

## "In Awesome Wonder"

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I ONCE HEARD A STORY about a minister who made it a point to preach one sermon each year on astronomy. Although each sermon was somewhat different than the others, he always found a way to remind his congregation:

--of the vast expanses of deep dark space,  
--of the tremendous beauty and size of spiraling galaxies,  
--of the incredible mystery of black holes and tiny quarks, and,  
--of the wonderful intelligence, of incredible proportions, which is responsible for creating this marvelous universe in which we humans live.

Each year, when that astronomy sermon was announced, parishioners chuckled and said, "It's time for 'stars and quasars' again."

Asked why he gave those annual sermons, the minister said something like this:

*I want to expand peoples' minds, and their faith. Most of us Christians have a far too limited perspective. Our noses are firmly pressed to the grindstone of daily life. But we forget to look up. We don't see the "big picture" of our existence in this universe. And we fail to appreciate the wonderful transcendence and mystery of our God. So, I preach those sermons--to remind people to look up.*

YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY. I'm not going to start preaching annual astronomy sermons. For one thing, there are too many real scientists in our congregation, for me to do that with any credibility.

But even so, I still think that minister had a point. Many of us Christians don't look up anywhere near enough. Our concepts of Almighty God, the Holy One, are often much too small. We imagine a rather mundane God, whose interests and powers are not all that much larger than our own.

Yet the one true God who gave us all life, is far greater and more powerful than even our ever-expanding universe--that universe which is, as the Psalmist says, God's handiwork.

It's an irony. We Christians often fail to see the awesome power of God's transcendence. However, deep in our hearts we have a real hungering for that transcendence. Instead of being trapped in flat little lives of rigid cause and effect, we want to be inspired and drawn out of ourselves, by the experience of something far greater than ourselves.

We want to be touched by mystery and wonder, in a way that stirs our lives, and changes us forever.

A CHURCH IN CHICAGO was grief-stricken over the loss of one its younger members in a gang war. The death of that young man forced the church people to realize that they had failed. They realized that this boy, and others like him, were finding much more mystery and wonder in street gangs, than in their church.

That's a terrible truth for any congregation to face. But it also says a lot about who we are as human beings. Our deeper parts crave transcendence and mystery. And when we don't find the real thing, which God has to offer, we sometimes settle for shallow substitutes, such as those gangs had to offer.

I think the ancient church theologian, Augustine, had it right, when he prayed the following prayer. As Augustine said to God:

*You have created us for yourself, and our hearts can find no rest, until they find their rest in you. [paraphrase]*

THIS MORNING I want to focus our attention on one of the most popular Christian hymns in our day.

--It's a hymn which calls Christians to look up, and beyond themselves.  
--It's a hymn which celebrates the awesome transcendence of God.  
--It's a hymn which touches that deep craving for mystery and wonder which is within us.

The hymn I speak of is none other than, "HOW GREAT THOU ART."

A few Sundays from now, on September 19, our church will dedicate its new hymnal, which is titled: "Hymns of Truth and Light." You will be happy to know, that "How Great Thou Art" is in it, in the customized section. Requested by members of our congregation, our hymnal committee was pleased to add it to that hymnal.

NOW, REGARDING THAT HYMN: If you will, take a moment to imagine that you are standing on some outermost section of beach in the darkness of night. Perhaps you're at Chapaquoit, near Menahaunt, or on one of Falmouth's many other beaches. The air is balmy and still. Though barely visible in the moonlight, you can hear the gentle waves lap at your feet. Over your head you have an unimpeded view of the vast and distant vault of God's creation.

You can see the cloudy bands of the Milky Way. And a great field of twinkling stars meets your eye, wherever you look. Imagine that scene of God's wonderful creation, and then join me as we sing the first verse, of this moving hymn of praise.

→ HYMN "How Great Thou Art" [vs. 1]

RESPONSIVE READING -- From Psalm 104

\*GLORIA PATRI -- No. 513

ANTHEM Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus

### **“Through the Woods and Forest Glades”**

THE HYMN WE KNOW as “How Great Thou Art” has an unusual history. It began as a Swedish poem, created by Carl Gustaf Boberg in the year 1885.

Carl Boberg was a Swedish minister, an editor, and a member of Sweden’s parliament.

One summer day, Boberg was out walking in a beautiful country estate in his homeland, when suddenly a thunderstorm came up. The rain poured down in torrents, and strong winds blew through violently. But then, the storm went away, as quickly as it had come.

The bright yellow sun broke through the clouds, bathing the green meadows in a dazzling light. Rain dripped from the leaves of the trees.

The surface of the bay which Boberg could see in the distance was suddenly turned into polished glass. A mysterious stillness came over the land. Then, suddenly, Boberg heard the clear call of a thrush, and the ringing of a church bell.

Boberg was so inspired by that experience, that he fell to his knees in “humble adoration to God.”

If you take time to think of it, I think you will agree with me, that this planet on which we live, really is a wonderful place, a place we owe deep thanks to God for giving us.

Soon after that experience of the sun shining forth after the storm, Boberg created a poem of nine stanzas, in which he poured out his feelings of awe. That poem was published in a local Swedish newspaper, but then quickly forgotten. At least Boberg thought it was forgotten.

SEVERAL YEARS LATER, Boberg was astonished to visit a Swedish church and hear the congregation there singing his poem. Apparently, someone had set his poem to an old Swedish folk tune. In fact, it was the same tune the modern hymn is sung to today. Based on that experience, Boberg saw to it that his poem and that tune were published in a Swedish songbook in 1891.

Both the poem and the tune were called “O Store Gud.” In English that means, “O Great God.”

NOW IF YOU WILL, imagine that fierce storm--the winds blowing, rain coming down in torrents, drenching everything in sight. Then, imagine also, the thrill of seeing the bright sun suddenly break through

those storm clouds. Imagine the utter peace and stillness of that moment. Then, imagine the call of a thrush from a nearby meadow, breaking that silence, as life continues on.

The fact is that God has created a wonderful world for us all to live in. And if we have eyes to see, God's holy presence is often revealed to us, through both the forces and creatures of nature.

If you will, imagine those dripping trees. Look out over that distant body of water, suddenly turned to polished glass, and join me in singing, the second verse of this hymn which praises God.

→ HYMN "How Great Thou Art" [vs. 2]

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### **"His Son Not Sparing"**

THE GREATNESS OF GOD is revealed to us in the natural world. But it is also revealed to us Christians in the tremendous regard our God has for us humans.

We humans are far more precious to God, than most of us realize. We are so precious, in fact, that God even sacrificed God's own son, so that the spiritual rift between human unworthiness and God's holiness could be bridged.

As the author of the New Testament book I John wrote:

*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through in. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* [4:9,10]

Many of us are deeply moved, when we receive a thoughtful gift from a friend. But can we even begin to fathom the intense feelings which come to us, when we truly realize, that God's son Jesus, willingly gave up his life on a cross, for each one of us?

Have you ever had someone actually give up his/her life for you? It's almost an unimaginable idea, that anyone could love us that much. But that's what Jesus did for us! And that self-sacrificing love is one of the great jewels and proclamations of our Christian faith.

GOD'S SON DIED FOR YOU, AND FOR ME. But he also died for the rest of humanity. No human being is excluded. And that's a great truth, which just begs to be shared.

And so, as the centuries since Christ's death have passed, there have always been Christian missionaries. There have always been people of faith who have carried that great news of God's love for all humankind, to far away places, to people in foreign lands who speak in strange tongues.

AND SO IT ALSO WAS with Boberg's hymn, "O Store Gud." The feelings of awe that hymn evoked, and the grateful praise it offered to God--those things could not be kept confined within the Swedish culture and language alone. As it happened, in the decades after that hymn was created, that hymn was translated, and re-translated several times. For example:

In 1907, a Christian in Estonia was so moved by the hymn, that he translated it into German.

In 1912, a Russian clergyman--sometimes called the Russian Martin Luther--translated that hymn into his own native Russian tongue, so his own people could experience it.

In 1925, an English translation of this hymn was made. That hymn was given the title, "O Mighty God, When I Behold the Wonder." But for some reason, that English translation never caught on in English-speaking churches.

In 1927, with help from the American Bible Society, the Russian version of this hymn was published in a book of hymns, which was used by Christian missionaries in Russia.

IN THAT RUSSIAN FORM, Boberg's hymn came into the hands of a man named Stuart Hine. Hine was an English missionary to Christians in the Ukraine. After singing that hymn in Russian for many years during the 1930's, Hine finally decided to translate three of its verses into his native English.

In fact, the three verses Hine translated are essentially the first three verses of the hymn we know today. But there were these minor differences.

In Hine's original translation, the word "works" was used instead of the word "worlds." Thus, instead of "the worlds thy hands have made," the verse spoke of "the works thy hands have made."

Also, instead of "I hear the rolling thunder," Hines' original translation said, "I hear the mighty thunder."

BEFORE WORLD WAR II broke out, Hine published his new hymn, and called it "How Great Thou Art."

Of course, the good news of God's great love is shared by different people in different cultures around our world. And, there's a sense in which this hymn we know today is multi-cultural too.

For, "How Great Thou Art" is written in English. But, it is based on a Russian translation of a Swedish poem. And it continues to be sung to a Swedish tune.

Please join me as we now sing the third verse, of this international hymn of praise:

→ HYMN "How Great Thou Art" [vs. 3]

SCRIPTURE READING Romans 8:31b, 32, 35,37-39

CALL TO PRAYER

MOMENT OF SILENT PRAYER, PASTORAL PRAYER, CHORAL RESPONSE

OFFERTORY

Anthem // \*Doxology // Offertory Prayer

### **"And Take Me Home"**

IN THE YEAR 1948, Stuart Hine was stirred to write a fourth verse to his hymn.

In the aftermath of World War II, Hines was deeply moved by all the refugees from eastern Europe who flooded into his native England. Those refugees appreciated the shelter and help they found in England. But even so, they were always asking this question: "When can we go home?"

Hine thought about that question long and hard. As a matter of faith, he finally decided, that the one home we all can really depend upon, is the home which the risen Christ has prepared for us. Of course, that's our eternal home with God.

And so, praising God again, Hine added a fourth verse to his newly translated hymn. With deep thanks to God in our hearts, let's now sing that fourth verse together.

→ HYMN "How Great Thou Art" [vs. 4]

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SCRIPTURE READING John 14:1-6a, 23  
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### **"O Mighty God"**

IN THE 1950'S, Hine's newly translated hymn soared in popularity. It became a favorite of Christian missionaries, who clamored to translate it into the languages of the many different countries they served.

It also became a favorite of Billy Graham, who first came across the hymn in 1954, in a missionary leaflet which Hine had published. Graham first used the hymn at his 1955 Crusade in Toronto, Canada. Thereafter, it became a theme song for Graham's work.

I've read that in 1957 meetings of his New York crusade, Billy Graham and his choir sang this hymn no fewer than 99 times!

For a while, this hymn was so strongly identified with Graham, that other, more liberal Christian groups were often reluctant to use it. But then, over time, the spirit of this hymn itself overcame most theological boundaries, to be a favorite of many Christians.

"HOW GREAT THOU ART" does not appear in our Pilgrim Hymnal, which was copyrighted in 1958. That date was likely before the hymn's wide acceptance.

In 1966, the Methodists reluctantly included "HOW GREAT THOU ART" in their new hymnal, despite some opposition, especially from their more liberal members. Another problem was the royalties required at that time.

Believe it or not, in 1966 the Methodists had to pay the then huge sum of \$2,000, just to include that hymn in their hymnal. At some point, possibly in that period, there was an extended battle in the courts over who owned the copyright to that hymn.

As I said earlier, our hymnal committee has added "How Great Thou Art" to our new hymnal, "Hymns of Truth and Light," and paid a royalty fee to do so. You will be pleased to know that that royalty fee for our new hymnal only cost us the relatively small amount of \_\_\_\_\_.

Now to bring my thoughts to a conclusion:

A MAN FROM SWEDEN fell to his knees after he experienced the wonder of God, in the beauty and calm which came after a thunderstorm.

The truth is, that we human beings really do crave transcendence and mystery. We really do want to be inspired and drawn out of ourselves, by the experience of something far greater than ourselves.

We really do want to be touched in a way, that stirs our lives and changes us forever.

--So let us look up to the heavens which God has created.

--Let us look up to see the "big picture" of our existence in this great universe.

--And let us look up, to see God's great love for us--that wondrous love which sent us God's beloved son, Jesus Christ.

Let us look up, and let us sing from our hearts, "How Great Thou Art."

→ \*HYMN "How Great Thou Art" [all four verses]

\*BENEDICTION AND CHORAL RESPONSE

\*POSTLUDE

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