

Sermon Songs: How Great Thou Art

**A Message Offered by
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Do you have big problems or small ones? Maybe you have medium ones. Everyone knows the size of their problems. We measure our problems. We analyze our problems. We brood over our problems. We compare them to the sizes of other people's problems ("At least I'm not as bad off as Now *he's* got problems..."). And we know the old adage: "Little kids; little problems. Big kids; big problems." Health problems. Marriage problems. Money problems. We know the size of our problems.

But do we know the size of our God? We should. We talk to God in prayer. We ask God for things. We thank God for things. We complain to God. We cry to God. We trust God with our kids, and finances, and futures, but when was the last time you stopped to think about just how big God is? When was the last time you were truly *awed* by God's power, love, and wisdom? If you're like me, we don't have enough of those moments when we say, "How great Thou art."

Ancient people didn't have that problem. They were acutely aware of how ignorant, petty, and powerless they were in comparison to God. And they knew that even their biggest problem was small in comparison to God's greatness. That's why the Psalms are filled with prayers of praise like our first scripture lesson:

*I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.
Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. Great
is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.
One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your
mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your
wondrous works, I will meditate. The might of your awesome deeds shall
be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness.*

Psalm 145:1-6 NRSV

This is not the kind of language we use everyday when we're talking to God, is it?

If we thought more about the greatness of God and less about the size of our problems, we'd be less anxious, stressed, and confused. That's why it's such a blessing to sing hymns like, "How great Thou Art." It reminds of just how big and powerful and loving and great our God is.

It began over 100 years ago as a poem written by a young Swedish pastor after he walked home from a Bible Study one night. On the way home Rev. Carl Gustav Boberg got caught in a violent thunderstorm, kind of like of the ones we've had lately. Rain poured down and the wind blew wildly, whipping up whitecaps on Sweden's beautiful Monstera Bay. Lightening lit the dark; thunder exploded. Just as suddenly as the storm arrived, it passed. The bay calmed. Birds started singing. And he could hear the peal of his church bell two miles away. It was the summer of 1885.

As Boberg looked out his window at the night sky he contemplated the fierce beauty of God's Creation. That's when he wrote the words that would eventually become the first two verses of "How Great Thou Art."

*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.*

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

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander
I 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.*

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

There's nothing like nature to remind us of God's power and majesty—and how much bigger God's mind is than ours is. I'm getting a kick out of a debate that's been going on for a long time among astronomers. Poor Pluto. Is it a planet, a dwarf planet, or just a big icy rock? Either way, it's a miracle that it's even there—or that we are.

Children have a knack for helping us see nature for the miracle that it is. I hope I never forget the first time my six-year old, Aaron, saw the night sky. It was when he was three. At the time he usually went to bed long before the stars come out, but one night we got home late and as we got out of the car he said, "Look! The moon!" He'd read about it in books like "Goodnight Moon"; now he'd seen it in person. He was so excited. He didn't need to know that it's 238,857 miles away or what its geological composition is or why it keeps changing shapes every few days—or at least seems to. Just looking at it taught him that the moon is something special and whoever is behind its being there is even more special still. I hope he never grows out of being awed by God's creation.

Andrew, our 7 year old, loves nature, too. Sometimes too much. Back when he was two he pulled the wings off a ladybug. When we scolded him and asked him why he

did it, he said through tears, “I didn’t want it to fly away.” He’s now our bug specialist, and we have since instituted a catch and release program. Our house is filled with rocks and shells and other signs of creation. The more we study nature, spend time outdoors, learn about the biology of plants and animals, take in a sunset, or catch the power of an ocean wave, the more we realize that we have a wildly creative God.

Sometimes the beauty and complexity of our natural world speaks to us of the greatness of our Creator. Sometimes it’s thinking of Jesus’ life and death for us that fills us with awe.

In the third verse of the hymn we sing of a second aspect of God’s greatness: God as Savior.

*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 burdens gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin.*

What kind of God would give his own flesh and blood for his people—people who have rejected him at every turn? Only a great one.

In a famous sermon the Southern Baptist preacher E.V. Hill reflected on the gift of salvation. He said something like this to his congregation: “It’s a good thing for you that God is god and not me. I love ya’ll, but not that much. I wouldn’t die for you, much less give my son for you. If it depended on me, you’d all still be lost. But it’s not up to me—and you can thank God for that.” [E.V. Hill, “When Was God at His Best?”]

Long before E.V. Hill and Carl Boberg, a guy named St. Paul wrote to some Roman Christians about God’s greatness:

if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

Romans 5:10 NRSV

It’s easy to take eternal life for granted. It’s God’s free gift to us. But just because salvation’s free doesn’t mean it’s cheap. God paid the price; we reap the dividends. That’s how great God is.

Stuart Hine and his wife were English missionaries working in the Ukraine in the late 1930s when they heard a Russian hymn based on Carl Boberg’s poem. Later they ministered in a poor and isolated village in the Carpathian mountains (in what would become Czechoslovakia), sandwiched between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s regime in Russia. They brought Boberg’s hymn with them and it turned out to be very popular with new Christian converts. Hine himself began to appreciate its uniqueness and special power to express what people of faith feel about their Savior.

When Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939, Hine returned to England and translated three verses of the hymn into English for the first time. They settled in London and began a ministry to refugees from the rest of Europe. These refugees were looking for hope and the promise of a return home. Hine couldn't tell them when the war would end or when they'd return home, but he did tell them what it would be like when Christ came for them at the end of time. His preaching inspired the fourth verse we sing, which Hine added to Boberg's original three:

*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.*

Have you ever thought what it will be like when Christ comes again? He's not going to sneak in as a baby in some tiny village like Bethlehem next time. Next time he's coming with power and glory. The Bible describes it this way:

[T]he Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 NRSV

When I feel down and my problems seem large, I sometimes think, "I hope today's the day he comes." [Of course, too, there have been plenty of times when I've thought, "I sure hope he doesn't come right now; it wouldn't look good. I want to get caught doing something good, not expressing my feelings to the driver of the car who just cut me off.]

But on good days I keep things in perspective. When Christ comes, in the blink of an eye all our problems will seem so small as to be laughable. The debts we worry about. The relationships that trouble us. The illnesses that plague us. Someday none of that will matter. That'll be the day when we go to Christ or he comes to us. Either way, it's going to be a very good day. That's how great God is.

After World War II ended, English-speaking missionaries spread Hine's version of "How Great Thou Art" to some pretty exotic locales. Dr. Edwin Orr heard Naga tribes-people singing it in Assam, India, and when he returned to the United States he brought it back with him for use in revivals here. An American music publisher took note of it, and in 1953 Hine finally copyrighted the hymn we love to sing today. The following year George Beverly Shea sang it a Billy Graham Crusade, and it became a staple in his repertoire. In 1957 Shea sang it 99 times in 100 days at a Crusade in New York City, and its place in our hymnals and American history was secured.

The hymn traveled from Sweden to the Ukraine to Czechoslovakia to England to India to New York City before it worked its way into our hearts. That miraculous journey is evidence itself, I think, of God's power and providence.

How big are your problems today? It doesn't really matter, does it, because our God is bigger. God created the mountains; he can move the mountains of debt, or worry, or illness you're facing. God gave his life for you; he's not going to cheat you out of joy. God is going to come again; he wants us to have hope. That's how great God is. Amen.

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