

# Count Your Blessings

*Hymn of the Month*

*Just as picturesque scenes can bring peace and calmness to the soul, so does beautiful music*

## The Hymn



The observation of the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States often turns our thoughts to gratitude in the month of November.

Gratitude, or the state of being grateful or

thankful, is a virtue with multiple associations. Modern scientific studies have validated the divine wisdom in the commandment to give thanks, as related by the apostle Paul in the Bible, "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

Studies have shown that pointedly thinking of things we are thankful for can make us happier. Gratitude techniques, such as counting kindnesses, and writing gratitude letters, are therapies prescribed by psychologists for treating depression. Studies have also shown that religious people are happier, choral singing is a benefit to well-being, and belief in God provides tremendous comfort and support. So in a scientific sense, singing the hymn "Count Your Blessings" is a Christian prescription for feeling better when life makes you want to hide, as the photo above suggests.

The author of "Count Your Blessings," Johnson Oatman, Jr., was a Methodist Episcopal minister who would have been very familiar with the Bible and while the hymn is written in a very practical style, the text is scripturally based.

The first verse alludes to the tempest on the Sea of Galilee recorded in Matthew chapter 8, which covered the ship with waves and caused the disciples of Jesus to fear for their lives. They surely were discouraged and thought all was lost

## The Author



Johnson Oatman, Jr. was born to Johnson and Rachel Ann Oatman in April of 1856 near Medford, New Jersey. Medford is located about 20 miles east of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

It is said that his father was in the mercantile business, but was also a faithful Christian and an excellent singer. Young Johnson delighted to sit by his father in church and hear him sing. Through this he apparently gained knowledge and love of the hymns and songs of the church which would later blossom in his own hymn writing.

Johnson is believed to have received his basic education in the local public schools and then attended Herbert's Academy in Princetown, New Jersey, forty miles to the north, and the New Jersey Collegiate Institute in Bordentown, about twenty miles closer to home.

It is reported that at the age of about nineteen, Johnson Jr. joined the Methodist Episcopal Church and studied for the ministry. He was granted a license to preach a few years later, and eventually was ordained as a minister. He apparently did not serve full-time as he is said to have worked with his father in the mercantile business at Lumberton, New Jersey, about eight miles north of Medford.

In 1878, at the age of twenty-two, he married a local Lumberton young lady, Wilhelmina Reid, and their family eventually included three children.

After the death of his father, it is said that Johnson Jr. worked in the insurance industry at Mt. Holly, New Jersey, about two miles north of Lumberton. He evidently was able to balance his time well as he was also a prolific hymn writer, and by 1914 was believed to have written over three thousand hymns. By the time of his death in 1922 the number had reportedly grown to five thousand. "Count Your Blessings" is one of his best known hymns.

## The Composer



Edwin Othello Excell was born in December of 1851 to Joshua J. and Emily Excell at Uniontown, Ohio. Edwin was the oldest of several children. His father was a minister and an author. Between 1860 and 1870 the family moved to Pennsylvania. Edwin is

believed to have been educated in the public schools.

Edwin grew to be a tall, robust man with a remarkable singing voice, able to solo as a baritone or a tenor. In 1871 he married his sweetheart, Jane, and worked for several years as a plasterer and bricklayer as well as a singing instructor and a church choirmaster. It is said that involvement with leading songs at revivals and worship services of the Methodist Episcopal churches turned his focus to sacred music.

He studied music formally between 1877 and 1883 at the Normal Musical Institutes of George F. Root. 'Normal' in this time period meant that the institute was for training teachers. In 1881 John J. Hood of Philadelphia published E.O. Excell's first collection of hymns and gospel songs, "Sacred Echoes." In 1883 Edwin moved to Chicago, the location of Root's operations, and focused on his lifelong career in music publishing.

Edwin continued to be involved in church music and assisted Benjamin Jacobs and John Vincent with the music of their Sunday school work. This was a significant influence in that much of his future music was published for Sunday school and youth programs.

Edwin continued as a choir leader and vocalist for revivals and evangelistic meetings and was said to be a master at directing great audiences in singing. It was remarked that he was large of body and happy in disposition, never known to lose his temper or his smile in his endeavor to make the people sing.

Edwin was known by his initials, E. O. and over his forty-year publishing career, it is

before they awoke the Savior and he calmed the sea. As we look back upon our previous tempests with an eye to see how the Lord has calmed our sea, we can become aware of His blessings.

The second verse speaks of the heavy cross we are called to bear. Layers of meaning can be found in this, the basic reference is to the account in John chapter 19 of Jesus bearing the cross as he was taken to Golgotha.

Foreshadowing this the Savior said to his disciples in Luke chapter 9, "...If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." To deny ourselves or to control the natural man or woman daily and serve humbly as a disciple of the Savior is not easy; the cross symbolizes things that are particularly hard for us to deal with or overcome. We may doubt that we can do it or that it is worth the effort, but as the hymn says, our doubts will fly as we count the blessings that come to us from the Lord.

The third verse can be seen to refer to the New Testament account of the man who had great possessions who was grieved when Jesus told him to sell what he had and give to the poor. Subsequently Jesus told his disciples, "...how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!" John records the Savior's assurance to his disciples, "In my Father's house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you." This reminds us that the riches that will last forever are not the material ones, and we need not envy worldly wealth, but focus on the things of eternal value.

The fourth verse paraphrases the Savior's message in John chapter 16, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." Counting our blessings can help us be "of good cheer" or of a more positive outlook, as we recognize the hand of the Lord throughout our lives.

The timeless message of "Count Your Blessings" was written over one hundred years ago. It is believed that the hymn was first published in 1897 at Chicago,

Johnson Oatman, Jr. passed away in September of 1922 at the age of 66 while in Norman, Oklahoma, and was buried at his town of residence, Mt. Holly, New Jersey.

He will be gratefully remembered for his contribution to the faith of future generations.

## Count Your Blessings

*Text as found in the 1985 LDS Hymnal*

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,  
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,  
Count your many blessings; name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

Count your blessings;  
Name them one by one.  
Count your blessings;  
See what God hath done.  
Count your blessings;  
Name them one by one.  
Count your many blessings;  
See what God hath done.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care?  
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?  
Count your many blessings; ev'ry doubt will fly,  
And you will be singing as the days go by.

When you look at others with their lands and gold,  
Think that Christ has promised you his wealth untold.  
Count your many blessings; money cannot buy  
Your reward in heaven nor your home on high.

So amid the conflict, whether great or small,  
Do not be discouraged; God is over all.  
Count your many blessings; angels will attend,  
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.

estimated that he authored, composed or arranged over two thousand songs, developed approximately fifty song books and contributed to over thirty-five more. He is best remembered for his 1909 arrangement of John Newton's "Amazing Grace," his hymn tune for our hymn, Johnson Oatman's "Count Your Blessings," and the tune for the children's favorite, "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam."

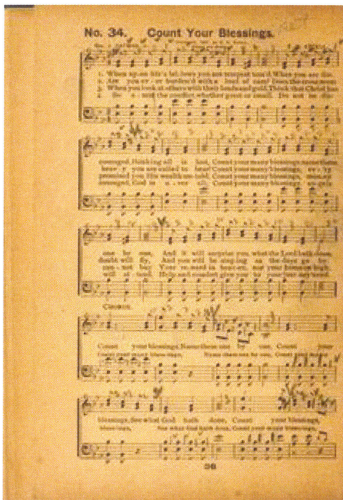
E.O. Excell is reported to have served as a member of the International Sunday School Association for thirty-six years in addition to his music activities.

Falling ill while assisting evangelist Gipsy Smith with a revival in Louisville, Kentucky, E. O. Excell returned to Chicago where he passed away in June of 1921, at the age of sixty-nine, after a lengthy hospital stay. His music continues to brighten the days of the next century.

E. O. Excell was also the composer of the February 2014 Hymn of the Month – *Scatter Sunshine*. Information is reprinted here from the previous article.



Illinois in a collection titled, "Songs for Young People" by the composer E.O. Excell. See photo below of the original publication.



The hymn tune, BLESSINGS, is believed to have been written for the text. The sprightly melody is written in a rhythmic gospel style with four lines and a refrain. The repetition in the chorus facilitates memory and emphasizes the essential message of the text.

"Count Your Blessings" has been published in over 180 hymnals of various denominations since its first appearance and, as a testament to its quality and appeal, has not diminished in use. The text remains essentially unchanged in the versions sung today, likely due to the original copyright. The hymn appeared in the 1948 edition of 'Hymns, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' (LDS Hymnal) under the title "When Upon Life's Billows" and continues in the current 1985 edition with the original title, a slightly lower key signature and minor changes to musical notation.

Applying the message of this hymn can make every day a Thanksgiving Day.



Information in this article came from:

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*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, (G&C Merriam Company, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1975)

*Holy Bible, King James Version*, 1 Thessalonians 5:18, p. 1502; Matthew 8:23-26, p. 1200; Mark 10:24, p. 1259; Luke 9:23, p. 1291; John 14:2, p. 1352, John 16:33, p. 1357; John 19:17, p. 1361. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1979)

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