

Hymn Series

Good morning New Hope! This morning is an exciting day for me – over the next five weeks we are going to look at some of your favorite hymns and praise songs. This is the first sermon series I've created from scratch – and I'm excited to do it. No one's ever asked me, but if they were to ask, "Rob, what would you most like to learn about with these course of study courses and seminary coursework?" I'd have to tell them – the music. I want to know the stories of the hymns of the Church, and not just the Church, but also in the secular society.

Friends, I'm convinced that much of the music we surround ourselves with – that we hear on the radio as we drive to various places throughout the week – are the cries of people so desperate to know love and Jesus Christ that they have no other outlet than to put a poem to a tune, strum it on their guitar, and sing even in the heartbreaks. So thank you for letting me digress from the lectionary texts for a few weeks to do something that speaks to my heart. I hope through these weeks that the themes of our assurance of God's faithfulness, knowing He's ever-present, that He washes us clean at the cross, proves His ability to do so at the empty tomb, and constantly gives us His amazing grace bless your hearts as much as it has mine just in the planning.

Today we're going to look at the stories behind four hymns: "Great is Thy Faithfulness," "Surely the Presence," "Are You Washed in the Blood?" and "Blessed Assurance." We'll explore how these hymns resonate with Scripture. I think you've probably already connected the dots between "Great is Thy Faithfulness," and the text from Lamentations. I also want to tie it into the message of Hebrews 10:8-25, which encourages us to hold onto our faith and draw near to God with sincere hearts. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn there with me. **Read Hebrews 10:8-25.**

Offerings for Sins

Bible scholars are conflicted about who wrote the Book of Hebrews, and who its intended audience was meant to be. The early church attributed it to a variety of guys – Paul, James, the brother of Jesus – we just don't know who wrote it. It's someone who knows the Gospel, and the Jewish Bible very well, though, because a lot of it is a commentary on the Old Testament and how Jesus fulfills all the Old Testament prophecies. The writer is talking about Jesus Christ earlier in chapter 10, and continues where our text starts. "First He said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings You did not desire, nor were You pleased with them' – though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then He said, 'Here I am, I have come to do Your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second," (Heb. 10:8-9).

See, the Jewish faith required the people to give offerings as part of their worship. We do that, too, when we give our gifts and tithes to the church. They also had to give an offering every time they sinned. That would have been a calf, a lamb, a young goat, or a dove. For each sin. Can you imagine? It would have been expensive – we sin a lot! But Jesus says God didn't want the sin offerings – they were given because that's what the law required. And so, Jesus puts the law to rest once for all time by becoming for us a perfect sin offering on the cross.

This is what verse 10 says, "And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." In our gratitude for His sacrifice, we give gifts, and tithes to the church, and do acts of kindness to those who don't deserve it. The writer continues making the distinction between the priests of the Jewish people, and Jesus in the next few verses:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this Priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool. For by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy, (verses 11-14).

Christ Sets Us Free

What God does for us through the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the biggest miracle of all time. He takes hopeless sinners, caught permanently in the trap of sin and death, and sets them free. He washes us clean, and makes us holy through His in-dwelling Presence within us. Sometimes I hear people say – maybe you've heard them say – "I just can't hardly believe God would want someone like me." Well, He loves them – but He loves them enough to not leave them wallering around in the muck of their old, sinful lives!

The Bible is an interesting book. When you read it on a daily basis, pray over what you're reading, and think about it, it changes who you are as a person. Notice what the Scripture says next:

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First He says: 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put My laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.' Then He adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.' (verses 15-17).

He loves us, if His Holy Spirit is living in us, and we're reading our Bible, He's gradually shaping us and molding us into the people He originally intended and designed us to be. The beautiful thing about Christ crucified is that His blood doesn't just cover us – it completely erases every sin we ever committed, assuming we keep drawing ourselves closer and closer to God. In other words, we aren't wallering in the

crud. God says He won't remember our sins anymore. "And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary," we're told.

God's Faithfulness and Being Washed in the Blood

Everything we do in life – everything we give to the Church, to the hungry, orphaned, widowed, homeless, imprisoned – ought to be done with an attitude of gratitude because Jesus has taken our sins away, and has blotted them out of the mind of God. He does a remarkable thing for us. And He gives us confidence:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a Great Priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, (verses 19-22a).

In 1977, a guy by the name of Lanny Wolfe wrote a popular song – you all sang it earlier this morning. "Surely the Presence," was originally written by him as he worked with a music trio on raising funds for a new church building. Reading this Scripture, I hope you feel God's presence through it. In 1923, Thomas Chisholm penned a poem which was later set to music. You sang his song earlier this morning. "Great is Thy Faithfulness," by Thomas Chisholm, a former Methodist pastor, was written after he had left the pulpit due to poor health.

Going further back in time, to 1878, Elisha Hoffman wrote another hymn which we sang today, in the great State of Ohio. "Are You Washed in the Blood?" became a marching song for the Evangelical Association, one of the predecessor denominations which became the United Methodist Church. At the time, he wrote it, Hoffman was working at the Evangelical Association's publishing house in Cleveland, raising three boys on his own because his wife had died two years earlier. Going back further still to 1873, we find Fanny Crosby penning "Blessed Assurance."

Blessed Assurance

Her life was filled with sorrow. She lost her sight as an infant, lost her father when she was a little girl, got married, had a baby, but the baby died, and then her husband died. She spent the next 32 years alone, but never became bitter. She penned an estimated 8,000 hymns under her own name, and other pseudonyms during her lifetime.

Hoffman, Chisholm, and Crosby – they all took joy in the salvation offered through the blood of Jesus, despite their struggles. "Since we have a Great Priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water," (verses 21-22). These saints, who wrote the hymns we sang today, they did it. They drew near to God,

despite all the bad stuff going on in their lives. They had “Blessed Assurance,” because they knew God is faithful.

If you're on my church email list, you received my email Wednesday afternoon. One of our saints, our sister Carolyn, she knew it, too. Right now, she's not on Facebook – she's worshiping in Heaven at the feet of Jesus, with a lot of our other saints that we've known and loved over the years! Now that Carolyn's home, and not relying on Facebook, I'm taking a new view of Facebook. I don't really care if the Livestream goes kaput during the service. The people who want to be here, and know they need to be here – they're here – and if they aren't, then they can read the manuscript in the email.

We aren't going to be, moving forward, a convenience store church, where people pick and choose if they want a little of this or little of that. We need to be either all in, or all out. We have something like 90 or 100 people on the membership list – it's terribly inaccurate. We're working on improving it. There are going to be a lot of first and second readings at Charge Conference. If we haven't seen people since Christmas or Easter and they aren't shut in, then friends – and I don't have to tell you this – they've already made a choice about where they want to be. And that's not here.

Keep On Keeping On

I don't mean that we treat them bad or belittle them, but being part of New Hope Church isn't a priority to them. And that's okay. Sometimes life takes different people in different directions. There's nothing wrong with that, just everyone needs to be transparent about it. I'd rather see 20 or 30 die-hard, dedicated followers of Jesus Christ in person on a weekly basis than have 10,000 Facebook followers. Because with those 20 or 30 people, I know Jesus Christ is working through them and doing great things to change the world, and directly impacting people who are connected to this little country church! This of course, goes right along with what the writer of Hebrews says:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching, (verses 23-25).

We sing about God's faithfulness, but as humans, we're often unfaithful. There are a lot of people who would rather be connected to a megachurch type place where they get told how wonderful they are and that God loves them just as they are. To be sure, He loves everyone, even to the point of death. The issue is, they don't want accountability.

They don't like hearing a country church pastor say that God expects us to be transformed and renewed. He loves us enough to not leave us where He finds us. The hymns we sing are the testimonies of saints who have gone before – who know how hard and narrow the road is when it comes to following Christ. They encourage us to “keep on keeping on,” to “hold fast to the hope we profess,” and “draw near to God with sincere hearts, encouraging one another in love and good deeds.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us hearts full of gratitude for the blessed assurance we have in Jesus Christ. Thank You for Your unwavering faithfulness, Your constant presence, and the cleansing power of Jesus' blood. Draw us near to You with sincere hearts and cleanse us completely, so that we may enter Your presence with confidence. In Jesus' name, Amen.