

History of Hymns: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

by C. Michael Hawn

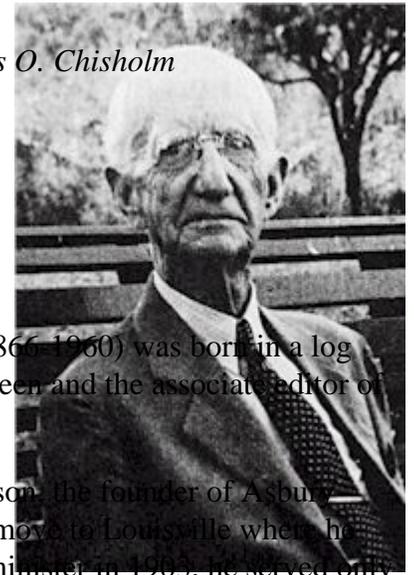
"Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

Thomas O. Chisholm

The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 140

*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! **

Thomas O. Chisholm



A native of the small Kentucky town of Franklin, Thomas Obediah Chisholm (1866-1960) was born in a log cabin. He lacked formal education. Nevertheless, he became a teacher at age sixteen and the associate editor of his hometown weekly newspaper, the *Franklin Advocate*, at age twenty-one.

In 1893 Chisholm became a Christian through the ministry of Henry Clay Morrison, the founder of Asbury College and Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Morrison persuaded Chisholm to move to Louisville where he became editor of the *Pentecostal Herald*. Though he was ordained a Methodist minister in 1903, he served only a single, brief appointment at Scottsville, Kentucky, due to ill health. Chisholm relocated his family to Winona Lake, Indiana, to recover, and then to Vineland, New Jersey, in 1916 where he sold insurance. He retired in 1953 and spent his remaining years in a Methodist retirement community in Ocean Grove, New Jersey.

By the time of his retirement, he had written more than 1200 poems, 800 of which were published. They often appeared in religious periodicals such as the *Sunday School Times*, *Moody Monthly*, and *Alliance Weekly*. Many of these were set to music.

Hymnologist Kenneth Osbeck provides the background for "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." Chisholm had sent a number of his poems to the Rev. William H. Runyan (1870-1957), a musician with the Moody Bible Institute and one of the editors of Hope Publishing Company in Chicago. Runyan wrote of the hymn: "This particular poem held such an appeal that I prayed most earnestly that my tune might carry over its message in a worthy way, and the subsequent history of its use indicates that God answered prayer. It was written in Baldwin, Kansas, in 1923, and was first published in my private song pamphlets."

George Beverly Shea (1909-2013), the famous Canadian-born singer of the Billy Graham Crusades, introduced this hymn to those attending the evangelistic meetings in Great Britain in 1954. It immediately became a favorite.

A phrase in Lamentations 3:22-23 provides a basis for the refrain: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,

his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Stanza one emphasizes God's unchanging nature: ". . . there is no shadow of turning with thee;/thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not." Perhaps James 1:17 provides the scriptural basis for this concept: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

In stanza two, the natural created order, including the cycle of the seasons, bears witness to the faithfulness of God. The final stanza brings the eternal, unchanging God into contact with humanity. We receive from the presence of God "Pardon for sin and a peace that endures." Indeed, William Runyan's tune was the ideal musical complement to the warmth of the text. The subtle changes in harmony and the solemnity of the melody amplify the text, bringing the climax on the word "faithfulness" perfectly at the end of the refrain.

This hymn appeared in many evangelical hymnals and song collections, but was not chosen for an official Methodist hymnal until the current *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), even though the author was a Methodist. It was a very popular hymn of the former Evangelical United Brethren Church and had been included in their hymnals.

According to Carlton Young, "Great is thy faithfulness" was second only to "In the garden" as the most requested hymn for inclusion in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. A survey conducted in 2000 by Dean McIntyre, Director of Music Resources, Discipleship Ministries, revealed that "Great is thy faithfulness" remains one of the favorite hymns among United Methodists.

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