

Sermon Series: *Hosea: A Divine Love Story*

The Hound of Heaven

The Relentless Love of God in Pursuit of Francis Thompson

Hosea 10:13 (ESV)

*¹³ Sow for yourselves righteousness;
reap steadfast love;
break up your fallow ground,
for it is time to seek the LORD,
that he may come and rain
righteousness upon you.*

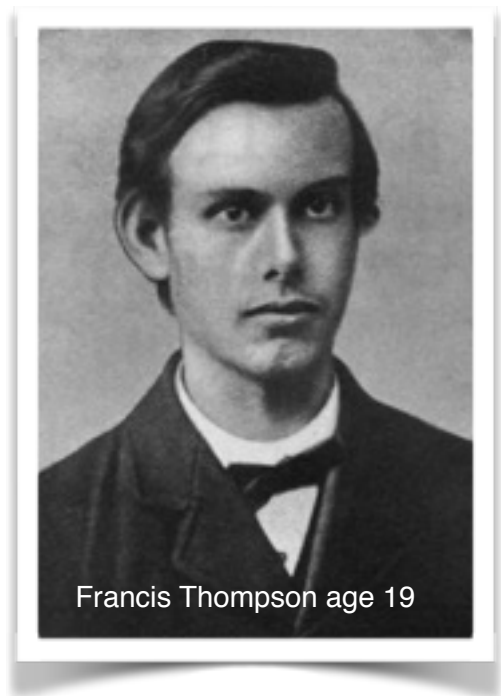
This morning I'd like to let a dead man preach to you. I will not preach an expository sermon as I normally do. This morning's sermon will be a story which will serve as an illustration of the central message of the book of Hosea, as it found expression in the life of Francis Thompson.

He was born in northwest England in 1859 and he died of tuberculosis in London in 1907. He was 47 years old.

I want to let Thompson speak to you this morning because he wrote a poem which essentially is summation of the entire message of the book of Hosea. It is also a record of Thompson surrendering his life to God. It is a divine love story.

I had heard of the poem, but sadly, until last September, I had never actually read it. After reading it, learning of God's redemptive work in Thompson's life, and seeing the unmistakable connection to the message of Hosea, I had a very strong impression that I must share it with you. I'm convinced that someone listening to my voice desperately needs to hear and receive the message this poem delivers.

The poem is entitled *The Hound of Heaven*.



Francis Thompson age 19

Some have claimed that Thompson was one of the greatest English poets¹ and *The Hound of Heaven* “the greatest poem ever written in the history of the English language.”² Thompson’s writings influenced G.K. Chesterton and J.R.R. Tolkien. Oscar Wilde said of Thompson’s poetry, “Why can’t I write poetry like that? That [kind of writing] is what I’ve wanted to do all my life.”³

A Summary of the Poem

The Hound of Heaven “is autobiographical for it tells of Thompson’s own story of being utterly lost, and relentlessly pursued by God, and finally found.”⁴ “It is a record of conversion.”⁵

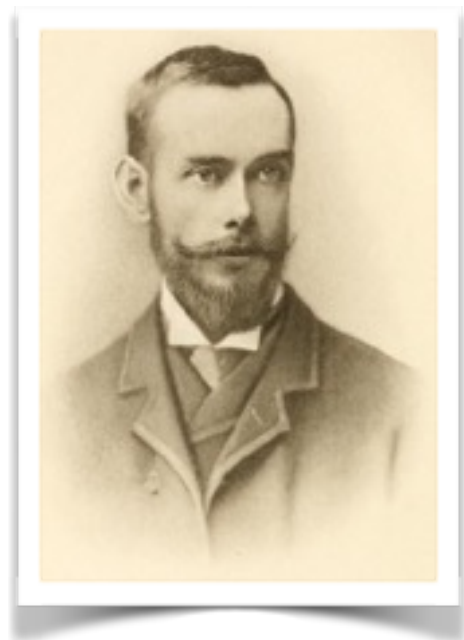
The Hound of Heaven is the love of God pursuing the poet’s soul till he surrenders to it. As he tries to evade this love, seeking consolation in human loves and earthly delights, the pressure of the divine demand gathers urgency in the image of the following feet that pound behind him till he is driven to his knees by the inadequacy of alternative satisfaction. His endless flight ends when the poet finally comes to see that the darkness of deprivation which all along he feared was really but the shadow of the Divine hand stretched over him in love.⁶

An Overview of Thompson's Life

Before I share the poem with you, you need to know the sad circumstances of Thompson’s life which gave birth to the poem. It is impossible to fully appreciate the depth of the poem without first knowing the depth of despair into which Thompson had fallen.

Thompson was born into a well-to-do, devout Catholic family. He was the oldest of three children but there was a kind of introverted shyness about him that led some to believe that “he wouldn’t make it in the real world.”⁷

His father was a doctor, but he encouraged young Thompson to prepare for the priesthood. In the early days of his education, Thompson started studying to



¹ Pat McNamara, “Francis Thompson and The Hound of Heaven” available at <http://www.patheos.com/Catholic/Hound-of-Heaven-Pat-McNamara-07-10-2012> accessed 21 November 2014.

² Brian and Sally Oxley & Sonja Peterson *The Hound of Heaven: A Modern Adaptation* (Ft. Myers, Emblem Media, 2014), 98.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Harry Blamires as quoted in Oxley, *The Hound of Heaven: A Modern Adaptation*, 81.

⁷ McNamara.

become a priest, however his persistently poor health precluded vocational priesthood. Then upon the insistence of his parents, he began studying to be a doctor. However, soon after embarking upon a medical career at Owens College in Manchester, he realized his heart was not in practicing medicine.

His true passion was writing. Upon sharing this with his parents, he experienced rejection and disappointment. His parents were of the opinion that being a writer was neither a sustainable nor respectable career. Their relationship became very strained and Thompson soon left home and set off for London to become a writer.

Languishing in London

Upon arriving in London, Thompson's dreams almost immediately began to languish. His poor health continually plagued him. He found work as a bookseller, but this did not pay enough to provide for all his needs. He then tried his hand in a shoemaker's shop, however this didn't work out either.

His health continued to decline and soon not only was he sick, but he was also homeless. He began sleeping on the banks of the Thames, selling matches on the streets of London to earn a living. He struggled to find food and frequently fought against depression. These were very dark days both for Thompson and for London. At the same time Thompson was wandering homeless through the streets of London, Jack the Ripper was walking those same streets⁸ terrorizing the citizens of London.

Thompson's desperation and poor health sent his life into a near irreversible downward spiral. Soon he was addicted to opium (i.e. laudanum). In the darkness and the hopelessness of his addiction, being homeless and alone, he attempted suicide. A prostitute he had befriended took him in and nursed him back to health.

Yet it was during this time, in the midst of all his hunger, deprivation, and hopelessness, that he was most able to see the kingdom of heaven. These devastating experiences honed his poetic focus and insights.⁹

In 1888 he sent some dirty manuscripts of his poems to the Catholic literary magazine *Merry England*. The editors, Wilfred and Alice Meynell, both devout Christians, immediately recognized his talent and published some of his poems. After they learned of his desperate situation, they took him into their home and cared for him. They helped him find his way back to God. Their gracious love and care for him were to him like the love and care of God himself.

⁸ Oxley, 12.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

Given the severity of his condition and the depth of his drug addiction, the Meynell's soon realized Thompson needed more help than they were able to give him. They arranged for him to stay in a monastery in Storrington, in Sussex. Thompson spent the next five years there, 1893-1897, recuperating under the watchful care of the monks.

The battle against his addiction took longer and was more intense than he would have liked, but for the first time in his life he began to have "hope the [addiction] would be gradually loosening its grip upon him."¹⁰ Through the faithful dependance upon the grace of God, the loving care of the brothers of the priory, and long solitary walks in crisp, fresh air of the peaceful monastery grounds where he spontaneously broke out in songs of praise¹¹ to God, he overcame his addiction and his life was transformed.

As his body was freed from its slavery to opium, so his soul was freed to surrender to the love of God, who never let him go. During these days, with his mind clear of it's opium induced haze, he began to write again and poetry poured from him. It was during this time that he wrote *The Hound of Heaven*, and many other poems and shorts stories as well. The Maynell's helped him publish his first book in 1893, entitled *Poems*, which included *The Hound of Heaven*. "The poem was immediately recognized as a masterpiece."¹²

The Hound of Heaven is written in a style of prose commensurate with that of the late 1800's and therefore it is a bit difficult to follow for modern readers. However, I do recommend you read the poem in its original form. Emblem Media has just released a modern adaptation of this great story, which I would like to share with you now.



You can view the video [here](#).

¹⁰ Documentary, "The Hound of Heaven: The Story of Francis Thompson" available at <http://houndofheaven.com/product/the-hound-of-heaven-the-story-of-francis-thompson>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 22.

Jesus said,

Matthew 11:28-30 (ESV)

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Francis Thompson found his soul's rest in a personal relationship with Christ. He discovered that God can redeem broken people and restore the lost, dark years. God changed his life. God redeemed his life. God freed him from his addiction and hopelessness.

After leaving the monastery he enjoyed a decade of writing God-centered poems and short stories which not only blessed his generation, but which are still blessing readers over 100 years later.

He learned the lesson of Hosea.

He sowed for himself righteousness,
and he reaped the steadfast love of the Lord.

He broke up the fallow ground his homeless, addicted soul,
and he decided that it was time to seek the Lord.

And seek the Lord he did.

He sought to the Lord, because the Lord had first been seeking him.

He surrendered to the One who had been persistently pursuing him in love.

He surrendered his life to One' whose footsteps were always following him,

*"with steady pace,
and unhurrying chase."*

Do you hear the footsteps of the LORD close on your heels?

Don't run from Him.

Turn and welcome Him.

Surrender to Him.

Members of the prayer team are available right now if you sense the need to pray about anything.