

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Words by Thomas Obadiah Chisolm (1866-1960), Music by William Marion Runyan (1870-1957)

“Great is Thy Faithfulness” was written by two men who suffered disappointments due to poor health. The story of this song is the story of their response.

Thomas Chisolm was born in a log cabin in Franklin, Kentucky. He was unable to attend high school or college, but at sixteen, he began teaching in the same schoolhouse where he had been a student. His writing ability was soon evident, and when he was 21, he was offered a position as assistant editor of his local newspaper. Later, he was the chosen poet of the Kentucky Press Association.

When Thomas was about 26, Henry Clay Morrison, a circuit-riding preacher who later served as president of Asbury College, held meetings in Franklin. Deeply convicted and almost in despair, the young writer returned to his room. As he read the account of Jesus’ arrest and death in John 18, it dawned on him that he was one of those who made Jesus’ death necessary. But if his sin was so great, God’s grace was too! As Thomas experienced forgiveness, he felt like he was coming out of a dark tunnel into the sun.

Henry Clay Morrison soon asked Thomas Chisolm to edit and manage his paper, the Pentecostal Herald. In 1906, Thomas was ordained a Methodist minister, but he had to resign a year later because of poor health. He ended up working as a life-insurance agent instead.

A humble, shy man, Thomas first started writing poetry for his own encouragement, eventually writing more than 1200 in all. “Having been led, for a part of my life, through some difficult paths,” he said, “I have sought to gather from such experiences material out of which to write hymns of comfort and cheer for those similarly circumstanced.” He also wrote, “I have sought to be true to the Word, and to avoid flippant and catchy titles and treatment. I have greatly desired that each hymn or poem might have some definite message to the hearts for whom it was written.”

Thomas wrote “Great is His Faithfulness” in 1923, when he had been walking with the Lord for about 30 years. He sent the hymn, along with several others, to his friend, William Runyan.

As a teenager, William Runyan was already serving as a church organist, later becoming a pastor and evangelist who was well-loved for his hymn singing. But he had to retire because of severe hearing loss.

When Thomas Chisolm sent him “Great is His Faithfulness,” Runyan was especially impressed by the words. He wrote, “This particular poem held such 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.”

“Great is Thy Faithfulness” became the “Institute Hymn” while William Runyan was on the staff of Moody Bible Institute, spreading from there to Christians all across the United States.

Both Chisolm and Runyan continued to write and work at their professions for many years, retiring at ages 87 and 78 respectively. In 1955, Thomas Chisolm attended an alumni Bible conference for Moody Bible Institute near his retirement home in Ocean Grove, New Jersey. Afterwards, the song leader asked for the story of “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” which they had all sung together. Thomas replied that he had simply been reading Lamentations 3:22-23, and became overcome with God’s faithfulness and mercy.

As he once 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 unflinching 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.”

“This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:21-23)

Great is Thy Faithfulness

D D+ Gmaj7 Em/G A7 G/A A7 G/D D6 G A7/G G

1. Great is Thy faith - ful - ness, O God my Fa - ther! There is no
 2. Sum - mer and win - ter, and spring-time and har - vest, Sun, moon and
 3. Par - don for sin and a peace that en - dur - eth, Thine own dear

6 D/F# D E/B B7 E7 A A7 D D Em D/F#

shad - ow of turn - ing with Thee; Thou chang - est not, Thy com - pas sions, they
 stars in their cours - es a - bove, Join with all na - ture in man - i - fold
 pres - ence to cheer and to guide, Strength for to - day and bright hope for to -

12 Gmaj7 G6 G#7 C# G#7 D/A / A A7 D A

fail not: As Thou hast been Thou for - ev - er wilt be. Great is Thy
 wit - ness To Thy great faith - ful - ness, mer - cy and love.
 mor - row Bless - ings all mine, with ten thou - sand be - side!

18 G/D D B7 Am/E Em A7 D B7 A/E E7 A / A7

faith - ful - ness! Great is Thy faith - ful - ness! Morn - ing by morn - ing new mer - cies I see; All I have

26 D / Em D/F# Gmaj7 G6 G#7 C# G#7 D/A D/A A7 D

need - ed Thy hand hath pro - vid - ed Great is Thy faith - ful - ness, Lord, un - to me!