

The Gospel in song

September 27, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Before I came to Langford, I spent a lot of time as a worship pastor, which meant that I spent a lot of time looking at songs. Contemporary songs, old spirituals, hymns, you name it. It's left me with a little rolodex of lyrics in my head that's really come in handy here at Langford.

And as I thought about those songs, I noticed an interesting trend in a few songs, that's so specific, it made me wonder if it was intentional – like a pattern that hymnwriters had followed in the past. Now, I haven't seen anyone else write on this before, so I have no idea, but I think that this pattern gives us a really neat way for us to reflect on our faith, together and personally. So I want to share it with you in the hopes that it will give you a new way to think about your faith.

So here's the pattern that I've noticed in a number of hymns. The pattern goes – verse 1 – think about God; verse 2 – think about life in light of God; verse 3 – think about the Cross; and verse 4 – think about eternity. Ok? So verse one introduces an idea about God, verse 2 develops that idea in the context of life, verse 3 takes us to the cross and then verse 4 points us to eternity. That's the pattern.

Think about God.

Think about life.

Think about the Cross.

Think about eternity.

I've seen this frequently enough to think that this might have been a model that people followed; let me show you what I mean. I've given you some hymns there – let's start with How great Thou art.

So, verse 1 - O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder/Consider all the works Thy hand hath made... He's thinking about God, isn't he? He's reflecting on the creative power of the Lord and that ultimately leads him to sing – How great Thou art!

Now verse 2 – he applies that power of God in real life. God the Creator is not just some abstract idea; instead, everywhere he goes, he sees God's handiwork. When through the woods and forest glades I wander... when I hear the birds, when I see a beautiful sunset, when I see the changing leaves, I realize that God is real, and an artist, and it makes my soul sing – How great Thou art!

Now verse 3, the hymnwriter goes one step further – because as awe-inspiring as nature is, there is something even more amazing – and I would argue – even more important that we need to consider – and that's the Cross. 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. If you stop at Creation, you are missing out on the Gospel. We humans tend to worship created things more than God (Romans 1:20-25) – like ourselves or our careers or our finances – and that separates us from the God that made us – but God sent His own Son to bring us back to Him. That's awe-inspiring! That's reason to sing – How great Thou art!

And then verse 4, the hymn points us forward – to eternity – and this is a really important idea for us to engage with. We're so focused on the here and now that we scarcely give a second thought to what's to come. But the hymnwriter very rightly says – this world is not all there is. As blood-bought children of God, we have an eternal future to enjoy, and that should really impact our faith now. He writes - When

Christ shall come with shout of acclamation / And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart! / Then I shall bow in humble adoration, / And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art! That gives us hope and courage. And reason to sing 'How great Thou art.'

Think about God, think about life, think about the Cross, think about eternity. You see the pattern? Let's do another one.

Christ the solid rock - My hope is built on nothing less / than Jesus' blood and righteousness; / I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. He's thinking about God – about how dependable He is, what a firm foundation He is. That word 'frame' is an archaic way of saying 'system of support,' so like, government or law or family. Those are all wonderful, but God alone is the solid rock to stand on.

Then verse 2, he takes that idea into real life. Even when darkness veils His face, so that I can't see that He is there, I know that He is and He is an anchor that holds me firm, in every situation. That's God's dependability in real life.

Verse 3 – goes to the Cross. His oath, His promises, His covenant commitment to us, His blood spilled on the Cross on our behalf – they all reveal – God is for us and no trial will overcome us because of it. It's a bit like Romans 8:32 - *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:32 NIV).*

And then verse 4 – eternity. 4 When he shall come with trumpet sound, / O may I then in him be found, / dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.

The hymnwriter looks ahead and says my eternal future is rooted in Jesus' righteousness. Not my own good deeds; not my good actions. I could never be good enough for God. But since Jesus died for me and since I have trusted myself to Him, I will stand in HIS righteousness before the throne and so enter into eternity. Simple as that. Christ is the solid rock to stand on, now and forever.

Let's do another one – It is well. Verse 1 - When peace like a river, attendeth my way / When sorrows like sea billows roll... So, whatever the situation, God has given me the capacity to say 'It is well with my soul.' This hymn is going to be about the confidence that comes from God's sovereign care.

Now verse 2, not content to leave that as an abstract idea, he's going to work it out in real life: Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come – I am confident and secure knowing that Christ has looked with compassion on me and laid down His life for me. If He's done that, to secure my eternal well-being, how can I not trust Him with this and so say 'it is well with my soul.'

Verse 3 takes that one step further, going to the cross - My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part but the whole, / Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, / Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! Isn't that amazing? God doesn't hold grudges. When you turn from sin to Christ, He wipes the slate clean – not a part, not a little, not in accordance with your gratitude. The whole. You don't need to carry sin any longer – you can live in sinless freedom and confidence before God.

And then verse 4 – eternity. And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, / The clouds be rolled back as a scroll; The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, Even so, it is well with my soul. The hymnwriter's thinking there of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 - 16 For the Lord himself will come down

from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. We are promised eternity forever together with God and that should give us confidence now.

Think about God, think about life, think about the Cross, think about eternity.

Now, I've noticed this in older hymns, but I was really intrigued to see this in a newer song that we've sung recently at the church – the first one we did today.

See Him there, the great I Am / A crown of thorns upon His head / The Father's heart displayed for us / Oh God, we thank You for the cross

The songwriter's thinking about God, identifying Jesus as the great I am, and reflecting on what the Cross tells us about God. We see God's posture towards us on the Cross – a reckless, self-giving love that it meant to save us.

And then verse 2, he pushes a little deeper into real life – WE were the guilty ones, cursing and questioning His goodness and yet He still died for our benefit.

And then 3 drives it home – The crown of thorns, the bloodied nails, this sacrifice - laid in the grave, for rebellious sinners – it was all for our benefit – every sin paid for. But that's not the end of the story, is it? Jesus died to forgive our sins but rose again to show that death had no hold on Him – or on us.

And that means, verse 4, that we have eternity to look forward to. I like how they put this - When the age of death is done / We'll see Your face, bright as the sun - in a sense, they're right – this is the age of death – it is something that each of us will go through. But if we are trusting in that all-for-us sacrifice, then we will rise again into the age of eternal life, no more death, no more pain – and as they say - We'll bow before the King of kings / Oh God, forever we will sing – hallelujah!

Think about God / think about life / think about the Cross / think about eternity.

Now, what do we do with this? Well, if you have an artistic streak, I think it would be kind of neat to sit down and write a poem or a song using this outline. God/life/Cross/eternity – but if rhyming's not your thing, then just make this a part of your everyday life.

When you wake up, think about God. Think about His justice and patience and compassion. Think about His faithfulness to Joseph and to Joshua, to Peter and to Paul and to you. Focus on some aspect of God's character throughout the day.

And apply it in real life. How do you see God at work? How is God leading and directing and comforting and guiding you? Because He is.

And then go to the Cross. There is no greater demonstration of God's love for us than the Cross. That is God in a nutshell – committed, faithful, sacrificial, just in paying for sin, merciful in extending forgiveness to us. Praise God for it.

And then think about eternity. You know, this is something that we don't often do. We fix our eyes on what's immediately before us, but these songs remind us to have an eternal perspective. These songs remind us that we have a certain future – an eternal life where death and pain and sin and sorrow are longer there. We will be with the Lord forever – and that should really shape how we act now. The promise of eternal rest should motivate us to live faithfully, turning our backs on sin. Should motivate us to live confidently, courageously, knowing that no matter what, we will one day stand before the Lord and hear Him say 'well done good and faithful servant, enter into my rest forever.'

Think about God, think about life, think about the Cross, think about eternity.