

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A Biblical look at some popular hymns: "How Great Thou Art!"

Good morning and welcome to 'Truth for Today' where we begin a new series of talks based upon well known hymns. My remarks today are about a song made popular, in 1957, by George Beverley Shea, of the Billy Graham Evangelistic team, at the Crusade they held in Madison Square Garden, New York. I am, of course, referring to the hymn 'How Great Thou Art' which, since the fifties, has been translated into many languages including Spanish, Polish, Japanese and Chinese.

Before we examine the Scriptures that undergird this hymn, I wish to recount something of the circumstances of its composition. In 1885, Karl Boberg, a Swedish pastor, was caught in a sudden thunderstorm while walking home from a morning service. This caused him to seek temporary shelter from the rain, but allowed him to witness the thunder and lightning. The storm ended as suddenly as it began and, on arriving home, he was acutely conscious of the display of power he had just seen, which caused him to give thanks to God for His creatorial greatness. This incident led Boberg to compose a nine verse poem on the power of God in creation, entitled "O Great God". In 1890, it was published for his church members to sing to the tune of a Swedish folk melody. Sometime later, it was translated into German and then, in 1927, into Russian.

Meanwhile, Stuart Hine, an English-speaking missionary, working in the Ukraine area, heard the people in an isolated village singing Boberg's poem. As he listened, he realised that the hymn was only concerned with the revelation of God through creation, a fact which inspired him to add a further verse to the hymn, which he had translated into English from the Russian version. This is centred upon the atoning work of the Lord Jesus. In 1939, at the start of the Second World War, Hine had to leave his work in the Ukraine, along with many refugees who fled when the conflict of the Second World War threatened the stability of the small states surrounding Russia. Sometime later, a refugee expressed a longing to return home which, again, inspired him to add the verse that is sung as the last verse of 'How Great Thou Art'. The hymn was now finished.

Though the words of the hymn might be familiar to most of us, I shall quote each verse so that we can ponder again the greatness of the God revealed to us through creation and the Scriptures.

*"O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,
Consider all the works Thy hands have made,
I see the stars; I hear the mighty 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."*

As these words bring before us, in a very real way, the power of God in creation, I shall concentrate for the next few minutes on the implications of the Biblical account in Genesis 1. There is a suggestion, in some accounts of the writing of this hymn, that Boberg had before him the thought expressed by David when he wrote Psalm 8. I cite just verses 3 and 4: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained, what is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?" In these verses, David brings to our notice his understanding of the immensity of the universe. We must also recognise that our present knowledge has greatly enlarged man's conception of the vast extent of the universe, which should cause us to stand even more reverently in the contemplation of creation.

To return now to our hymn we notice that the first verse brings to our attention the stars and the power of God throughout the galaxies and unknown regions of space. This is why I wish to read Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." As Graham Scroggie has written: "This first verse of the Bible has no parallel for sublimity and comprehensiveness. In scope it is declarative, not demonstrative; affirmative not argumentative; and historical, not philosophical. There is no attempt to prove the being of God." The same writer also points out that this

verse denies the eternity of matter by stating that everything had a beginning. Atheism is also ruled out because the Bible, in this verse, declares that whenever the universe began God was there. Some ancient religions might have suggested that there are many gods. Not so the Bible which, as we have read, begins with the authoritative statement, 'God created'.

There is another thought contained in these early verses of Genesis, for the second verse begins: "And the earth..." We have no time to deal with the whole glorious account in Genesis one and two, only to point out that the second verse brings our attention to the earth. The Bible is concerned with the earth and the people who populate it. This is further emphasised by Genesis 1:16: "And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also." Notice how the rest of the universe is dealt with in five words, namely, "...he made the stars also."

To my mind, the second verse of our hymn brings us face to face with the details of creation as they affect us personally. The poet now writes about the songs of birds as he wandered through forest glades and woods, more typical perhaps of Sweden than some of the densely populated tracts of the UK, though, if we listen carefully, we can all hear the songs of many birds, even in our cities. Perhaps our holidays include visits to the more mountainous regions of the world. Nowadays, owing to the availability of foreign tours, holidays are more likely to include a greater variety of scenery than those in my youth. We can, if we try, hear the ripple of a brook and feel the caress of a breeze. Such phenomena, whether actually experienced firsthand or vicariously via the television screen, leave us in no doubt that we live in an impressive and beautiful world.

Paul, when writing to the Romans, pointed out that creation leaves us without any excuse for unbelief in God. In Romans 1:18-20, which I shall read from the New International Version: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known of God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." Please note that God's wrath is directed against godlessness and wickedness. Godlessness, I would suggest, is an absence of reverence and piety, even rebellion, towards God, whereas wickedness means man's inhumanity and injustice towards his fellow men.

Paul has made it obvious in these verses that creation is a clear witness to its Creator. When we sing the opening verses of 'How Great Thou Art', we are agreeing with Paul's statement, an action which has implications for us. He uses the word 'understood' in our quoted passage from Romans, which goes further than simply seeing and enjoying creation. It suggests that thinking and reflecting about the natural world will bring us to the conclusion that there must be a Creator. We also need to note that the knowledge of God, gained from creation's testimony, is limited to 'His eternal power and divine nature.' We can learn nothing of His love and grace by observing mountains, seas and forest glades. This is why Stuart Hines was moved to write a third verse to which we now must turn.

To remind us of the changing theme of this part of the hymn, I will read the four lines that resonate with the great subject of our redemption.

*"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."*

It is crucial that we do not miss this verse out of the hymn for it brings to our attention truth that is critical to our relationship with God.

This third verse is replete with Scriptural truth that informs us what it means to be a Christian. When a person confesses that they believe in Jesus, they must be able to say what truths and beliefs they hold about Him. The first line of the verse of the hymn that we have just read tells us that Jesus is God's Son. I am convinced that to be a Christian, in the New Testament sense, entails a belief that Jesus is God incarnate. I would be the first to agree that this takes some believing; in fact, I would suggest that man is unable to grasp this tremendous and awe-inspiring truth, apart from the Spirit of God. When the disciples were asked about the identity of Jesus, in Matthew 16:16-17, we find that: "Simon Peter answered and said; Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father, who is in heaven." What was true for Peter is also true for us. We need the touch of divine grace to bring us to the point of confessing Jesus as the Son of God.

There are two further points I wish to discuss in the lines,

*"And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die - I scarce can take it in,"*

The first of these is that it was not an accident of history that Jesus was born two thousand years ago. These words that we have quoted tell us that God sent His Son. Stuart Hine did not pluck the thought out of his imagination, when he composed this third verse, for he was in line with Scripture. 1 John 4:9-10 states exactly that: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." From such statements we learn something of the great plan of salvation that involved nothing less than the eternal Son of God being sent by the Father to accomplish the work of salvation.

The New Testament writers proclaimed the complete acceptance by God of the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus. By His death and resurrection, Jesus completely satisfied the just demands of a holy and righteous God against sin. In order to have this point clear in our minds, I will quote an explicit commentary note from my Bible: "Propitiation is not placating a desire for revenge, but rather it is satisfying the righteousness of a holy God, thereby making it possible for Him to show mercy righteously." God, through the death of Christ, accomplished reconciliation between Himself and man that was impossible for us to do ourselves. The last two lines of the third verse of our hymn reinforce this:

*"That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin."*

Amongst many, many other hymn writers that could be referred to, I let Charles Wesley take up this same theme:

*"And can it be, that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain;
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?"*

The only answers that can ever be given to the penitent sinner, when he or she is faced with their need of salvation, are the tremendous facts of Calvary and the atoning death of Jesus. Behind it all is the amazing love of the God who sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. In the face of such suffering love, are we still trying to live a good life as a means of earning salvation and a relationship with God? I trust that the discussion we have had around this third verse has demonstrated that the Bible is adamant that we ourselves can never adequately deal with sin. Yet what we can never do, God has accomplished in the Person of Christ! My earnest desire this morning is that each of us should be believers in Jesus.

It must be stated at this point, however, and stated emphatically, that because we are saved by grace, and not our own efforts, that we can then live how we please. A believer who constantly and knowingly practices sinful acts, on the premise that God has dealt with man's sin at Calvary, is a travesty of New Testament Christianity. Paul, and all of the apostles, demand that believers in Jesus live a life that is pleasing to the Lord. If we have owned the Lordship of Christ, it behoves us to follow Him as His disciples and servants. All of the New Testament writers inform us of how we ought to live, which means that there is no Scriptural warrant for having a careless and immoral life style.

For those who have joined us in the last few minutes, you are listening to 'Truth for Today' where we are considering the truths behind the hymn "How Great Thou Art", and we are now about to discuss the last verse. To refresh our memories I will read the four lines:

*"When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home - what joy shall fill my heart!
Then shall I bow in humble adoration
And there proclaim my God how great Thou art."*

A few minutes ago, I told how Stuart Hine, who had much to do with this hymn, was listening to some refugees, from Eastern Europe, expressing a longing to return to their homelands. Such remarks inspired him to write the lines that I have just read. There are two points from the first two lines that I wish to concentrate upon for the closing minutes of our time together this morning. The first of these is the coming again of the Lord Jesus which can be a neglected aspect of the Christian faith. Why this should be I cannot explain because the New Testament contains many references to the Lord's return.

The Lord Himself spoke of it in the Gospels, though we have only time to read Matthew 24:29-30 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give its light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the power of the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." Such words tell us, plainly enough, that there will be a cataclysmic event at the end of the age that looks on to the return of the Lord to this earth. Two further Scriptures, from the many that could be cited, will demonstrate that the teaching of the Lord's return is not based upon isolated references that occasionally occur in the Bible.

When, in chapter one of The Acts of the Apostles and verses 10 and 11, the disciples witnessed the ascension of the Lord, it is recorded that they were taught that He would return. "And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; who also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." Just one more reference, this time from 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord." Of course, we can say that it seems unlikely, or even impossible, that such drama could happen in our world, when belief in the supernatural is at an all-time low. If we are of this frame of mind, we must admit that we do not believe what the Bible clearly states. We, at 'Truth for Today', gladly accept the doctrine of the Lord's return as a real event occurring in history. We are convinced that it is an essential consequence of the great victory that the Lord Jesus gained at Calvary.

I said earlier that there were two points that I wished to make from the last verse of our hymn, so I will now turn to the second of these, which concerns the thought of being taken home when the Lord comes. Paul was confident that when he was absent from the body he was present with the Lord. In other words, he would be in the place we call heaven. We believe that when a Christian dies his or her spirit is immediately and consciously in the presence of Christ. We also believe in the resurrection of the body when the Lord returns again, which could be the subject for another talk. Sufficient now to accept that there is a home in heaven, secured by the grace of God through Calvary, for every believer. Obviously, death is not something that we welcome, as it cuts us off from those we love, but for the believer it is not something to fear. I will finish this morning's talk with an illustration to show what I mean when I suggest that we have the victory over the grave.

Many years ago, when I was serving an apprenticeship in a large factory manufacturing motor cars, I had to lock up the workshop in which I was working at the time. Just before I switched off the lights, and before I closed the steel exit door, I was very aware of the quietness, where previously there had been the clamour of many different machine tools. Now the milling machines, lathes, shapers, and grinding machines were still. Where were most of the men who, a few minutes before, had been exercising their high skills at the bench and the lathe? They had returned to their wives and families to rest from their daily toil; to where they knew they were loved and welcomed.

This is how the Christian should view death. It is the laying aside of the things that have occupied us during our earthly pilgrimage so that we might be forever with the Lord. I know that some Christians, naturally speaking, die far too early, and sometimes accompanied by great pain and discomfort, but so do many others who live on this planet. The difference is that Christians are convinced that the Lord has prepared an eternal place for them. The closing verse of another hymn that I particularly like states:

*"When to Canaan's long-loved dwelling
Love divine thy foot shall bring,
There with shouts of triumph swelling,
Zion's songs in rest to sing,

There no stranger God shall meet thee,
Stranger thou in courts above;
He who to His rest shall greet thee,
Greets thee with a well-known love."*

I would suggest that those lines complement the words of Stuart Hine's last verse.

If I had a good voice, it would be appropriate to conclude by singing the chorus of the hymn that has been the theme for this morning's talk. You will be relieved to know that I shall read it and not sing. If the words truly mean something to you, dear listener, then join in with me:

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

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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