

Hymns of the Faith: “Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi,
with,
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, 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. Good morning to you all and good morning to you, Derek. It's great to be with you on “Hymns of the Faith” this morning.

Dr. Thomas: Thank you, Ligon. It's good to be with you too.

Dr. Duncan: We've been chatting a little bit off the air this morning about the first hymn that we're going to take a look at which is, “Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise.” It's a wonderful Charles Wesley text, written in the early 1700s, in the early 18th century, and it's unique in that it's an ascension hymn. Whereas there are lots of Christmas hymns, incarnation hymns, and there's lots of resurrection hymns, Easter hymns, there're not many ascension hymns. And so I want to pick Derek's brain about that because the ascension has been a special study of yours for many years. You wrote a book on the doctrine of the ascension called, *Taken Up To Heaven*. Is that the name of the book? Am I getting it right?

Dr. Thomas: That's correct. I'm impressed.

Dr. Duncan: And so I want to talk with Derek about that today and I also want to give some attention to this wonderful tune and text. Bill, we were saying there's not a whole lot of information about Robert Williams who wrote this tune, but what we know we'll talk about today, but maybe there're some folks who don't immediately know what tune we're talking about when we say — how do you say it, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Llanfair.

Dr. Duncan: See, I'd say Llanfair because it's just got two “l's”, and an “an”, and

“fair,” but because we have our official Welshman on this program, Derek Thomas, he is able to pronounce it. Say it one more time.

Dr. Thomas: Llanfair

Dr. Duncan: And tell them what it means.

Dr. Thomas: *Llan* is the old Welsh word for church.

Dr. Duncan: And if you were preaching a sermon in Welsh and you were referring to the church, is this the word you would use?

Dr. Thomas: No, *eg/wys*. The influence of French on Welsh.

Dr. Duncan: And Latin on French. I mean, you can hear *ecclesia* in that. Wow. Okay, so that's the word that you would typically use but this refers to a place where a church building was, is that right?

Dr. Thomas: Right. There are hundreds of towns and villages in Wales which begin with this prefix, *llan*. I was born in a little village called *Llanybydder*.

Dr. Duncan: Right. And the fair refers to a place where there's a market you were saying.

Dr. Thomas: Probably a cattle market of some kind.

Dr. Duncan: Do it's identifying — it's a place where there's a church and there was also a cattle market there. And so that was given the name as the town.

Dr. Thomas: And the “boffins” here suggest it's a town in Montgomeryshire in Wales. But it is a common Welsh name.

Dr. Duncan: And it's a beautiful tune. It's in a major key. Not all Welsh tunes are minor key tunes, so Bill, let's here this wonderful tune. [Bill plays tune]

Dr. Thomas: It would be altogether inappropriate to have an ascension hymn in a minor key, of course. And why is it, you know it always fascinates me that by altering one note in a scale or whatever, one scale can sound triumphant and one scale can sound plaintiff.

Dr. Wymond: So if it were in a minor key it would be much more serious.

Dr. Thomas: But is that because in the minor key there is a hint of irresolution, that it's not resolved in some way?

Dr. Wymond: I think perhaps that's part of it and there's something

psychological.

Dr. Thomas: A yearning in the minor key.

Dr. Wymond: Yes, very much so.

Dr. Duncan: And you could see that being turned into a good, plaintiff Welsh tune in the minor, couldn't you?

Dr. Thomas: And it is certainly part of the Welch psyche. I was on the telephone this week with our good friend, Sinclair Ferguson and I made a comment and he said, "Oh, there's the Welsh in you again!" which was indicative of something plaintiff I think.

Dr. Duncan: Now that's pretty bad when a Scot is giving you the business about that and blaming it on being Welsh!

Dr. Thomas: But it's a marvelous tune and I just think that the very syllables of "Alleluia" must be grist for the mill for any musicologist. If you want to write a tune, that repetition of "Alleluia" —

Dr. Wymond: Well, what I think is interesting about it is you just have these short phrases, every line has a short phrase followed by an "Alleluia" and that comes from a very old tradition in the church. When the church first started adding something to the psalms to expand them musically they would add "Alleluia" phrases at the end.

Dr. Thomas: Could you sing this antiphonally, have a choir sing the short phrase and have the congregation sing "Alleluia"?

Dr. Wymond: I think so. The phrase would be awfully short. I think probably if you were to do it antiphonally you would do the whole first line with the "Alleluia" and then the second group would do the second line and so on like that.

Dr. Duncan: Because the first, second, and fourth lines are the same.

Dr. Wymond: Absolutely.

Dr. Duncan: It's a very, very simple tune.

Dr. Wymond: Extremely simple, and as some of the hymnologists point out, it's built on thirds with this "Alleluia" phrase.

Dr. Duncan: You've called attention to repetition in keys making it a strong tune and the rise, so it's got both the repetition and the rising notes.

Dr. Wymond: Absolutely. You're saying, "Hail," which is a command, "Hail the day that sees Him rise" and you have this rising tune. And then the "Alleluia" is more like a phrase from a Gregorian chant so I think it's a blend of a very old church style.

Dr. Duncan: Now the material that we were reading about the hymn called this a rounded bar-form, which is not a term that I'm used to, and then it described that as A-A-B-A, which is just what we were describing — the first line, the second line, and the fourth line are all the same and then you have this different line in the third line of each stanza.

Dr. Wymond: Isn't it interesting, you have these three lines that are just the same thing? You would think it would be boring, but actually it makes the hymn easy to sing, easy for the congregation to pick up. So you have this — and then that repeats and then you have it in a minor key and then you go back to the original and it makes for a very good hymn.

Dr. Duncan: And it's got enough energy — maybe the rising aspect of it and then the happiness of the "Alleluia" — it's got enough energy that it's able to stand that repetition. I think other hymns probably would be boring if they had that much repetition but there's enough energy. And the text does go well. The command, "Hail the day that sees Him rise" does fit well with this particular piece of music.

Dr. Wymond: It certainly does. And some of the great hymns, "A Mighty Fortress" is another that comes to mind where you have this repetition so that these hymns are not hard for congregations to learn. Derek, you know Welsh folk music. Does this have any element of that in it?

Dr. Thomas: You know I was just thinking there are folk, or at least nursery rhymes, that have this A-A-B-A — there were a couple going in my — I won't sing them now, but there were a couple in my head as you were talking how three lines, the first, the second, and the fourth are identical and therefore very easy to sing. I mean there's not much to learn here.

Dr. Wymond: And what was that technical term that you used, Ligon?

Dr. Duncan: They called it a rounded bar-form — A-A-B-A. And again I've not heard of that term used. I was also looking here, the hymnary — by the way, the www.hymnary.org which is sponsored by Calvin College and by the Christian Classics Ethereal Library has some wonderful background information on hymns and it's one of the places I always check. There are two or three internet sites that I like to check on hymns, and then I've got literature in book form and other forms that I like to read about hymns. But one of the interesting things about this is this is one of those tunes where the text came together over a period of time. Charles Wesley wrote the bits apart from the "Alleluia's" back in 1739 and then Thomas Cotterill wrote or added the "Alleluia's" in 1820 and it's interesting to see,

and I'm not sure when this text was first matched up with Llanfair. I mean, all my life I've sung this hymn to this particular tune and I'm sure that there are other tunes that it circulates with, but it really does work.

Dr. Thomas: It's fascinating to me that this is about the ascension of course, I mean the text is about the ascension, and this tune rises and as it were descends a little and that fits perfectly the visual affect of Christ ascending and then sitting at God's right hand, which is what the New Testament emphasizes.

Dr. Wymond: You know you can — I'm wondering if the word round does have to do with doing it as a round. You could do this as a round, this tune, if you just started it on the fourth count.

Dr. Duncan: Oh, right.

Dr. Wymond: So it would work as a round also I think. Not a perfect round but a round

Dr. Duncan: The hymnary says that this is considered to be the most popular of all Ascension texts in English language worship and I'm trying to think of other Ascension hymnody and nothing just immediately jumps to mind when you think about the Ascension. Whereas, if we sat down, just common folks sitting in the pew, ask them for Christmas hymns, they'd know some of those, ask them for Easter hymns, they'd know some of those —

Dr. Wymond: Or Second Coming hymns.

Dr. Duncan: Second Coming hymns — even “Low He Comes With Clouds Ascending” — there would be things that they would immediately know, but they don't know much about the ascension. Probably one of the reasons for that, Derek, is the doctrine of the Ascension is not emphasized like Incarnation and Resurrection and Second Coming. But it's very important in the New Testament.

Dr. Thomas: Indeed. One thinks of passages like Ephesians 4, that “having ascended on high, He gave or distributed, gives unto men.” So the sending of the Holy Spirit and the gifting of believers is a consequence of the Ascension. I often think of the Ascension as Jesus' promotion. We do say in colloquial speech, “he's gone up in the world,” meaning he's been promoted. And Jesus went up and was received into the cloud, as a figure of speech at least, but the point is that He went up to be with his Father, to sit at God's right hand as part of that theological paradigm of Scripture that He rules over His enemies. One thinks of the second psalm — “until He has made His enemies His footstool.” So the ascension is in the history of redemption and the progress of Jesus from Incarnation to death to burial to Resurrection to Ascension to the Session of Christ at God's right hand.

Dr. Duncan: And we even affirm that in the Apostle's Creed because we say that

“He sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty” and so the idea of the heavenly Session is a very, very important idea in Christian theology and we even repeat it in the Apostle's Creed. But unless your pastor has maybe taught through the Apostle's Creed you may never have heard a message on the Ascension.

Dr. Thomas: Right. And it's certainly rare. I think if you were preaching through certain books like the Acts of the Apostles or Ephesians 4 or some passages in Hebrews you might not specifically remember a series on the ascension as you would on the death of Jesus or particularly the resurrection of Jesus at Easter time for example.

Dr. Duncan: It's interesting, the information from the Psalter hymnal handbook — and used to there was a wonderful practice of writing handbooks for hymnals. I used to collect these handbooks. I wish I could still go out and do it more these days but when I was in Britain the Oxford University Press produced handbooks for the Church of England Hymnal which was called, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Oxford also produced handbooks for the Church of Scotland hymnal which was called, *The Church Hymnary and Psalter*.

And those hymnal handbooks did two things. One, they told you about the authors of the text and the composers of the music, but they also gave you background on the hymns themselves and I love to read those. And the *Psalter Hymnal Handbook* says something very interesting about this tune. It was introduced by this Thomas Cotterill who studied at St. John's College in Cambridge in England and who was an Anglican clergyman and he produced a popular collection of hymns called, *Selections of Psalms and Hymns* in 1810. And when he did, there was a reaction because there were many in the Church of England at that time who wanted the Church of England to maintain a practice of only singing psalms. I think a lot of people don't realize that's not just a Presbyterian thing but it was sort of the common stance of Protestant churches, certainly in Britain, to be psalm singing. And so when he introduced this collection of hymns there was a bit of a controversy about it and he withdrew it and then submitted another edition of it to the archbishop to get his approval of it before it was distributed and that's the one that was published in 1820 and that's the one that contained this particular version of Wesley's hymn, “Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise.” And it was the first hymnal of the Anglican Church in that region which is fascinating. It's 1820 and it's the first time they've had a hymnal. They've worked out of a Psalter up until that point. I think a lot of people don't realize how recent church hymnals are in some cases in comparison to what was being sung in the past. I find that fascinating.

Dr. Wymond: And in the British cathedral system, the choir system, some of the best still do the psalms in Anglican chant form. It's a wonderful tradition.

Dr. Duncan: They tend to — they're these elongated, there'll be like one note on

the page and they'll sort of chant the song out. It's not as melodic as our hymns or even metrical psalm forms but it makes it easy I guess to articulate complex phrases with lots of syllables in it.

Dr. Wymond: That way they can do the Scripture as written and they don't have to put it in a metric form.

Dr. Duncan: Rhyming and that sort of thing.

Dr. Wymond: It's a really wonderful art to do but it's not easy.

Dr. Duncan: I guess the congregation really has to be trained in it, and even a choir presumably would have to work at it a bit.

Dr. Wymond: Basically, a few forms such as the *Magnificat* or the *Nunc dimittis* or something like that the congregation will do, but for the most part it's a choir exercise and just listen to.

Dr. Duncan: Which presumably that's what monastic choirs would have done. They would have done a lot of chants like that in the middle ages and if you had been participant of the services of the abbey or wherever they were, you would have observed but you probably wouldn't have participated in that. It would have been beyond your ability. Presumably there wouldn't have been anything that you could have read from anyway and whereas you can line out a hymn that's rhyming and maybe a little less complex syllabically, you can't do that with a chant because you've got a longer phrase. That's very, very interesting. Looking at the text itself, Derek, why don't you walk us through? What's the first line? Walk us through the flow of Wesley's argument or logic in this hymn.

Dr. Thomas: Well, it opens with "Hail the day that sees Him rise to His throne above the skies; Christ, the Lamb for sinners giv'n, enters now the highest heaven." And it's the enthronement and Lordship and triumph of Christ, His victory over sin and death and hell.

Dr. Duncan: Don't you love the way that Wesley, no matter what he's writing about, always finds a way to work in the cross. I mean, he's talking about the Ascension here but he gets the cross in the very first line! "Christ the Lamb for sinners given" and I love that cross-centeredness to Wesley's hymns. And he never lets you forget the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ as the centerpiece, even while he's drawing your attention to the importance of the ascension.

Dr. Thomas: And the second verse, you know, is a thing of beauty because Wesley imagines the expectation of angels and archangels and the church triumphant welcoming Jesus back now in His incarnate form into heaven. "There for Him high triumph waits; lift your heads eternal gates" and that's a reference to the twenty-fourth psalm.

Now there's just an exquisite Scottish tune to the twenty-fourth psalm that we used to sing in Belfast a lot, especially on sort of important or momentous occasions. It's just, to hear a large congregation sing that acapella, "Lift up your heads, o ye gates, and be lifted up ye ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." That's just one of those grand Scottish Psalter tunes. "He hath conquered death and sin, take the King of glory in!" And you've almost got to visualize the sort of gasp of delight and wonder in heaven as Jesus, in His now incarnate body, comes to take His seat at the Father's side.

Dr. Duncan: Well, you know we can envisage the way that a nation celebrates triumphant victors coming back. Maybe somebody in our listening audience has seen those kinds of parades and celebrations, like that when Dwight David Eisenhower came back from the Second World War to the United States, and there were these grand parades and such and perhaps you have those memories as well in Britain. But to think of heaven's response to the return of Christ — "The mission that I was sent on has not been accomplished" and He's being welcomed into heaven. And the perfect praise of risen saints and spotless angels — it's an awesome scene.

Dr. Thomas: And Wesley again won't let us see that without seeing the reason why He had come to the world in the first place — "He hath conquered death and sin, take the King of glory in!" And then in the third stanza, you know one of the consequences of the Ascension of Jesus and His sitting at God's right hand is in the book of Hebrews — "that He ever lives to make intercession for us" and He makes that intercession based on the triumph of His accomplishments. "See, He lifts His hands above! See, His shows the prints of love! Hark! His gracious lips bestow blessings on His church below."

Dr. Duncan: And that picks up on the Ephesians idea that you were pointing us to where Paul says that what's happening in the heavenly session is that Jesus is engifting His church. He's pouring out gifts of love to His church.

Dr. Thomas: We don't hear so much of it now but it is an important point. "See, He shows the prints of love" — the nail prints in His hands and feet and how important is that?

Dr. Duncan: Well, you know, you point out in your book the importance of knowing that there is a human being sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Yes, the second person of the Trinity, yes, fully God and fully man, but He is enfleshed and He is enfleshed forever, and so it is Jesus Christ the God-Man, and not only the God-Man but continuing to bear the marks of His pain. Whereas we in glory will be in glorified bodies which presumably bear no visage of our past imperfections, yet He carries in His own flesh the marks of His pain for us.

Dr. Thomas: And don't you love the way it ends with, "There Thy face unclouded see, find our heav'n of heav'ns in Thee!" That's a beautiful way to end.

Dr. Duncan: You couldn't end better. Bill, let's hear this wonderful hymn, "Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise."

Hail the day that sees Him rise! Alleluia!
To His throne above the skies; alleluia!
Christ, the Lamb for sinners sig'n, Alleluia!
Enters now the highest heav'n. Alleluia!

There for Him high triumph waits; Alleluia!
Lift your heads, eternal gates, Alleluia!
He hath conquaered dath and sin, Alleluia!
Take the King of glory in! Alleluia!

See, He lifts His hands above! Alleluia!
See, He shows the prints of love! Alleluia!
Hark! His gracious lips bestow, Alleluia!
Blessings on His church below! Alleluia!

Lord, beyond our mortal sight, Alleluia!
Raise our hearts to reach thy height; Alleluia!
There thy face unclouded see, Alleluia!
Find our heav'n of heav'ns in thee! Alleluia!

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

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