

Hymns of the Faith: “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

Lamentations 3:22, 23

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 First Presbyterian Church. The minister of First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of Faith.”...And now here with “Hymns of Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. It's a delight to be with you and with Derek Thomas this morning, talking about hymns again.

Welcome to “Hymns of the Faith,” where we talk about the great hymns of the Christian church. Christians live and die singing, and it's our joy to talk about the great songs that Christians have been singing, some of them, for almost two thousand years now.

And this morning we're going to move into the twentieth century to a modern hymn. A number of the songs that we have done the last weeks have been from the sixteenth century or seventeenth century, some from the nineteenth century; but today we move into the twentieth century and to a hymn which I think is associated in many people's minds with perhaps the Billy Graham Crusades. *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* would have been a favorite hymn sung at those Billy Graham Crusades in the 1950's, '60's, and '70's.

The hymn itself — the text of the hymn — was written in 1923, back in the early 1920's by Thomas Chisholm...(and I'm going to let you tell us a little bit about Thomas Chisholm in just a moment, Derek). But the song itself began to make its way into the hymnals at least by the early 1950's — maybe earlier than that. I'm not particularly aware of when it started making its inroads into all the hymnals, but I know that it was in the Methodist hymnal and the Baptist hymnal by the mid-1950's. And I certainly remember growing up singing this hymn from the time that I would have remembered hymn—in the, say, mid-1960's. This was one of the hymns that we were singing in the church, and it's still a favorite today in our congregation and in most congregations that still sing hymns.

Could you tell us just a little bit about the author of the hymn, Derek?

Dr. Thomas: Surely. Thomas Obadiah Chisholm was born in 1866. As you said, the hymn itself was written in 1923, and he lived to a good old age. He retired the year I was born, in 1953, to a Methodist home. He was born in Franklin, Kentucky, in a log cabin. He had a meager education in a country school. It is said that he became the teacher of the school at the age of 16, and at 21 he became the associate editor of a weekly newspaper, *The Franklin Favorite*. And then he was converted in 1893 (he would have been 27 or so) under the ministry of a Dr. Henry Clay Morrison, who was the future president of Asbury College. And Chisholm then moved to Louisville, at Morrison's persuasion, and became the editor of something called *The Pentecostal Herald*.

Dr. Duncan: I saw that in the documents and thought that I'd love to know a little bit more about that publication, because he seems to be associated with the Methodist church throughout his life.

Dr. Thomas: Right. He was ordained a Methodist minister in 1903. He'd have been — what is it? — 36, 37 or so? And he served in a brief pastorate in Scottsville, Kentucky. I'm not sure where that is...but Scottsville...

Dr. Wymond: Eastern Kentucky.

Dr. Thomas: And this would be fairly rural? Farming community?

Dr. Wymond: Yes.

Dr. Thomas: He had very poor health, and he moved his family to a farm near Winona Lake in Indiana and became an insurance...or as I would say, "insurance" — but you would say an "insurance" salesman [laughter]...moving eventually to Vineland, New Jersey, in 1916, and then retires in 1953. Apparently he wrote some 1200 poems, 800 of which were published and many were set to music, although I have to say that *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* is the only piece that I know by him. It's quite interesting that somebody could be raised up of God, live for almost a hundred years, and then be remembered for one thing. And it looks as if he will always be remembered for this one marvelous hymn.

Dr. Duncan: And it's a beautiful, beautiful tune of course that William Runyan set the text to, but the text itself is superb. Of course it has allusions to Lamentations 3:22, 23, and the song walks you through a celebration of God's faithfulness to us in promise and in providence:

"Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be."

So as he's preparing to make the declaration, "Great is Thy faithfulness," he's reminding himself of the constant, unchanging, committed, unfailing compassion of God that doesn't shift and change, and is not fickle and unreliable, but can be counted on every morning, just like the dew. And so his confession of faithfulness has as its backdrop in this case the constancy of God.

And then that's sort of reflected in the second stanza:

"Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love."

So that the very rising of the sun, the very fact that you look up at night and there are the stars — they are a testimony to the constancy of God. They're there morning, noon, and night, and day after day after day, in a testimony to His faithfulness.

But then I love the way the third stanza climaxes by focusing our attention on God's redeeming work:

"Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!"

So even as he thinks of these manifold blessings of God's providence, central to those are pardon for sin and the peace that passes understanding that comes from being made right with God; the present enjoyment of the nearness of God and the guidance of God; the hope that the Lord gives us in salvation; and then, the declaration again:

"Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see:
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"

I'm trying to think, Bill. We sometimes sing this in funeral services and in some other special services, too. But in our congregational life, we're regularly singing this song of course on Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesday nights. Where are the places that you have seen this song used? Do you have something you want to interject?

Dr. Thomas: Well, in Belfast it was often sung at a Watch Night Service. The end of the year, December 31.

Dr. Duncan: Well, the text fits for that, for sure!

Dr. Thomas: Right! And it was the way...it was because of its covenantal setting: "Great is Thy faithfulness" in Lamentations. God is faithful to what? Faithful to His word, and faithful to His promise, and faithful to His covenant. It seemed appropriate that you were looking back and giving thanks over the last twelve months for God's enduring faithfulness and as an aspiration of hope for the year to come. So we often sang this in Watch Night Service.

Dr. Duncan: And, Bill, presumably this hymn has been sung at First Pres since you were here, when you first came.

Dr. Wymond: Actually we started singing this hymn in 1965, I remember.

Dr. Duncan: Wow! Tell us about that.

Dr. Wymond: We changed hymnals at that time, and we started using a hymnal that had the hymn in it, and it was immediately a great favorite. And I think it has had its greatest impact at funerals. It's just the testimony song of so many people. We had a big celebration here at the turning of the millennium also, and I remember that the hymn around that time was used in the same way that you all used it as a Watch Night hymn.

Dr. Duncan: So it was in the *Worship and Service Hymnal*...is that when we picked that up? And it had not been part of the congregational singing before then. But presumably people would have heard it.

Dr. Wymond: I think that's why we got that hymnal, because this one and others were in it. One called *Like a River Glorious*...and so this hymn immediately became one of the favorites of the congregation because they did have a familiarity with it.

Dr. Duncan: Am I right in my recollection? Is this one that Billy Graham would have used, and George Beverley Shea, and others would have sung and played during...?

Dr. Wymond: I think so. The movement out of which this grew, which was the Holiness wing of the Methodist church. There were a lot of camp meetings in Kentucky, and I'm sure that Chisholm would have been a part of those...connected with Asbury College. And so the gospel hymns, these wonderful hymns that affirm these great scriptural promises, grew out of that movement. And Winona Lake, Indiana, had a big publishing house and published hymnals...

Dr. Duncan: And a big seminary and a big summer conference. I mean, they just

had a huge, huge summer. People would go up there and camp and go to the conference and such, a lot like the one that you've been to in Iowa, where that big campground...people come in and stay for the week...bring their families...

Dr. Thomas: You know, in a letter dated 1941, during the Second World War, Chisholm wrote:

“My income has not been large at any time, due to impaired health in the early years, which has followed me until now; although I must not fail to record the unflinching faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.”

Dr. Duncan: Umm! That's a great testimony. Bill, the music to this hymn is really, really different from the ones that we've done so far. Tell us a little bit about the music that Runyan wrote for this.

Dr. Wymond: The music for this hymn really is different in that it is actually a little more complex. It doesn't have quite the repetition as some of the other hymns, which made me wonder if perhaps it was first used as a solo piece, and then, as with so many other of the gospel hymns, then became a congregational song.

The thing that is nice about it is that it just grows in emotional intensity so that the high point comes at the very end of the hymn when you repeat the phrase, “Great is Thy faithfulness.” There's a refrain here, which is common to gospel hymns — we would call it a “chorus” a lot of times — which is the Scripture, “Great is Thy faithfulness.” I think it's a nice tune. It's very singable, which always pleases me! Let me just start it out to remind folks [plays]. And in that somewhat dramatic tone there of an organ, it sort of shows the emotion. Then as we come to the end to “Great is Thy faithfulness” in the chorus, it sounds like this [plays piano]. And then the affirmation, “Great is Thy faithfulness” [plays to demonstrate], and then, “Lord, unto me.” [Plays]

Dr. Thomas: Now, Bill, what is the musical term for the way in the last line it so stretches it out...comes almost to a stop, just before the end there?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think there's not a particular musical term, but we could just psychologically describe it as a very emotional moment. It's nice.

Dr. Thomas: The tunes that we've been singing and listening to in the previous sessions we've had were very staccato; the notes had a very definite time quality to them. But this sort of tune is capable of being squeezed and stretched, depending on the emotional nature of the word.

Dr. Wymond: It's the stylistic thing to do that, too, with these songs. And it's just a way to infuse them with a lot of emotion, which is not a bad thing. That's what

the music is for. It's to express the emotional response to the text.

The songs that came out of this era of the twenties, gospel songs often had that quality to them. They were more emotionally charged, and they were sung in that style as well. They were sung very freely. I remember one time we had a soloist here who had traveled with Billy Graham. I cannot remember his name...Stratton Shufelt...J. Stratton Shufelt, who had traveled with Billy Graham in the beginning of his evangelistic Crusades and had gone to Europe with him and so on in the late forties. And he would sing a gospel song like this one for us each evening at the meetings that we had, and he was so free with them that you really had to be on your guard. You couldn't play with him note for note, because he would run away with the notes, and then suddenly you just had to hold the chord so that he could have the full freedom to do the dramatic effects with the time like that.

Dr. Duncan: William Runyan, commenting on the writing of the tune, says that this particular poem held such an appeal that he really wanted to provide a tune that would carry the message in a worthy way, and he gives testimony that the subsequent history of its use indicated that God had answered his prayer. It's interesting that Chisholm himself doesn't indicate that there was any special circumstance in the writing of the text itself. In other words, there was no dramatic experience in his life that led to the writing of the hymn other than, he says, just his Christian experience and Bible truth.

Well, that pushes it back to Lamentations, Derek. What's going on when Jeremiah makes that confession of the faithfulness of God to Israel? What's going on in terms of Bible truth when that confession of God's never-failing compassions is made by Jeremiah?

Dr. Thomas: Well, of course Jeremiah is predicting the final overthrow of Israel and Jerusalem by the Chaldeans [or the Babylonians], and Jeremiah is in a particularly difficult spot because he is being accused of being unpatriotic. Because to the very end he is urging them to succumb to this judgment, and there were those who thought that was an unpatriotic stance of his. And in the end of course Jeremiah has to flee to Egypt. He was left behind in the exile itself. But that was Israel's darkest moment, to quote a Churchillian phrase: the loss of the temple and all of its artifacts: the ark of the covenant, the tablets of stone, Aaron's rod that budded...all of those disappeared during that time. The temple was razed to the ground. Jerusalem was set on fire and burnt. Hundreds of thousands were taken into captivity. So in the midst of it — those are the lamentations, of course — and in the midst of it, God is faithful to His promise to His remnant, to His chosen people.

Dr. Duncan: So if we bear that in mind, given that Chisholm himself is working off of Bible text and making that declaration, it really is so suitable that in any crisis of life, in the bereavement when one has lost a loved one, that this text be sung. Because if Jeremiah can declare “Great is Thy faithfulness” in Israel's

worst hour, then we as believers can declare “Great is Thy faithfulness” in our worst hour.

Dr. Thomas: The words are so memorable. A lot of us, I imagine, sing this hymn from memory. There is a cadence to them:

“Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest;
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.”

And there's a simplicity to the poetry. There are some hymns whose poetry...I remember reading a hymnbook that belonged to a friend of mine, Geoff Thomas. I remember browsing through his copy of a hymnbook that was marked from beginning to end. Every time they had sung the hymn he had put a little date by it, and so on. And there were some hymns that were just scored through and said “Poetry too complicated!” It was good poetry, but most of them didn't know what they were singing. The idioms and the metaphors were too complicated. But this one has a very direct appeal, bringing the changes constantly on this word *faithfulness*.

Dr. Duncan: Bill, you had commented on how the last line stretches out, and in the edition of the hymn that I'm looking at in front of me, which is out of our hymnal, there's a fermata on the “-ness” of the *faithful-ness*, right before the “Lord, unto me!” And I guess it's up to the director or up to the organist how long that's going to be dragged out...or to the soloist, if the soloist is singing it. But are there any other comments on the shape of either the rhythm or the melody or the tune that you would want to draw people's attention to?

Dr. Wymond: Well, actually, the rhythm of the hymn is fairly steady, and the interesting thing about the melody is that it starts out rather low and it just continues to rise throughout the hymn, which adds this sort of dramatic tension to it, I think. Or it just conveys a sense of great conviction.

Dr. Duncan: It doesn't get too high, though. You have often commented to me that you have noticed that people...the high end of their singing register is lower than it used to be. People can't quite get as high as they used to be able to get.

Dr. Wymond: I think that's because of several factors, and one may be actually good health of people — that they are more virile and vigorous, and their voices are lower. One might argue that. Or one could argue that it's because people don't sing, and that's the line of argument that I would take. It used to be that people sang in school all the time. They would sing at home around the piano. And now very little singing is done by people, so they have a narrow range in their voices. Also, voices used to change in men...I remember reading somewhere that Bach was still singing soprano at the age of 19, and so voices

have lowered earlier and earlier in men, and so that's a factor also. And to me it's important that the men sing the tune where it's written—and the women, too, and not grovel and go down an octave lower. So if we keep the tunes at reasonable ranges I think that they will most normally sing it where it's written.

Dr. Duncan: So this one, it's all within about an octave, basically, the tune from bottom to top. But it doesn't get much above a D, and so you're not putting anybody...or does it ever get above a D?

Dr. Wymond: No, no, it doesn't.

Dr. Duncan: ...and so a D is as high as it goes and nobody is having to squeeze and strain to sing it, but still it's high enough to be robust and strong in the affirmations.

Dr. Wymond: To me — now I hope the non-musicians will excuse us — the higher D is about the most reasonable limit that a hymn should go to. So we try to work it so that our hymns don't go above that.

Dr. Duncan: And you do notice it. For instance, our congregation loves to sing *For All the Saints*, but, boy, by the time they get to the last stanza on those high notes it's pretty tough!

Dr. Wymond: Well, even in the years that I have been doing church music, it's been interesting to see how the pitches of hymnals have dropped. I remember that the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* used to be in the key of E when we first started, and so that took the congregation up to an E. Then it dropped to E-flat, and now it's at D in most hymnals. It may go down even lower.

Dr. Duncan: I did not know that! Well, let's listen to this hymn, Bill.

Dr. Wymond: And, Dr. Duncan, this hymn will be sung for us by Clifford McGowan. *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see:
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above,

Join with all nature in manifold witness
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Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see:
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
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