

**Great Is Thy Faithfulness**  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
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**Ephesians 5:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, <sup>16</sup>making the most of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup>So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup>Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup>as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, <sup>20</sup>giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Lamentations 3:22-33**

<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
<sup>24</sup> “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”  
<sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.  
<sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.  
<sup>27</sup> It is good for one to bear  
the yoke in youth,  
<sup>28</sup> to sit alone in silence  
when the Lord has imposed it,  
<sup>29</sup> to put one’s mouth to the dust  
(there may yet be hope),  
<sup>30</sup> to give one’s cheek to the smiter,  
and be filled with insults.  
<sup>31</sup> For the Lord will not  
reject forever.  
<sup>32</sup> Although he causes grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;  
<sup>33</sup> for he does not willingly afflict  
or grieve anyone.

Bob Kauflin, author of one of my sources on this hymn, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, says of the hymn, “It’s just the fruit of a faithful man with a simple faith in a faithful God.”<sup>1</sup> There is no tragic tale or in-the-blink-of-an-eye life-changing moment behind this hymn. Its author, Thomas Obadiah [or Obediah] Chisholm, for the greater part of his life, was a life insurance salesman. “According to Chisholm, there were no special circumstances which caused its writing - just his experience and Bible truth.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.worshipmatters.com/2009/08/03/a-hymn-for-ordinary-christians-great-is-thy-faithfulness/](http://www.worshipmatters.com/2009/08/03/a-hymn-for-ordinary-christians-great-is-thy-faithfulness/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/g/r/e/greatif.htm](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/g/r/e/greatif.htm)

According to a record by relative Walter Chisholm:

Thomas Chisholm was born in a log house on the family farm in the Lake Spring community near Franklin in Simpson County, Kentucky on July 29, 1866. He attended school in the little country schoolhouse in the community and was asked to become a teacher there at the age of sixteen. He taught for approximately six years before he was given the opportunity to become associated with the local newspaper, the Franklin Favorite, a position he held for five years. Later he became editor and business manager for the Pentecostal Herald, a denominational newspaper published in Louisville, Kentucky.

Mr. Chisholm was converted during a revival meeting conducted in Franklin by Evangelist [Dr.] Henry Clay Morrison...He was ordained to the ministry...and was assigned to a pastorate in nearby Scottsville, Kentucky. He served in this capacity for only one year before failing health forced him to resign.

Mr. Chisholm was advised to work in the open air, and moved his family to Winona Lake, Indiana, where he became involved in the insurance business. He continued in this occupation when he later moved to Vineland, New Jersey. He retired in 1953 and moved into the Methodist Home for the Aged in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, where he continued to live until his death on February 29, 1960.<sup>3</sup>

“When Chisholm was 75, he wrote in a letter: ‘My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.’”<sup>4</sup> This sense of God’s constant presence caused Chisholm to write more than 1,200 poems and hymns over the course of his lifetime.

This hymn, written in 1923, was sent to his friend, and fellow Methodist minister, William Marion Runyan. Runyan later said, “This particular poem held such an appeal that I prayed most earnestly that my tune might carry its message in a worthy way, and the subsequent history of its use indicates that God answered prayer.”<sup>5</sup> “William Runyan was born in 1870...As a youth, [he] served as a church organist...[He] attended Northwestern University for three years...and was ordained as a Methodist minister at age twenty-one and then pastored various congregations in Kansas...Runyan began writing gospel songs with the encouragement of D.B. Towner of the Moody Bible Institute.”<sup>6</sup> Eventually William Runyan moved “to Chicago where he worked with the Moody Bible Institute, and he worked as an editor for Hope Publishing Company, co-editing ‘The Service Hymnal’ with Gordon Shorney.”<sup>7</sup>

And that connection to the Moody Bible Institute is what caused the use of this hymn to spread.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=43600909](http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=43600909)

<sup>4</sup> [www.worshipmatters.com/2009/08/03/a-hymn-for-ordinary-christians-great-is-thy-faithfulness/](http://www.worshipmatters.com/2009/08/03/a-hymn-for-ordinary-christians-great-is-thy-faithfulness/)

<sup>5</sup> [www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/g/r/e/greatitf.htm](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/g/r/e/greatitf.htm)

<sup>6</sup> [www.hymnary.org/person/Runyan\\_WM](http://www.hymnary.org/person/Runyan_WM)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

“Dr. Will Houghton of the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago found [the hymn] and decided to have the students sing it in chapel on a regular basis.”<sup>8</sup> The students sang the song so often that it “became the unofficial theme song of the college.”<sup>9</sup> Then, in 1945, “George Beverly Shea, [who had been hired for the radio station at Moody Bible Institute by Dr. Houghton], began to sing *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* at the Billy Graham evangelistic crusades”<sup>10</sup> and the hymn got exposure around the world. The rest, as they say, is history.

I began by implying that Thomas Chisholm was an ordinary man because of his profession. Even more so than his profession, his life experiences were ordinary, as Merriam-Webster defines it: “of common quality, rank, or ability.”<sup>11</sup> Chisholm was beset by health problems almost his entire life. Like the apostle Paul who spoke of a thorn in his side. Like you or I who have something, or somethings, which weigh upon us - which remind us life is not perfect, and which remind us of our good fortune that our God is beside us in it all, who never leaves us alone, who is our Rock and our Redeemer.

This ordinariness of his life and your life and my life is the same ordinariness of the life of the author of Lamentations. Lamentations is a collection of laments, of cries of grief, of sorrow, of weariness. In it, the people of Israel have been exiled because they have not followed God; they are suffering the consequences of separating themselves from God. They have turned their backs on God and have found their lives to be empty, painful, and terrible and so, in their lament over the troubles of their lives, they beseech God to restore their relationship because God is true. The book of Lamentations ends with “Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old.” We read this morning words of the true nature of God: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

We each have our laments, the things about which we cry out to God. Remember what Thomas Chisholm wrote in his later years: “My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.” His life, despite his trials, or maybe as a result of his trials, was lived as we are urged to live in the letter to the Ephesians. “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with

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<sup>8</sup> [www.khouse.org/enews\\_article/2011/1739/print/](http://www.khouse.org/enews_article/2011/1739/print/)

<sup>9</sup> [www.sharethefait.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/great-is-they-faithfulness-the-song-and-the-story.html](http://www.sharethefait.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/great-is-they-faithfulness-the-song-and-the-story.html) [NOTE: this link is accurate - “thy” is misspelled as “they” in the link]

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ordinary?show=1&t=1345311833](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ordinary?show=1&t=1345311833)

wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Understanding the will of the Lord is tricky. Paul describes it in his first letter to the Corinthians in this way: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.”<sup>12</sup> When we are reunited with God, we will understand. Until then, we, like the author of Lamentations, do our best. And sometimes, we, like the author of Lamentations, speak in riddles. For example, the end of reading says, “For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.” Huh? “Although he causes grief...he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.”

I reached out to a seminary friend who has a Master’s degree in Hebrew, the original language of Lamentations. I asked her for some clarification around this and she was quite helpful. Another interpretation “could be something like, ‘if he causes grief’ and in verse 33 it could be that...he is trying to show that he is not trying to do it on purpose. So in [verse] 32 he can't help it, and in [verse] 33 he is not causing grief willingly.”<sup>13</sup> One simple re-understanding of a word takes us from “Although he causes grief” to “If he causes grief.” There is far greater harmony in that understanding for there are things in our lives which happen and, although we don’t like them, we trust they are all part of God’s working of good in the world. “If he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.”

While we may not understand God’s will and we may have difficulty describing it, God’s nature is made clearly evident in the Scriptures, and in the words and works of Christ. It is this nature of which Chisholm wrote in the first and third verses: “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. // Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, / Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide; / Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, / Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!”

Remember once more what Thomas Chisholm wrote: “My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.” He was never a wealthy man as this world thinks of wealth yet he wrote this refrain: “Great is Thy faithfulness!

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

<sup>13</sup> Thank you, Terra Winston!

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!” This line, perhaps more than any other, restores my perspective: All I have needed Thy hand hath provided. When it comes down to it, what I need is available to me through God’s gracious hand, shelter, food, and for me, above all, the people in my life. God is ever present through the people in my life. “All I have needed Thy hand hath provided.”

What is it that you need which God has provided? What is it that makes you sing and make melody to the Lord in your heart, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? What is it that assures *you* of God’s faithfulness? Let us all join in manifold witness and give thanks for those things we name as we stand now and sing hymn 276, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*.