

The Iron Rod

Hymn of the Month



The Hymn



As the month of August comes around, parents in the USA and elsewhere prepare to send their children back to school after the summer break.

Understanding the feelings of parents as they watch their children leave their protective care and become subject to the influence of others helps us recognize the feelings that God, our Heavenly Father, must have toward us, His spirit children, as we make our way through our earthly life.

"The Iron Rod" is a hymn of parental counsel. Just as parents would wish their children to listen to their words to avoid life's problems, so too, the hymn teaches that our Heavenly Father wishes us to listen to the words of counsel He has given us in the scriptures to guide and protect us.

The hymn was first published over 135 years ago; however, the message is as timeless as the concern of parents. The author and composer were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and the context of the hymn originates in the LDS faith tradition, however, the message can be understood universally.

The text of "The Iron Rod" is based on the scriptural account of a vision given to the ancient prophet Lehi and his son, Nephi, as recorded in The Book of Mormon – Another Testament of Jesus Christ. Members of the LDS faith regard the Book of Mormon as a companion to the Bible. It contains a record of Lehi, a Jewish man, who was warned by God of impending destruction and left Jerusalem around 600 BC with his family.

Traveling through the wilderness toward a new land, Lehi received a wonderful vision from God in which he was shown a

The Author



The Author, Joseph Longking Townsend, was born in August of 1849 at, or near Canton, Bradford County, Pennsylvania; a small northern Pennsylvania town in the Appalachian, Mountain region. It is

believed that his father was Captain Herman Townsend, a deeply religious businessman who also served as a Protestant Clergyman. It is said that Herman started a foundry after moving to Canton from New York and with his foundry workers served with distinction in the Civil War.

It is believed that Joseph's boyhood was spent on a farm; he then traveled three hundred miles west where he attended the West Side High School of Cleveland, Oio.

His education included study of Latin, Greek, rhetoric (speaking and writing), physics, drawing, architectural and mechanical drawing, and landscape gardening. Continuing his education, it is said that he was the initial student at the University of Missouri College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, which was established in 1870, at Columbia, Missouri and that he was offered a professorship there.

Joseph declined the offer due to illness, and a change in circumstances sent him west for his health (presumably for the drier climate), arriving in Salt Lake City in 1872.

The transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, so it is likely that he made the journey by train. Living in Utah among the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) who had settled the area, and having been raised in a religious Christian home, it is not surprising that he joined the LDS Church in 1873 and later served as a missionary in the Southern States.

Joseph used his education to good effect, spending much of his life in teaching. He began teaching penmanship at Morgan's Commercial College, then became principal of the high school of Payson. He met his wife, Alta Hancock in Payson, and they were blessed with eleven children. The city of Payson, Utah, approximately sixty miles south of Salt Lake City, was first settled in 1850 by LDS pioneers. The Payson High School was established in 1873, reportedly the first high school south of Salt Lake City at the time. It closed for a time when Brigham Young Academy began classes in 1876 at Provo, sixteen miles northeast of Payson.

The Composer



The Composer, William Clayson, was born in February of 1840 in England. His birthplace is believed to be in the county of Northamptonshire, about sixty miles north of London.

Little is known of William's early life. It is said that he received an injury doing farm work at about ten years of age that left him lame for life.

Northamptonshire is reported to be renowned for shoe-making, from the middle ages to the present. As the 1870 Utah census lists William's occupation as 'Shoemaker,' it seems likely that his lameness may have sent him to learn the shoe-making trade as a youth in England.

William joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and in 1861, at the age of twenty-one, immigrated to the United States to join with the church members in Utah. He settled in Payson.

The early years in Utah, and in Payson, were not always peaceful as the Native American tribes objected to the settlers. William served as a private in the Utah Territory Militia from May to August of 1866 during the Blackhawk War.

William married another native of England, Susan Moulton. Their oldest child was a son they named William after his father, and they had several other children. The hymn tune for our hymn, 'Oh, What Songs of the Heart,' was named SUSAN after his wife.

It is said that William had little formal training as a musician, but had natural talent, particularly on the flute. It is reported that he served as conductor of Payson's first brass band.

William was involved with the LDS Sunday School in Payson, which led to his collaboration with Joseph Townsend. All six of the hymn tunes by William Clayson in the current 1985 LDS hymnal have texts by Townsend.

William Clayson passed from this life in July of 1887 at the young age of 47.

number of things referred to in the hymn text. His fourth son, Nephi, prayed to understand the meaning of his father's dream, and was also shown the vision and given an interpretation of the symbolism.

While we cannot do justice here to the full account of the vision, in essence, Lehi and Nephi were shown a beautiful tree bearing a shining white fruit, that when partaken of would fill a person with joy. This was a representation of the love of God. From a large and spacious field that represented the world, a narrow path guarded with a rod of iron led to the tree along the side of a river. A thick mist rose from the river across the path. The river represented the depths of hell and the mist represented the temptations of the devil. The rod of iron represented the word of God, which would lead a person safely through the mist and prevent them from falling into the river. In the vision numberless concourses of people started along the path, but the only ones who were successful in reaching the tree were those who held on to the rod of iron.

Nephi was also told by God of the coming of Jesus Christ and His ministry and what would happen to Nephi's descendants far in the future.

The text of the hymn refers poetically to the scriptural account of the vision. The author refers to Nephi as a "seer," which, defined as, "one who predicts events or developments," is an appropriate title.

It is instructive to note that in the chorus, the iron rod is described by the author as being "strong," "bright," and "true." There is a metaphorical meaning in this description. In a physical context the rod, or handrail in modern vernacular, would need to be strong to protect a person who would lean on it. The term 'bright' would most likely be defined as 'shining' or 'lustrous' which implies that the rod or handrail is smooth and free from corrosion or rust. The most applicable definition of 'true' in the physical context would likely be 'without deviation.'

The type of iron that Nephi would have been familiar with was wrought iron, as the blast furnace was not invented until the middle ages. Iron is noted for strength, however, this type of iron would

Joseph Townsend conducted a mercantile and drug business in Payson for fifteen years, then for two years taught penmanship at Brigham Young Academy, the predecessor of Brigham Young University. He later accepted a position at the Salt Lake City High School.

During his lifetime Joseph wrote many poems, songs, and hymns. Many of his works were published in Church magazines and in the Deseret Sunday School Songbook. Ten of his well-loved hymns are included in the current 1985 LDS hymnal, including such favorites as "Choose the Right" and "Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words."

Joseph Longking Townsend left a legacy of enduring gospel messages in verse when he passed away in 1942.

Joseph Townsend was the author of the September 2012 Hymn of the Month, "Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words." The biographical information about him is largely reproduced from the previous article.

Text as found in the 1985 LDS Hymnal

To Nephi, seer of olden time,
A vision came from God,
Where in the holy word sublime
Was shown an iron rod.

Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true.
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.

While on our journey here below,
Beneath temptation's pow'r,
Through mists of darkness we must go,
In peril ev'ry hour.

Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true.
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.

And when temptation's pow'r is nigh,
Our pathway clouded o'er,
Upon the rod we can rely,
And heaven's aid implore.

Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true.
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.

And, hand o'er hand, the rod along,
Through each succeeding day,
With earnest prayer and hopeful song,

have been subject to rust in a moist environment, and as it was 'wrought' or hammered into usable forms, it would have been very difficult to make a rod that was perfectly straight or smooth enough to be shiny. Thus it is seen that the author intends that this is a very extraordinary 'rod of iron,' particularly in the figurative sense where 'the word of God' is strong enough to save us from the power of Satan's temptations, bright and full of light to illuminate our way, free from corruption or error, true and undeviating in its direction to us.

The text connects us to the scriptural account with descriptions of our own "mists of darkness," which cover our pathway with a cloud, putting us in peril of losing our way. It is significant that that author uses the phrase "hand o'er hand, the rod along," which suggests that we always have at least one hand in contact with the rod, never letting go completely. Translating from metaphor to reality, this suggests the need for daily study of the scriptures. The hymn concludes with the assurance that after having held to the rod, or having followed the words of God, we will arrive at the "golden rest," and live forever with the angels. Presumably this is intended to mean eternal life in the presence of God where we will enjoy His love as the fruit of the tree.

It is said that the hymn was first published about 1878 and, very fittingly, for use in a Sunday School. The author, Joseph Townsend, was an officer in the Payson, Utah, LDS Sunday School organization and collaborated with a fellow Sunday School worker, William Clayson, who composed the tune. The tune name, PAYSON, has an obvious connection to this origin. The hymn was then included in the 1892 'Deseret Sunday School Songbook' and subsequently in the later editions of "Hymns, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

The music for the verses is written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, while the chorus varies with $\frac{4}{4}$ time. Succeeding editions have been written in slightly lower keys with the highest note in the 1985 LDS Hymnal edition a step and a half below the 1894

We'll still pursue our way.

Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true.
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.

Afar we see the golden rest
To which the rod will guide,
Where, with the angels bright and blest,
Forever we'll abide.

Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true.
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.

Deseret Sunday School Songs (photo below.)

In the 1948 edition of the LDS Hymnal, the hymn is titled with the first line, "To Nephi, Seer of Olden Time," however; the current 1985 edition reverted to the previous title, "The Iron Rod."

Regardless of the title, the hymn carries a wonderful, timeless message that is very relevant today in our age of information.



Information in this article came from:

Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, #274, (Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1985)

The Book of Mormon-Another Testament of Jesus Christ, 1 Nephi 1, 2, 8, 11, 12, pp. 1-5, 14-16, 19- 23. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1979)

Karen Lynn Davidson, *Our Latter-day Hymns*, p. 278. (Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1988)

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

<http://www.anselmedu/homepage/dbanach/h-carnegie-steel.htm>

<http://www.losthymnsproject.com/lost-hymns.html>