrow from popular secular music for worship.

Dr. Thomas: Sadly, I think, I'm probably one of a few who'd be distracted by it, but I do think association matters. And I think when I hear certain hymn tunes I think "church," and I like that. I like that sense of association — this is church, and this is what worship is. But for me, this tune...I can worship singing this tune, listening to this, but it's not "church" worship.

Dr. Duncan: Do you think that that is something that folks don't give enough attention to today? That is, that they're not as attentive to the power of association in worship in general?

Dr. Wymond: I think an extreme example of the problem that that sometimes brings (and I think I may have cited this), Bavinck, in his book on missions, talks about how there were missionaries in the South Sea Islands using the old tunes that they found in the culture, and finally the natives came to him and said, "Please quit using these tunes for our hymns now, because we have such bad associations with those in pagan worship." And the early church was very, very careful about this because certain instruments — the flute and so on — were used in pagan worship for very bad rituals, and so for a while they just banned their use because of those associations that could not be broken.

There's another thing that I think is interesting also, as we talk about music — sacred, secular, and so on — having to do with Beethoven, because we certainly don't have a record of Beethoven having been in the church very much. While he did write a great mass and wrote some other things that we use — the *Christ on the Mount*, and so on, we use music from that — we don't have a great strong record of his affiliation with the church, so some have asked the question, should we use his music that was written for the church? And my own thought is that whatever musical abilities he had were given by God, whether he acknowledged that...and I think he did. He left statements about believing in God and so on like that. Nevertheless, these common grace gifts that were given to him were from God and can be used in certain instances appropriately for worship.

Dr. Thomas: Yes, and I think that our understanding of common grace means that musicians who are ungodly can have a sense of beauty, and that is more defined I think in certain eras, in certain cultures. And I think it's under some

stress and strain in post-modernity in defining beauty, because the foundations of how you go about defining what is beautiful are...

Dr. Duncan: Well, we're so relativistic in the area of aesthetics that people are very, very reluctant to say something is good and something is bad, or something is better and something is worse — and certainly something is right and something is wrong in the realm of anything that has to do with music or art.

Dr. Thomas: And we're super-sensitive to the charge of elitism, I think. You know, that if you say, as I would say, this piece of music belongs to the highest class of music ever written. And that sounds elitist, I suppose. And I think we have an inadequate sense of history and an inadequate sense of the development of culture and how that should affect the church.

Dr. Duncan: I think what you raise...it is, for me at least, much less of a problem than the issue of associations. You could say the same thing about Ralph Vaughan-Williams that you say about Beethoven, even though he spent much of his life writing music for the church. But the thing was that Vaughan-Williams so often was writing music for the church — he wanted the church's music to be excellent, and so the associations, whatever his own personal state of regeneration was, were all churchly associations. And I do think...I'm thankful that whatever his state was, I'm thankful that he wrote music for the church. I do think there's something to it. Because this piece of music was one that I came into contact with probably in Vacation Bible School and as a child in Sunday School classes long before I heard it as Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, it doesn't rock me like it rocks you with the associations. But I tell you, there are lots of them...I could name other things. Like when...what's the hymn in our hymnal that tries to use the tune from Holtz's *The Planets*? I cannot sing that hymn without thinking of Jupiter, or whatever it is, from Holtz's *The Planets*!

Dr. Thomas: Yes. It was 1963; I was ten. I bought Hebert von Karajan's recording of this symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Dr. Duncan: And was it really slow? [*Laughing...*]

Dr. Thomas: It was very slow! And it was a problem getting it on one LP. It was a huge problem for the recording industry with Karajan. But, you know, that's my association of it, and I really do think that the church does need to think about writing its own music for worship, and that that is a process that needs to continue.

Dr. Wymond: I hate to just keep on beating this horse, but with regard to what the church is doing today and its music, it is basically reaching out to the popular culture so that it supposedly will have some commonality with people who come in who don't know Christ. And unfortunately, I think they're reaching in the poorest directions, the least creative directions. Much of the anthems that start

today sound to me like a theme song for one of the soap operas. You know, it's just the same thing... [*plays to demonstrate*]...this kind of a sound! [*Laughter*]

Dr. Duncan: Oh! Touché!

Dr. Wymond: Almost every anthem starts out like that.

Dr. Duncan: And you see somebody running through a field with their hair flying or whatever! That's great!

Well, let's talk a little bit about the text to the hymn, *God, All Nature Sings Thy Glory*, now that we've thoroughly bashed the use of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* as a hymn in the church.

Dr. Wymond: Well, only Derek!

Dr. Duncan: Derek, this hymn text itself really picks up kind of on a Psalm 19 kind of theme, with the heavens declaring the glory of God. Talk about the first stanza of this hymn text:

“God, all nature sings Thy glory, and Thy works proclaim Thy might”

Dr. Thomas: Yes. I mean, this is a typical hymn, and we have many of them that sing the beauty and glory of nature, of creation. It is somewhat surprising and unexpected that at the end of the first stanza ... You know we've talked about nature and we've talked about the vastness of the heavens, and day and night, and changing seasons, and storming sea, and then it ends with “praise the changeless Trinity,” which is not what I was expecting to find. And it obviously rhymes with “storming sea.” [*Laughter*] I hadn't been prepared for a statement about the Trinity, and I somewhat wish that having mentioned Trinity, he would then in the second stanza go on to just to elaborate maybe on the Trinity.

But as I was telling my students yesterday, we constantly need to affirm Trinity in worship all the time, and therefore this would make a good opening hymn. (I mean the text would make a good opening hymn — perhaps to another tune!)

Because I think that if the church doesn't constantly affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, we lose it. And it is the most fundamental doctrine of Christianity.

Dr. Duncan: The second stanza makes a Calvinian move, or if you will, a Pauline move, in moving from nature to man as a display of God's glory. Talk about the second stanza that begins with:

“Clearer still we see Thy hand in man whom Thou hast made for Thee....”

And that's a very John Calvin kind of statement about how even our bodies bear

witness to the reality of God.

Dr. Thomas: And it's a very Clowney...not so much David Clowney, maybe, but Ed Clowney-esque statement to make, the importance of Genesis 1:26, 27, that man is made in the image of God and even after the fall that man still retains that image, in Calvin's words, "like a ruined castle." But then, interestingly, we go from there, that even fallen man...that man as man, man as a created being, still reflects something of the majesty and glory of God. Where does he do that? Well, in music. Yes, in Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. If you don't see something of the hand of God in that music, then you are truly blind and deaf.

"Music, art, the fruitful garden, all the labor of his days,
Are the calling of his Maker to the harvest feast of praise."

A testimony to the rightness and propriety of vocation, no matter what that vocation may be.

Dr. Duncan: Now, the logic of that second stanza flows. I mean, you point out that in the first stanza you're not prepared for the introduction of the Trinity. But the logic of the second stanza flows. I like what he does with the third stanza though, because he does what you almost never hear done in nature hymns; that is, in hymns that praise the revelation of God in nature, very rarely is there a strong statement of the doctrine of sin and depravity, and boy, does he go there with a vengeance! And he not only goes there with a vengeance, but he takes you to Jesus, and not just to Jesus, but to the blood of Jesus by the time you've gotten to the end of that stanza, and that's a pretty impressive thing to do. Walk us through that third stanza.

Dr. Thomas: Oh, that third stanza is masterful, especially his emphasis on conscience, a much forgotten but important aspect of our created-ness and image bearing, that "...Conscience only serve, As unceasing, grim reminders of the wrath which we deserve."

Dr. Wymond: Read that line in that wonderful Welsh right there.

Dr. Duncan: Yes!

Dr. Thomas: "But our sins have spoiled Thine image; nature, conscience only serve, "As unceasing, grim reminders of the wrath which we deserve."

That's a phenomenal piece of writing.

Dr. Duncan: It almost evokes the famous phrase in Calvin where, you know, that from time to time our conscience drags us before the throne of God to sit before the One who will judge us. And then there's this wonderful shift in the last part of that line. Take us there, Derek.

Dr. Thomas: Well, I want you to take us there, Ligon! Because this is grace. I mean, a statement of sin and condemning conscience, and now a statement of great beauty.

Dr. Duncan: “Yet Thy grace and saving mercy in Thy Word of truth revealed, Claim the praise of all who know Thee, in the blood of Jesus sealed.”

It's a great way to end a line that started with the doctrine of sin, and we'll let you hear the choir or the singer sing the final stanza. But here it is: *God, All Nature Sings Thy Glory.*

God, all nature sings Thy glory, and Thy works proclaim Thy might;
Ordered vastness in the heavens, ordered course of day and night;
Beauty in the changing seasons, beauty in the storming sea;
All the changing moods of nature praise the changeless Trinity.

Clearer still we see Thy hand in man whom Thou hast made for Thee;
Ruler of creation's glory, image of Thy majesty.
Music, art, the fruitful garden, all the labor of his days,
Are the calling of his Maker to the harvest feast of praise.

But our sins have spoiled Thine image; nature, conscience only serve
As unceasing, grim reminders of the wrath which we deserve.
Yet Thy grace and saving mercy in Thy Word of truth revealed
Claim the praise of all who know Thee, in the blood of Jesus sealed.

God of glory, power, mercy, all creation praises Thee;
We, Thy creatures, would adore Thee now and through eternity.
Saved to magnify Thy goodness, grant us strength to do Thy will;
With our acts as with our voices Thy commandments to fulfill.

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