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GREAT IS THE LORD!

Normally I would *read* a biblical passage as a text; but in a recent message, I had everyone *sing* the text. It is a chorus many readers will recognize, based entirely on Scripture:

**GREAT IS THE LORD,
AND GREATLY TO BE PRAISED.
IN THE CITY OF OUR GOD,
IN THE MOUNTAIN OF HIS HOLINESS.
BEAUTIFUL FOR SITUATION,
THE JOY OF THE WHOLE EARTH,
IS MOUNT ZION, ON THE SIDES OF THE NORTH,
THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING.—Psalms 48:1,2.**

In the message that followed, I focused on the word “great” as used in Scripture.

The prophet Samuel told the Israelites to serve the Lord in truth, and to “consider what GREAT things he has done for you” (1 Sam. 12:24). The Psalmist said, “The LORD has done GREAT things for us; and we are glad” (Psalms 126:3). These words bring to mind another chorus we sometimes sing: “He Has Done GREAT Things, Hallelujah!”

When the demonic at Gadara was healed by Jesus, he no longer cut himself or lived among tombs, but was clothed and in his right mind. When Jesus left that area in a boat, he wanted to go along. But Jesus said, “Go home and tell what GREAT things God has done for you” (Mark 5:1-20).

God’s goodness is great: “Oh, how GREAT is your goodness, which you have laid up for those who trust in you” (Psalms 31:19).

His works are great: “O LORD, how GREAT are your works!” (Psalms 92:5).

His kindness is great: “His merciful kindness is GREAT toward us” (Psalms 117:2).

His salvation is great: “How shall we escape if we neglect so GREAT a salvation?” (Heb. 2:3).

His promises are great: “...exceedingly GREAT and precious promises” (2 Peter 1:4).

In Job 37:5 we read: “God thunders *marvelously* with his voice; he does GREAT things which we *cannot comprehend*”; and Job 9:10 says: “He does GREAT things past finding out.” These verses bring to mind Ephesians 3:20, that God is able to do

“exceedingly abundantly *above all that we ask or think*,” and Jeremiah 33:3: “Call to me, and I will answer you, and show you GREAT and mighty things, *which you do not know*”!

There were two people to whom Jesus said: “GREAT is your faith”—the Syrophenician woman and the Centurion (Matt. 8:10; 15:28). In contrast, he said of his apostles: “O you of *little* faith” (Matt. 8:26). Sometimes we may feel like we only have “little” faith, but there is good news: faith can *grow*! (2 Thess. 1:3). This is what happened for those apostles. One only has to read the book of Acts to see their exploits of faith as they went forth with the gospel. “Little faith” can become “GREAT faith” through Jesus Christ.

In Daniel 4:3 we read these words:

How GREAT are his signs,
And how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
And his dominion is from generation to generation.

We might assume these thrilling, victorious words were uttered by an anointed prophet. But they were actually the words of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar!

Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed about a huge tree that would be cut down, was troubled by the dream, and wanted to know the interpretation. He called for the fortune tellers and astrologers, but they could not explain the meaning. Had Nostradamus, Jean Dixon, and Edgar Cayce been there, they would have struck out on this one! But it was revealed to *Daniel*, in whom was the Spirit of the true God. Ultimately when it all came to pass, Nebuchadnezzar was humbled and acknowledged the true God! See Daniel 4.

People have long tried to explain the Incarnation—how Jesus could be both divine and human. Try as we may to explain this, there remains an element of mystery we may not comprehend. Notice Paul’s words: “*Without controversy*, GREAT is the *mystery* of godliness.

God was manifested in the flesh,
justified in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the Gentiles,
believed on in the world,
received up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16).

One of those wonderful “3:16” verses! (cf. John 3:16, Luke 3:16, 1 Cor. 3:16, Col. 3:16, 2 Tim. 3:16, Rev. 3:16).

Though the book of Revelation is commonly thought of in terms of doom and gloom, there are sections that are songs of *praise* to our great God, such as “the song of the Lamb” (Rev. 15:3,4):

GREAT and marvelous are your works,
Lord God Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the saints!...
all nations shall come and worship before you.

“How GREAT Thou Art” is considered by some to be the most popular hymn in the world. It was while thinking of the words of this hymn that I began to focus in on the biblical passages that use the word “great.”

Years ago, Tim Spencer (1908-1974)—indirectly related to Arlene—was probably best known for his part in founding The Sons of the Pioneers singing group with Bob Nolan and Roy Rogers. Later, he came to Christ and his life was changed dramatically. He began traveling, singing, and giving his testimony in churches. I heard him as a boy at a church in Riverside. He went on to found Manna Music to promote gospel songs.

At one point his college-age son and daughter, Hal and Loretta, returned from a church camp at Forest Home where they had heard what was a new song to them: “How GREAT Thou Art.” The original version had been written in Sweden in 1885. They shared the song with Tim who obtained the rights to the song in English and promoted it far and wide. Lawrence Welk called it his favorite hymn. Eventually a wide range of people recorded the song—from George Beverly Shea to Elvis.

The Elvis album titled “How Great Thou Art,” won numerous awards, and has been heard by millions—many who may not have heard these hymns otherwise.

Three years ago, I was driving through Tupelo, Mississippi. Though my time was limited, I did a quick tour of the Elvis Birthplace Museum grounds which is the location of the small two room house where Elvis was born in 1935. Also on the grounds is the old Assembly of God Church which was purchased and moved to this location in 2008. The building (including an outhouse) has been restored to look as it did when Elvis and his parents attended the church in the 30s and 40s. As I went up the steps to the door of the church, I could hear Elvis singing inside. It may have been “How Great Thou Art” or possibly “Peace in the Valley.”

A friend of mine, who has now been a pastor for many years, told me this story: When he was nine years old, he met a boy a little older than himself, at a church revival meeting in Mississippi. That other boy liked to sing, had a small guitar, but was somewhat bashful. His name? Elvis Presley. Someone suggested they get a couple other boys who liked to sing, form a quartet, and if they were good enough, they could sing at the revival meeting that night—which they did. In later years, the boy who went on to be a pastor, on several occasions, met with Elvis privately—no lights, cameras, bodyguards, etc. During those times they talked about spiritual things and prayed together.

Almost every day, morning and evening, Arlene and I walk our wonderful little dog “Buddy” (rescued from a shelter in December 2012). Sometimes we drive to different parts of Palm

Springs for these walks, including walking past 845 Chino Canyon Road, the former home of Elvis. (When I tell Buddy this was the home of Elvis, he does not seem overly impressed! ☺). Owned from 1970 until his death in 1977, it is said to be the only house he actually owned, beside Graceland. Other houses, such as the “Honeymoon Hideaway” (in Palm Springs), were leased.

That Elvis from an early age loved gospel music is well documented in the Gaither video “He Touched Me: The Gospel Music of Elvis Presley.” It tells of an incident that happened during a concert. A group of young women seated in a row together, all stood up at the same time displaying a long banner that said, ELVIS IS KING! Elvis' response was that he was not king, that JESUS CHRIST IS KING! The video tells how if one of his backup singers might be sick, he would pray for them, and how he liked to include Doris Akers' wonderful song “Sweet, Sweet Spirit” in his concerts.

Did Elvis believe in Jesus, did he believe in prayer, did he love gospel music? It seems apparent he did. Unfortunately, the world—offering him overwhelming success, fame, and fortune—was like a gigantic magnet pulling him the other way.

Earlier I mentioned Tim Spencer and his conversion. Another country singer who experienced conversion was T. Texas Tyler (1916-1972) in the late 50s. Probably only a few readers now will recognize this name. But with a number of country music hits back in the 40s and 50s, he became quite well known at that time—was even referred to as “the man with a million friends.” After he came to the Lord, he traveled around singing and playing his guitar, giving his testimony. We invited him to come one night to where I was preaching under a gospel tent in Long Beach, California, on Pacific Coast Highway. He drew a good crowd, looked really nice in his white suit, hat, and guitar.

He was going to sing several songs before giving his testimony. But with a couple songs yet to go, a string on his guitar broke! I was 21 years old, had a guitar I had ordered through the Sears and Roebuck catalog. It seems impossible now, but I believe I only paid \$12.50 for it. It was probably made in Taiwan, looked good, but was far from being a *quality* guitar like his. With his string broken, he borrowed *my* guitar to finish his songs! He never said anything, but I imagine he was thinking: *What a piece of junk!* ☺

Finally, I want to say that life has many twists and turns. Some of you may feel like you have come to the end of your rope. If you have, just tie a knot and hang on! Though the challenges and trials you face may be great, remember “GREATER is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). HE is greater than the problem, whatever it is!

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