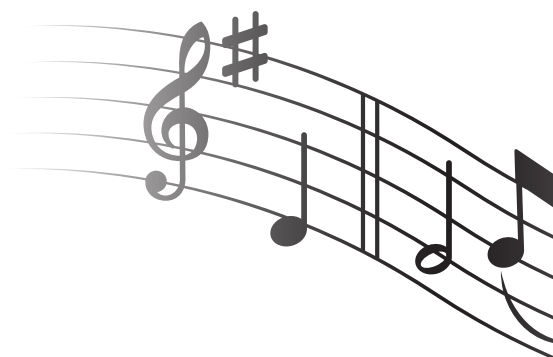




HYMNS

WE LOVE

LEADER'S GUIDE





1. HOW GREAT THOU ART

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hands hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed:

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
And hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze:

Then sings my soul...

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.

Then sings my soul...

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!

Then sings my soul...

About this hymn

- It was written in 1885 by Carl Boberg—a Swedish sailor-turned-hymn writer—under the title “O Store Gud”.
- Boberg published more than 60 poems, hymns and songs, but this one is easily his most famous.
- It was translated into the English version we know and love today by Stuart K. Hine in 1948.

Exploring the Christian faith

The Bible says that the wonderful world around us points us to God, the Creator:

- He is a God who is powerful and holy, set apart from us, and...
- He is a God who loves his creation, loves us and wants a relationship with us.

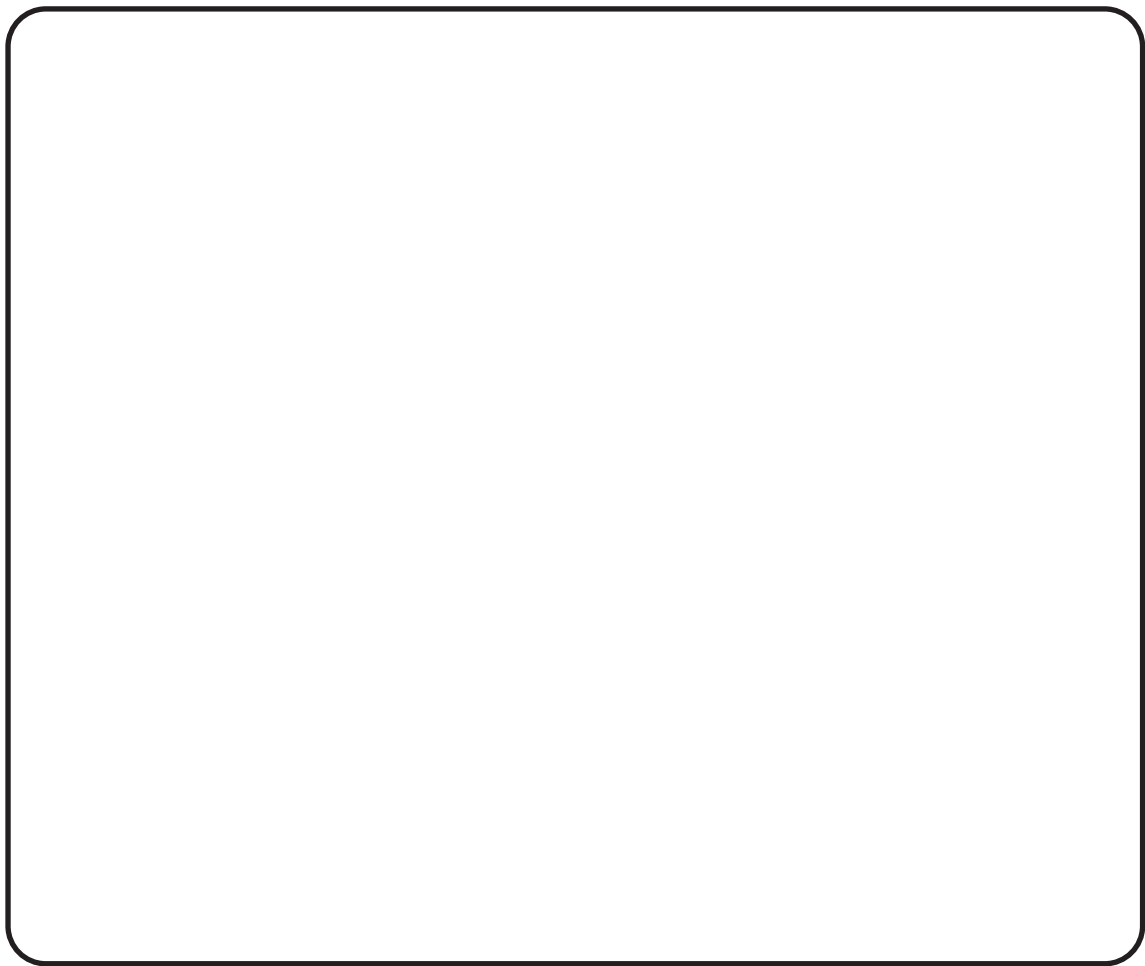
“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

ISAIAH 55:8-9

SECTION 4: SESSION NOTES AND TALK SCRIPTS

Questions to consider

- How do you feel when you look at the natural world around you?
- Are there particular aspects of creation that you enjoy or marvel at?
- Why did God create all of this, and create us, do you think?
- Has the hymn made you think differently about God's holiness or his love?

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a black border, intended for taking notes or writing answers to the questions above.

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Prayer

Dear Lord,

Thank you that you are a powerful, great God, who created the entire universe and trillions of stars with just the power of your word.

Thank you also that you love the beauty and detail of life, taking joy in peaceful forest glades and exquisite bird song as well as in the splendour of the lofty mountains.

Most of all, thank you that you love and take joy in your relationship with us, your people.

Help me to know your love, to experience your joy and to see the world around me, and people around me, as you do.

As I reflect on these wonderful hymns, please help me to take a step closer to you each day—to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

Script for Session 1 “How Great Thou Art”

The former US president Abraham Lincoln reportedly once said that “if you took all the people who fell asleep in church on Sunday morning and laid them out end to end... they would at least be a great deal more comfortable!”

Well, as we start this short series looking at some of our favourite hymns, I hope that, at the very least, you are sitting comfortably—and I promise I will do my best to try and help you stay awake.

Together, we are going on a short journey to explore the Christian faith through five of our favourite hymns.

And my hope and prayer is that over the coming sessions, each of us will discover something new about the God these hymns were written about.

And to kick us off today, we have this incredibly uplifting hymn, “How Great Thou Art”, which revels in the wonders of creation and helps point us to a powerful, holy and creator God.

It was in 1990 that the Hubble Space Telescope was launched. It took 13

years and at least 1½ billion dollars to build, but for the first time gave humankind the opportunity to observe some of the most distant parts of the universe. It quickly helped scientists develop their understanding of the cosmos, but ironically, it was only in 1995, with most of the staff off for their Christmas holidays, that our understanding of the universe was transformed.

That Christmas, with no one around and nothing better to do, NASA’s director, Robert Williams, decided to just leave the telescope pointing at a tiny, pitch black, apparently empty patch of sky no bigger than the size of a grain of sand held at arm’s length.

No one was expecting to find much in this part of the sky, and so, when the team returned after Christmas, they were astonished to find this apparently empty fragment of the universe contained not one or two stars but hundreds and hundreds of galaxies, each one containing billions of stars.

That accidental discovery transformed our understanding of the scale

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and complexity of the universe. Astronomers are now confident that there are trillions of galaxies, each one with billions of stars, and that the universe is far bigger and more glorious than we ever could have imagined.

As Professor Jim Al-Khalili, a theoretical physicist and broadcaster, said, “It is impossible not to ... be intimidated by the extraordinary depth of the cosmos”.

Now, Carl Boberg, who wrote today’s wonderful hymn, didn’t have the benefit of a space-age telescope, but, like many of us today, he could still look up at the sky and find wonder. And in its creation, he saw the work of an incredible Creator.

Carl was born the son of a carpenter in Sweden in 1859. He started out as a sailor, and you can imagine how at night, out on the northern seas, he might have looked up at the stars and wondered just how they came to be there.

After the sea, Carl went to Bible school, and later became a member of the Swedish parliament. He published more than 60 poems, hymns, and songs, but “How Great Thou Art” is easily his most famous.

Carl saw a universe of beauty, power, and wonder, and in that recognised the fingerprints of a beautiful, powerful and wonderful God... a God so great he could create trillions of stars with, as the Bible tells us, just the power of his voice.

But Carl also saw a God who was interested in the detail: the forest glades, the birds singing sweetly in the trees, as the hymn puts it.

A God who not only knows every star but lovingly created every leaf, who is intimately involved in the beauty and detail of life and who finds joy in birdsong—just as we do.

Carl saw creation as expressing something utterly central about who God is... But here’s the funny thing: if we look to the Bible, it spends very little time talking about HOW this creation happened—in fact it deals with the creation of billions of galaxies and trillions of stars with just the first ten words.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” and then a little later adds the throwaway line: “and he also made the stars...”

Now, if you know just one thing about the Bible, you will know it’s quite a

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long book. So, if the creation of the whole universe is covered with just a few words, what are the remaining 1,500 pages or so all about?

Well, the Bible was never meant to be a science textbook. Its emphasis is not so much on the exact HOWS of creation—but on the WHO and the WHY. Who is this creator God? And why did he make us?

And as the Bible continues, so the answers to those questions unfold. Maybe you can remember some of the Old Testament Bible stories—ones like Adam and Eve, Joseph and his dreamcoat, Moses crossing the Red Sea, or the Ten Commandments.

Well, I would suggest that when you put all of these stories together, they can be summed up as saying just two things.

Firstly, they were written to help us understand just how big, how powerful, but also how holy the God who created the stars is.

But secondly, they then reassure us that this great big, powerful God actually loves us and longs to be in relationship with us.

Let's just think about the first theme for a moment. When we look at the

world around us and the skies above us, we're prompted to ask: what kind of being could make all this? If there really is a Creator God, then he must be unimaginably powerful—and therefore must be very, very different to us.

But there's a problem. The Bible tells us this difference between us and God isn't just about scale and power... it is also about goodness. God is different to us because he is good—and sadly, we are not...

It may not be popular to admit it, but if we are honest, I think we could all agree that, at times, our thoughts and actions do not live up to the standards that we set for ourselves, let alone any standards that a God might set for us. When we consider all the tragedies of this world—from relationship and family breakdown through to wars and the environmental calamity we are facing—all have at their root and cause an element of human selfishness, be that individual or collective.

And that is why the Bible tells us that God is different from us both in terms of his power and his goodness, and the term it uses to describe this difference is “holy”, which literally means “set apart”.

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The book of Isaiah says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

God is, and by definition has to be, holy, set apart, perfect, and perfectly good. If he wasn't those things, then he wouldn't be God!

But just how set apart is he?

Let's imagine for the moment that we have all flown off to Dubai to visit the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in world...

And someone has set a scale from the top to bottom, so that you can rank everybody who has ever lived in terms of how good they are or how well they have lived.

Now, if you were doing that, who would you put at the top?

Maybe Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela?

And at the bottom perhaps Hitler or Stalin.

Now with that as a range, where would you put yourself? Somewhere near the top or maybe a bit lower?

And finally, having done all that, where should God be on the scale?

I guess he must be somewhere above Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela... maybe at cloud level or perhaps the moon?

Well, what all these stories in the Bible tell us is that he is infinitely beyond that, beyond the furthest reaches of what even the Hubble Telescope can see. He's off the scale completely!

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways.”

After all, no matter how wonderful Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela may be, it would still be a bit disappointing if God was just a slightly better version of them—and I have no doubt that they would be the first to agree!

The truth is that the whole range of humanity, from the very worst to very best, doesn't even register on the scale of God's goodness.

The gap between us and him is so big, there is no way you or I, by our own efforts, can ever close it.

Now, if we stopped there, believing that was the end of the story, then

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that would be bad news. But there is good news because it is not the end of the story... because God never stops there.

There is a second theme to all those Bible stories: God loves us and wants to have a relationship with us, despite our near-constant ability to mess that relationship up! Those Old Testament stories of Adam and Eve, of Abraham, of Moses, of David and of the Israelites are all about God reaching out to teach them who he was and to show them just how much he loved them—always in the hope that they would love him back and would share his love with others.

And although they often didn't listen to him and time after time went wrong and lost the plot, God never gave up on them... and he never gives up on us.

Despite all their failings, God kept loving and kept longing for relationship and ended up demonstrating that perfectly through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And coming back to today's hymn, we see the same link, as the words move seamlessly from the wonders of creation and a Creator God in verse

2 to the story of Jesus and the cross in verse 3.

And that is the wonderful story of God's love for you and me that we remember every Easter, and which we will explore a little more in our next session when we sing "Rock of Ages".

It's the story of a God who is powerful and holy but who has also made a way for us to know him, through Jesus. And if we truly know that, then we can't help but sing in response, "How great thou art".

But then again, maybe you're not so sure. I'm sure there'll be some people watching this who like the hymns and the history but who aren't convinced by all the God stuff and can't see how it is relevant.

Well, if that is you, we're thrilled you're here with us. You may have reached that view because you just can't quite believe in a God or because you may feel that all religions basically point to the same vague higher presence, or maybe you just think that Christians and Christianity are all a bit too strange or a bit too much hard work.

Perhaps you have been bruised by past experiences of the church. Or



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perhaps you've been a Christian for some time, but your faith just feels a little faded or rusty.

Well, wherever you are at—whether you'd call yourself a Christian or not—you are very welcome, and I would love it if you felt able to join us as we explore these well-loved hymns, and maybe, just create a little space to think again about the Christian God. For, as one writer put it, “Christianity

is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

So, please come on a journey with me through our next four hymns and reach your own conclusion about whether there is a God who created this enormous and beautiful universe—and whether he really is worth getting to know.