

## THEN SINGS MY SOUL 11

### *“How Great Thou Art”*

When you think about God...what do you think? Is God just a thought or idea that occupies limited places in your mind, or is God the **essence** of all that occupies your mind? Is God just an inherited familial tradition that causes you to have to get out of bed on Sunday morning to fulfill some guilt-inherited habit, or is God the **reason** you...LIVE? Is God just an afterthought; after you have exhausted your best analysis of each and every situation, or is God the first response to every circumstance, situation or encounter that comes your way? You see, what you think about God, determines what you believe about the world and your place in it. What you believe determines how you live...see why, what, and how you think about God is so important?

The last hymn we will study today is the second most popular, a close second to Amazing Grace, which launched this series. It is a modern hymn by standards set with the much older ones we have recently discussed. It was written in 1885 by a Swedish Pastor, poet and author Carl Gustaf Boberg; following a rather dramatic thunderstorm that caught him walking home from a church service. The storm didn't last that long, but was remarkable because of its intensity, and its rather immediate departure, which left an eerie silence in the middle of the afternoon. Boberg recorded in his journal that immediately after the storm, under the canopy of a majestic rainbow, a song bird could be heard singing harmony to the church bells toiling across the valley; and he was struck with God's creative genius, and had to write this beloved hymn.

His poem, written in Scottish of course, originally contained 9 verses. He submitted it for publication. It was some years later while he was traveling in the mountains of Scotland that he heard his words being sung to a familiar Scottish melody.

The first three verses of this poem/song were some years later translated into German, and in 1927 to Russian, as it moved across the European continent. The Russian version was heard at a Revival meeting in the Ukraine by a British Missionary named Stuart Hines, who was so taken with it, he rendered the first English version of it, and added what is now its/our 4<sup>th</sup> verse. From across Europe the song made its way to India, where an American Missionary from Fuller Theological Seminary by the name of J. Edwin Orr heard a choir of Indian tribesmen singing it in their language. Dr. Orr is credited with bringing the song to America, in the early 1950's, and introduced it to a group of Evangelical leaders, not the least of which was a little known young evangelist from North Carolina named Billy Graham. At one of his crusades in the mid 50's George Beverly Shea sang it at the close of the revival, and it soon became a regular part of each crusade. Shea sang it 99 times in New York City during Graham's famous revival there in 1957. Our own ND legend, Lawrence Welk once remarked that no other song was more requested than this hymn during his long running television show. ... Don't you wish we could hear or see the other 5 verses?? I don't know if they exist or not.

As we think about the content of this famous hymn, I want to draw its meaning from a scripture. I don't know if this is the one that inspired Carl Boberg in 1885, but it inspired me as I considered the great hymns matchless wonders...first the hymn, then the scripture from Romans 1:

**O LORD my GOD! when I in awesome wonder  
consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,  
I see the stars; I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.**

**When through the woods and forest glades I wander  
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur  
and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:**

**And when I think that GOD, His Son not sparing,  
sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;  
that on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
He bled and died to take away my Sin:**

**When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
and take me Home, what joy shall fill my heart!  
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,  
and there proclaim, my GOD, how great Thou art!**

**Then sings my soul, my Savior GOD, to Thee:  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul! my Savior GOD, to Thee:  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!**

*But the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being. So nobody has a good excuse. What happened was this: People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat him like God, refusing to worship him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand. Romans 1: 19-23 The Message*

There are 4 verses in this song, and I'd like to consider them in order:

#### **1. WHEN I WONDER AT THE MYSTERY OF GOD**

*...when I in awesome wonder..., and the mystery of his divine being...*

I am glad that the God I serve exists in mystery beyond my complete understanding. I'm glad that the religion I claim has enough mystery that I can't understand it all. I am leery and troubled by religious claims that advocate all the answers; that promise no uncertainty; that allow for no mystery. I'm troubled by the Pope's statement that all but Roman Catholic churches are "defective"...I believe was the word he used. Well, I readily admit any church I'm a part of is therefore by association defective...but so is the Pope and any church he associates with as well! He's still a man, much holier than I, but still a hu-man!

Do you ever wonder at the mysteries of God, the deep things of God? I hope so. We ought never to allow our misunderstandings, our doubts, our questions, our skepticism to circumvent our continual search for God. God is bigger than all our questions. God may never answer them all, but gives us just enough to keep us going, if we want!

I want to encourage all of us to keep seeking God, keep wondering about God, keep asking the hard questions, keep pushing the limits of what has been accepted for too long as right or true...just because! God loves people with brains, and especially those not afraid to use them. When I wonder at the mysteries of God...I can't help but shake my head and say..."O Lord, My God, How Great thou art!"

## **2. WHEN I WANDER THROUGH THE CREATION OF GOD**

*...When through the woods and forest glades I wander... By taking a long look at what God has created...*

I have most often talked of 'wandering' as a negative thing; as in people wandering away from God. I want to speak of it positively today. Most of you probably know that different people relate to God in different ways. Some people relate to God almost entirely intellectually. They have to know the intricacies of deep theology in logical ways. Some people relate to God emotionally, they love the things of God that tug at their hearts, and move them toward a more intimate relationship with God. Some people relate to God through music, some through books, some through interaction and discussion. Some have experienced God through work, selfless, serving work. Some people relate to God only on a Spiritual level, seeing, sensing and feeling their way to a closer walk with God. Some people relate to God only through other people. And some people relate to God through the things that God has made.

That is the point of this passage in Romans, that everything about God can be known through the things God has made. I'm sure it's because I was raised on a farm, but I relate primarily to God through His creation. I've stood in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and Wesley's Chapel, and grand Cathedrals in Japan, South America, Pakistan, and across our own great country. But, I still feel closest to God standing next to a giant Cottonwood rounding the turn between holes 16 and 17 at Riverwood; or in the cattails of McKenzie Slough. I relate primarily and most intimately to God through the things God has made.

I observe about God through his creation that God values beauty, for no other reason than us to enjoy. I observe that God is orderly by noting that spring always follows winter, never the other way around. I observe about God that details matter, and care for creatures (even me) is seen as Grizzlies feast on Caribou, and hummingbirds drink sweet water. God has been revealed to us through the things God has made.

So I implore you today, this week, to stop your grumbling about the heat, and wander slowly through the beauty of God's creation. Marvel at a tree, hear, really listen to the song birds. It is often in the simplest things of creation that the profoundest lessons about God can be learned. When I wander through God's nature...I can't help but stop and utter..."O Lord my God, how Great Thou art!"

### **3. WHEN I PONDER THE GREAT LOVE OF GOD**

*...when I think that GOD, His Son not sparing... a thoughtful look at what God has done...*

I mentioned that some people relate to God intellectually, and though this is not my preferred method, (for obvious reasons that shall remain unmentioned) it behooves all of us to ponder, to think, to consider, to contemplate, meditate, and not procrastinate the great love of God. God has not spared His Son, but rather gave Him to this world, to die on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

We say that so easily, it rolls off our tongue so casually; our familiarity with this truth lessens its dramatic significance, to our utter loss this is true! When I stop to think that God died for me...it stops me in my tracks, as well it should! When I stop to think that Christ's sinless life was exchanged for my sinful life, it makes me cringe and wish I could stop sinning. When I stop to think that Jesus didn't just die for me, but for the whole world, I'm appalled at my little thinking, my selfish praying, my pathetic witnessing, my sad excuse for a life...that I call Christian. I must continue to consider the grand love of God...that saved my life, and seeks for the world to experience this love. It falls to me and you that our love for the world be directly proportional to how much we understand that God loves us! So this week, forgive someone who doesn't deserve it, help someone who needs it, visit with someone who is lonely, talk to that stranger or new neighbor, and tell them how much you love God. When I ponder how much God loves me...I can't help but cry out to the world..."O Lord my God, how Great thou art!"

#### **4. THEN I BOW IN ADORATION OF GOD**

*...then I shall bow in humble adoration... they didn't treat him like God, refusing to worship him...*

I don't think we as human beings, especially those fortunate to be living in this country, fully appreciate God the way we should. Life is too often too easy, and we become too self sufficient. There is no persecution, and faith becomes trivial, not life-defining. There is little urgency, with all the stuff and resources we control, so we live on as if we're living forever. That is part of the reason why tragedies so undo us. In other parts of the world, death resides much nearer, and thus, people are more dependent on God, and less self-reliant.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not wanting to move to India or Africa, even Bolivia, I love my easy life here, but I have to be careful not to allow my ease to erase God's purpose and passion from burning in my soul, and flowing out of my life! When I wonder, wander and ponder the Greatness of God, I can no longer be satisfied sensing that God loves me special, because I am special! No, God loves me the same as everyone else, and that love must compel me...us to bow our knees, bow our heads, bow our hearts, bow our souls, bow our lives in humble adoration...then raise those same lives to go and help the world to wonder...wander...and ponder God's great love for them. Listen to the scripture again:

*So nobody has a good excuse. What happened was this: People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat him like God, refusing to worship him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines...*

My friends; let us not refuse to worship God, and let us not trivialize our lives by ignoring God's purpose and direction in our lives. "O Lord, my God, HOW GREAT THOU ART"! Let us sing it like we mean it, then live it like its true...because it is!

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**2. WHEN I \_\_\_\_\_ THROUGH THE \_\_\_\_\_ OF GOD**

*...When through the woods and forest glades I wander... By taking a long look at what God has created...*

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