

Hymns of the Faith: “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Wretched”

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.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. It's great to be with you again this morning for “Hymns of the Faith,” and you, too, Derek — good morning!

We are looking today at a wonderful hymn text, a Joseph Hart text, *Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Wretched*. And there are so many things I like about this text in contrast to how the gospel is sometimes presented today that I'm really looking forward to talking with you about the contents of what is essentially a hymn of invitation. It's a call to sinners to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Before we even begin to talk about it, Bill, why don't you play the tune to which this text is set. [*Dr. Wymond plays.*] Now that's the Welsh tune. That's not the tune that it's sung to in *Southern Harmony*. Is that right?

Dr. Wymond: That's right, but I couldn't find that tune this morning.

Dr. Duncan: But that's the tune that it's set to in our *Trinity Hymnal*, to that wonderful and — how do I say that Welsh tune name, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: BRYN CALDARIA, which is “Calvary's Hill.” It's a very, very recognizable Welsh tune. Only before we went on air this morning I was talking to Bill, and as a Welshman it's a very difficult tune to sing congregationally. I think some of these Welsh tunes were written in times of great revival with a thousand people committed to singing (as Welsh people can be). I think of a Boys Choir or something singing this. You know, with that *ritardando* at the end it's difficult for a congregation to do justice to.

Dr. Duncan: But if you do it well, it's very powerful.

Dr. Thomas: But you're exhausted at the end of four stanzas of this!

Dr. Duncan: Yes, that's true! Walk us through it a little bit, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: Derek and I were talking about this tune, and in saying that in spite of the fact that it's difficult, a congregation can learn any tune of any hymn, eventually. But for one like this you have to decide that it's worth the time that it will take and the many repetitions for them to embrace it. It's just one of these hearty Welsh tunes written in a minor key, as so many of them are (not all of them, but so many of them), and that gives it a pathos and a kind of a seriousness right off out of the blocks, I think.

Dr. Thomas: I think if you're going to be singing this tune on a Sunday morning, you ought to tell people to have a hearty breakfast before coming to worship, because you're going to need some stamina! [*Laughter.*]

Dr. Wymond: Well, the Welsh people obviously are vigorous about things they do, at least in their singing. Anyway, so this tune is not difficult in the beginning [*plays*]. It's in $\frac{3}{4}$, so it has a swing to it, and that repeats again, and then you get down to the third line, which goes like this [*plays*]...and then you get to this, which is very difficult for a congregation [*plays*]. What's difficult about that is that it's a sudden change of pulse and meter for them and rapid notes, so they have to learn that. Then it ends in the vein that it began [*plays*]. So it has a lot of vigor to it, a lot of energy, and sort of a difficult...

Dr. Thomas: And it's another minor key.

Dr. Wymond: It's definitely in a minor key.

Dr. Duncan: Do we know anything about the William Owen who is the composer of the tune?

Dr. Wymond: We do. William Owen, who was born in 1813 and lived through 1893, was a publisher of a couple of hymnals using Welsh tunes. He was born in Bethesda — Derek tells me he knows that place — in Northern Wales, and he worked in a slave quarry as a young man at the age of ten. (Can you imagine children having to do that at the age of ten?) And he lived near a church called St. Ann, and he loved to hear the organist there playing. And he became a good musician himself and started composing. He gave tunes to the temperance movement there in Wales, and some of his tunes at the time were very popular, but the style of these tunes fell out of favor later in Wales. But this tune has survived partly because Vaughan Williams (the great English hymn collector and hymn publisher, and composer of symphonies, and so on like that) took this tune and made it a little bit tamer than it originally was and made it easier to sing. And so Vaughan Williams published it in the *English Hymnal*. He also did an organ prelude on this tune.

Dr. Thomas: Oh, we've got to have that at our church! We've got to hear that!

Dr. Wymond: Okay...well, I played not exactly Vaughan Williams' version, but it doesn't get that much easier, frankly. Again you just have to decide if you want to do this tune. I like the tune, actually, but I'm just being candid about it.

Dr. Thomas: You ought to go to a rugby match in the Millennium Stadium. You would hear...I don't know...50,000 drunken Welshmen singing this tune, and possibly even some of the words!

Dr. Wymond: That's why I say that any congregation could eventually learn this tune!

Dr. Duncan: Maybe the inebriation helps, I don't know!

Dr. Thomas: Well, it does challenge me to say (as I think I've said before) that there ought to be a sense of involvement in singing. You know, we ought on occasions to feel a little breathless after singing...that there is some effort on our part in praising God, that it's actually cost us something.

Dr. Wymond: I never cease to be amazed at the energy that people will put in at a sporting event cheering their team, maybe singing the school alma mater and whatever else, but when they get in church somehow they clam up. But there's a lie put to the idea that they just can't sing. Every year when we have a Men's Rally here with a thousand or more men, they just nearly blow the roof off singing, and I always wonder: Now when you get home, do you do the same thing?

Dr. Duncan: There's a psychology, though, just like you were saying. When you get a large congregation together, people who sometimes will hold back will jump in there and let loose, and they'll sing with gusto. They'll be hearty in their singing, whereas they might mumble otherwise.

Dr. Wymond: Well, I do think when we're setting pace for hymns that on a hymn that has natural energy because of its design, I want us to put energy into the hymn. I want us by the way we play it and approach the hymn to convey to them a certain energy so that they will be inspired to take it up.

Dr. Thomas: Joseph Hart, the composer of this hymn, was born about a dozen years before John Newton. John Newton was born in 1725, and Joseph Hart is born in 1712, so again it's eighteenth century. He lives through the Great Awakening that we associate with 1738-'39-'40, that sort of period, as a period of enormous growth and vitality in the church, although I don't think he was converted at that time. It's one of those remarkable stories. Joseph Hart wasn't actually converted until his mid-forties, I think. One source that I looked at before coming on air this morning suggested rather snippily that he had "a reasonable education" and spent at least his early life teaching modern languages. But he was converted at a Moravian church, and I'm going to ask you to explain that.

Dr. Duncan: That happens all the time in the 1700's! Help me here with the Moravians in London. How many of them were in London? I mean, every time you turn around John Wesley is stumbling into a Moravian church.

Dr. Thomas: I've only had secondary contact with Moravians. Our good friend Duncan Rankin's family have Moravian roots somewhere.

Dr. Duncan: That's right. Winston-Salem, North Carolina, has one of the major Moravian centers, and Salem College is there, and...

Dr. Thomas: Would I be right in saying that they belong to that Pietist Movement in Germany in the eighteenth century?

Dr. Duncan: Yes.

Dr. Thomas: The text, interestingly enough, was Revelation 3:10, which is "Behold, I stand at the door and knock"...that passage. (I'm not sure if I've got the right passage in the church at Laodicea.) Anyway, he is soundly converted and becomes an author of many hymns, including *Come, Holy Spirit, Come* (which is in our hymnal, I think). I remember in J.I. Packer's book, *Keep in Step With the Spirit*, he said Joseph Hart's hymn on the Holy Spirit is the most perfect hymn on the Spirit ever written.

I remember him saying that each stanza of the hymn addresses every facet of the Spirit's work, and he thought it was a perfect hymn on the Holy Spirit. [I don't think I'm making that up; I remember reading that sometime.] But it's the same man, Joseph Hart.

Dr. Duncan: Now...let's...I was going to say he was converted, but then he becomes a pastor - right? He begins to preach at an independent chapel and large crowds come to hear him preach his sermons, and he writes a couple of hundred hymns, as well.

Dr. Thomas: Right! Well, he's buried in Dunhill Fields, which is my favorite place in London to go, because John Owen, and John Bunyan, and Daniel Defoe, and Susannah Wesley, and Joseph Hart.... I have to say I hadn't realized Joseph Hart was buried there, and I don't remember seeing...I'll have to go now next time I'm in London.

But if you're in London, look for the headquarters of Methodism, John Wesley's house in London, and right across the street is Dunhill Fields. (Be prepared for the fact that folk are going to be eating tuna sandwiches at lunchtime on park benches.) It's immaculately kept, beautifully kept. The tombs of Bunyan and Defoe are probably the most prominent...John Owen's was in some sort or disrepair, but John Bunyan's has just been redone — a beautiful tomb.

Dr. Duncan: Refurbished, yes. And, Derek, looking at the text of this hymn as a hymn of call and of invitation to sinners, the first thing that strikes me is it does not congratulate the sinner on his ability: it grants all the ability to Jesus Christ. The refrain is, “He is able, He is able, He is willing, doubt no more.” None of the emphasis is on the sinner’s power and ability, it’s on the Savior’s power and ability.

Dr. Thomas: Well, whereas the infamous preacher of a certain cathedral says, you shouldn’t tell people they’re sinners because it ruins their self esteem, or, as another TV evangelist is constantly telling us, “Find the inner strength that lies within you,” Joseph Hart is addressing us as sinners — poor and wretched, and weak and wounded, and sick and sore. And that’s what we are. But Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity, joined with power.

Dr. Duncan: And don’t you love that line? It’s not just “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” standing there helplessly; it’s Jesus whose pity is joined with power who is able, who is willing. It’s a very different picture than we get from some evangelism today.

Dr. Thomas: Well, it’s typical of what would have been at the forefront of an understanding of biblical truth among this group of people in the eighteenth century, that we are unable to come to Jesus in and of ourselves; that the will is bound to our natures, and our natures are dead in trespasses and sins. It’s doing evangelism on the grounds of personal moral inability — that we are bidden to come, and yet we cannot come. So how can we be saved? By the ability of Christ. So, “He is able, He is able, He is able, He is willing, doubt no more.”

Dr. Duncan: I remember sitting in systematic theology class at the Free Church College in Edinburgh when Donald MacLeod got to the section on faith and spent an entire day on the warrants of faith: that is, What are the compelling reasons for the sinner to put his or her trust in the savior? I had never heard a lecture on this. Now, I went to evangelical institutions, but it seems to me that Hart is walking through the warrants of faith here. Why should you put your trust in the Savior? Because He has pity joined with power, and He is able and He is willing. That’s the first line. But he doesn’t stop, he keeps on going. And what does he say in the second line as a warrant for faith?

Dr. Thomas: “Come, ye needy, come and welcome, God’s free bounty glorify;
True belief and true repentance, every grace that brings you nigh
Without money, without money, without money,
Come to Jesus Christ and buy; come to Jesus Christ and buy.”

Dr. Duncan: And so he tells you that God is able from His bounty to pour out the faith and repentance that you need — in fact, every grace that you need He is able to pour out, and you can come and buy it without money. Now he’s

harkening to one of your favorite Old Testament prophets when he says that! Isaiah, right?

Dr. Thomas: Right...correct. It's wonderful to me how we are told, "If you are unable to believe because you are dead in trespasses and sins, how is the offer of the gospel genuine? How is it a sincere offer of the gospel?" And it's being answered here so marvelously that the answer to that does not lie with trying to reinvent an idea that we somehow are able, that somehow there is some inner strength that lies within ourselves if we could only just find it; that it is entirely the work of Christ. We cast ourselves on His mercy and power.

Dr. Duncan: So we're first told to realize that Christ is powerful and able and willing, and then that God in His gracious bounty is ready to pour out everything that we need — repentance and faith, with all other graces. And then in the third stanza we're told...

Dr. Thomas: Oh, it's my favorite stanza:

"Come, ye weary, heavy laden, bruised and broken by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all"

Those are wonderful, wonderful lines.

Dr. Duncan: "Not the righteous, not the righteous, not the righteous..." Don't you love that? How can you preach that any better? You know, "Let me say it one more time: Not the righteous; sinners Jesus came to call, sinners Jesus came to call."

You remember Rabbi Duncan (the famous Scottish minister who had grown up in a Christian home but had rejected faith, went to Aberdeen University, didn't even believe in God) says that one of his professors at Aberdeen convinced him of the existence of God and that it lifted such a weight from his heart that he "danced with joy," he said, "on the Brig o' Dee," though he knew that he would be condemned by that God because he was not yet trusting in Christ. And later he tells us that the warrant (compelling reason) that got hold of him was the point of Hart's verse here. He said, "It's by my sin that I get hold of Christ. John Duncan is a sinner. Jesus came for sinners." Jesus came for John Duncan was how he reasoned, and that's how he came to put his trust in Christ. And so this warrant is to say Don't say that you'll come when you're better, because Jesus didn't come for people who are better. He came for people who weren't better; He came for sinners.

Dr. Thomas: And that what we're being offered here is not reformation, but regeneration.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. Meaning what, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Well, that the gospel is not “turn over a new leaf and start again...make resolutions and start again.” The gospel is you are dead in trespasses and sins, and by grace through the empty hands of faith alone...

Dr. Duncan: It's not twelve steps to become a better you?

Dr. Thomas: Right.

Dr. Duncan: It's not...you know, dynamic principles of discovering the inner power to live a new and different and successful life...your best life now?

Dr. Thomas: We're not saved by going to church or joining a church, or reading a book or being nice to our neighbor, but casting ourselves entirely on the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Duncan: And then the fourth stanza says:

“Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth is to feel your need of Him;
This He gives you, this He gives you, this He gives you;
It is the Spirit's rising beam; it is the Spirit's rising beam.”

What's he mean by that, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Well, it's profound, and it's so eighteenth century theology! The whole issue of conscience was so important, It's important in the Bible, how that moral arbiter within us that either condemns us, excuses us... “Let not conscience make you linger,” so your conscience is condemning you. You feel that you are a sinner, you know that you are a sinner, but don't let that make you linger.

Dr. Duncan: In fact, he says the fact that you feel and know that you are a sinner is the first light of the Spirit breaking forth in your heart.

Dr. Thomas: “The Spirit's rising beam.” It's a beautiful phrase.

Dr. Duncan: It reminds you of *And Can It Be?* where “Thine eye diffused a quickening ray.” He's deep downcast in the dungeon of sin, and “Thine eye diffused a quickening ray.” It's a similar kind of scene where the Spirit sends this beam of light. And the beam of light is not “Aha! You're a good person...God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” It's ...

Dr. Thomas: “You're a sinner, and there's nothing I can do to save myself.” It's the cry of the Philippian jailer: “What must I do to be saved?” And there's nothing that he can do but believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. Duncan: Right. And then the fifth stanza answers to the power of the Savior to be able to address this:

“Lo! th’ incarnate God, ascended, pleads the merit of His blood;
Venture on Him, venture wholly, let no other trust intrude...”

[And again, I love this repetition...]

“None but Jesus, none but Jesus, none but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good, can do helpless sinners good.”

Dr. Thomas: You know, Jim Packer says that his hymn on the Holy Spirit is a perfect hymn on the Holy Spirit. *Come, Holy Spirit, Come* is a gospel hymn that says just about everything in a way that's more profound than you imagine when you first read it. This is an incredibly well-written hymn.

“Lo! th’ incarnate God, ascended, pleads the merit of His blood;
Venture on Him, venture wholly, let no other trust intrude:
None but Jesus, none but Jesus, none but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good, can do helpless sinners good.”

Dr. Duncan: I'm thinking that it may be well worth the trouble to get the congregation to learn this Welsh tune, Derek. And we'll let that be the last word. Listen with us to *Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Wretched*. And don't *you* fail to come, if you're a sinner.

Dr. Wyman: Singing this hymn for us this morning is Victor Smith.

Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity joined with power.
He is able, He is able, He is able,
He is willing; doubt no more; He is willing; doubt no more.

Come, ye needy, come and welcome, God's free bounty glorify;
True belief and true repentance, every grace that brings you night
Without money, without money, without money,
Come to Jesus Christ and buy; come to Jesus Christ and buy.

Come, ye weary, heavy laden, bruised and broken by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all;
Not the righteous, not the righteous, not the righteous—
Sinners Jesus came to call; sinners Jesus came to call.

Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth is to feel your need of Him;

This He gives you, this He gives you, this He gives you;
'Tis the Spirit's rising beam; 'tis the Spirit's rising beam.

Lo! th' incarnate God, ascended, pleads the merit of His blood;
Venture on Him, venture wholly, let no other trust intrude:
None but Jesus, none but Jesus, none but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good, can do helpless sinners good."

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