



"Improve the Shining Moments"

August Hymn of the Month

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

The Hymn



As the earth north of the equator rotates toward the end of summer, the approaching change of seasons reminds us of changing seasons, or time periods, in

our lives. We often hear people lament how quickly time passes and say how they regret things they didn't do. The windmill in the photo above reflects this and is symbolic of the moving hands of a clock and of work being done.

Procrastination, the intentional delaying of things that need to be done, is a nearly universal human tendency, and can be the cause of some of our regrets. Research has shown that everyone procrastinates sometimes, and nearly twenty percent of people in the USA habitually avoid difficult tasks and look for distractions. It is said that placing more value on the difficult but important tasks in comparison to our pleasant distractions can help us be more successful. Our hymn, "Improve the Shining Moments" reminds us of the long-term value in the temporally and spiritually important things of life.

The Text



"Improve the Shining Moments" first appeared in the March 1, 1879 edition of 'The Juvenile Instructor,' published by the Sunday School organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), at Salt Lake City, Utah. This was the children's magazine of the Church at that time and was a resource for Sunday School lessons. The image above is of the original publication as available at lds.org.

It was apparently well received as it was included in the 1909 edition of the official LDS Sunday School song book, "Deseret Sunday School Songs," published by the Deseret Sunday School Union at Salt Lake City, Utah. It was included in the 1948 edition of "Hymns, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," with a few changes in punctuation and capitalization, and the music in 2/4 time transposed to a slightly lower key. The current 1985 LDS hymnal continued the hymn with the music transposed to a yet lower key and

The Author & Composer



Robert Bell Baird was born to Robert and Agnes Bell Baird in April of 1855 at Glasgow, Scotland. Glasgow today is Scotland's

largest city, a port city on the River Clyde located in the western lowlands. It is recorded that the father had been a handloom weaver, but was displaced by the factories of the industrial revolution and with his wife and family left his hometown of Paisley and moved a number of times in search of work. This ongoing search is what brought them to Glasgow when their youngest child, Robert, was born.

The course of their future had changed in 1848 when a co-worker at a foundry where he was employed introduced the father of the family to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Within the next year he, his wife, and the two oldest children were baptized and joined the church. The oldest son, Alexander left soon after to pursue a career as a sailor. The church was new and not popular, there was a good deal of persecution directed to members and after a few years, the parents left.

The hymn was originally written as a Sunday School song and while it is not a traditional hymn of praise to God, its admonition to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ makes it a valuable addition to a hymnal. In the Bible New Testament, we read that Jesus set an example of not procrastinating when he said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." He also taught with parables, such as "the slothful servant," the necessity of work and not delaying preparation. The author of our hymn, Robert B. Baird, puts this scriptural admonition into a poetic form with meaningful symbolism.

The hymn was first published in 1879 and at that time it is said that nearly half of all employed persons in the United States were farmers. The second phrase in the first verse, "Work while the sun is radiant, Work, for the night draws nigh," can be seen as having a reference to farming. At that time farm work could only be done during daylight hours, and the text would have been personally relevant to many people. Other outdoor work could be included as electricity would not become commonly used until after 1930. The text phrase also echoes the Biblical verse quoted above.

The first line of the hymn, "Improve the shining moments," seems to have an outdoor basis as well and could be rephrased as: "Do something to make things better during the moments when the sun is shining."

The primary symbolism in these opening phrases, however, is that the 'shining moments' and radiant sun can be interpreted as good opportunities that are only available for a certain amount of time. The second verse adds to this meaning and reminds us that from a historical perspective, even the longest-lived person's lifetime is very short.

some slight changes to the musical harmony and notation.

"Improve the Shining Moments"

The text is essentially unchanged
from the original
Text as found in the 1985 LDS Hymnal

Improve the shining moments;
Don't let them pass you by.
Work while the sun is radiant;
Work, for the night draws nigh.
We cannot bid the sunbeams
To lengthen out their stay,
Nor can we ask the shadow
To ever stay away.

Time flies on wings of lightning;
We cannot call it back.
It comes, then passes forward
Along its onward track.
And if we are not mindful,
The chance will fade away,
For life is quick in passing.
'Tis as a single day.

As wintertime doth follow
The pleasant summer days,
So may our joys all vanish
And pass far from our gaze.
Then should we not endeavor
Each day some point to gain,
That we may here be useful
And every wrong disdain?

Improve each shining moment.
In this you are secure,
For promptness bringeth safety
And blessings rich and pure.
Let prudence guide your actions;
Be honest in your heart;
And God will love and bless you
And help to you impart.

Ten years later, the oldest son, Alexander, returned to Scotland with his wife and family and through his influence, his father and several siblings rejoined the church. Alexander and two of the older siblings emigrated to America in 1863 and traveled across the plains to Utah to join with the church members there. Through their encouragement, their parents and three younger siblings, including Robert B., emigrated in 1866. It is believed that the father worked as part of the ship's crew to help pay their passage. They also received assistance from the church's perpetual emigration fund.

While traveling through Illinois they encountered measles, and one daughter died. Grief was no stranger to the family, six children had died before Robert was born.

Arriving in Utah in October after their wagon trek across the plains, they first lived with Alexander north of Salt Lake City, in Brigham City, then the father found work as a carpenter in Willard, seven miles south, and the family moved there. They eventually bought their own property where they remained.

This location would prove significant as young Robert attended the public schools in Willard where he was noted as being very bright and a splendid writer. He became good friends with Evan Stephens who had immigrated with his family. These young men both loved music and were said to have spent many hours together. They likely assisted each other in the development of their musical talents. The transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869 and in 1874, they both went to work for the railroad as section hands. Evan Stephens would leave the railroad in 1882 and go on to become a well known composer and musician, and director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. (See the January 2016 Hymn of the Month for more about Evan Stephens.)

In 1876 Robert Bell Baird married Ann Gwenthlyn Davis from Willard. Her family had immigrated from Wales. Robert was twenty-one and Ann

The third verse reminds us by the symbolism of "winter" and "summer" that change is a natural part of life due to aging, and also that what we have today, such as our possessions, relationships and physical abilities, can be gone quickly. Natural disasters, accidents, disease, and loss of loved ones can change our circumstances at any stage of life. The author exhorts us not to take our current circumstances for granted but to make an effort every day to be better and to exemplify the Christian attributes of service and obedience to God's commandments.

The fourth verse adds promptness, prudence and honesty to the list of Christian attributes and promises security, safety, and the love, help and blessings of God to those who promptly act to do the important things with their time and live as true Christians.

was eighteen. They eventually had eleven children, but lost five before the age of two. Robert was said to love his family and his music, but his family was his first priority. In 1882 he also left the railroad and moved to Logan to study and teach music, however, Ann became ill and after a year he returned to his railroad job to better care for his family. He would retire from the railroad in 1915.

Robert was a gifted musician and mostly self-taught. It is said that he could play the piano, accordion, flute, piccolo, clarinet, bagpipe and the organ. The organ was his best-loved instrument and his outlet for stress. It is said that he would play as songs came to him.

He composed many pieces for the needs of his church congregation and the children's Sunday School and Primary organizations. It can be assumed that the writing of our hymn, "Improve the Shining Moments" came from this Sunday School setting. His friendship with Evan Stephens, who was later involved with general church music committees, is likely how it came to be published and known to a church-wide audience.

It is noted that Robert directed the Willard Ward choir for nineteen years, from 1884 to 1903, and also directed a community brass band and orchestra. He composed music for these groups as well. He taught many music lessons and also taught music for a time in the area schools.

Robert served in the Church in the leadership of the Sunday School and in the community as a City Councilman.

He was described as sensitive, loving and kind, also witty and entertaining. He gave freely of his talent to better his community. He became ill shortly after he retired and it is said that the last thing he was able to do was to play his organ. He passed away in May of 1916 at the age of 61. His life is evidence that he lived what he taught and greatly improved his 'shining moments.'

**Information in this article came from:**

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