



"Let Us All Press On"

Hymn of the Month

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

The Hymn



The beginning of a new year for many people brings retrospection and the development of goals for the coming year. For others, the perpetual question

of "what do I want to accomplish in life?" can seem unanswerable in view of present challenges, and dreams and ideals can seem so far away that discouragement overtakes the setting of resolutions.

In the first phrase of our hymn, "Let Us All Press On," the author gives us a strategy for overcoming discouragement, which is to focus on the reward promised by the Lord to his faithful servants. ("Let us all press on in the work of the Lord, That when life is over we may gain a reward.") This promise is mentioned many places in the scriptures, such as the following recorded by David in Psalms: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me." These verses indicate that some

The Text

The publication of the text in the children's Sunday School songbook of 1888 is shown in the digitized image below.

HYMNS AND SACRED SONGS,

Designed for the Use of the Children of the
Latter-day Saints.

PUBLISHED BY THE
DESERET S. S. UNION.

PRINTED AT THE
JUVENILE INSTRUCTOR OFFICE,
Salt Lake City, Utah,
1888.

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HYMN 50.

Let us all press on in the work of the
Lord,
That when life is o'er we may gain a
reward,
In the fight for right let us wield a sword,
The mighty sword of truth.

The Author & Composer



Evan Stephens was born to David and Jane Stephens in June of 1854 at Pencader, Carmarthenshire, Wales. Pencader is a small rural village located in

southwestern Wales. Evan was said to be the tenth child in the family, and was reported to have been small and sickly at first. Having lost the two infants that preceded him, his parents were undoubtedly glad to see him survive.

The family was hardworking but poor. It is understood that they were tenant farmers, as was common in the area. The children contributed to the family income by working in the fields as soon as they were able, and hiring out as they got older. As a result, the children received little formal education. It is believed that Evan's mother taught him to read from the Bible in Welsh by the time he was six.

Wales became subject to the English King in 1283 and was incorporated into England in 1543. In spite of this, the

rewards may not have to wait until life is over.

The hymn text was first published in a collection of Sunday School songs for children and the author, Evan Stephens, was said to be a champion of teaching youth. He uses military imagery in the hymn text that captures the imagination in his motivational message. The references to fighting and weapons are symbolic, of course, and appear to be based on the Biblical analogy given by the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day... and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The hymn uses the phrase, "mighty sword of truth," which has essentially the same meaning as the Biblical verse, as Christians consider the word of God to be truth.

The second verse acknowledges that there are many in the world who think and believe differently than the 33% who currently are Christian. Evan Stephens, who wrote both the text and music for our hymn, was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Members of the LDS church, (often referred to as "Saints,") comprise less than 1% of the world population. This percentage would have been even less when the hymn was written over a hundred years ago, and the phrase "our numbers may be few," has additional significance in light of the statistics.

The positive, encouraging mood of the text and the enthusiastic gospel song style of the accompanying music make the hymn a motivational work for both children and adults. The author reminds us that we can have courage and not be afraid in living our religion, for the Lord is on our side, His help is near and He will aid us with an unseen power as we keep His commandments and are true to

CHORUS:
Fear not, though the enemy deride,
Courage, for the Lord is on our side;
We will heed not what the wicked may
say,
But the Lord alone we will obey.
We will not retreat though our numbers
be few
When compared with the opposite host in
view;
But an unseen power will aid me and you
In the glorious cause of truth.
If we do what's right we have no need to
fear,
For the Lord, our Helper, will ever be
near;
In the days of trial His Saints He will
cheer,
And prosper the cause of truth.

"Let us All Press On"

Text as found in the 1985 LDS Hymnal
(unchanged from the original)

Let us all press on in the work of the Lord,
That when life is o'er we may gain a
reward;
In the fight for right let us wield a sword,
The mighty sword of truth.

We will not retreat, though our numbers
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Chorus:
Fear not, though the enemy deride;
Courage, for the Lord is on our side.
We will heed not what the wicked may
say,
But the Lord alone we will obey.

Welsh people persisted in maintaining their language and culture. Although Evan was taught in English at the village school, it is said that he could read and understand English but could not converse in it. He inherited natural gifts from literary progenitors that compensated for lack of formal education, however, along with the Welsh culture of musical and literary emphasis.

At the age of ten, Evan was required to quit school and go to work tending cattle and sheep. His older brothers had found work in the coal and iron industries that were booming in southern Wales at that time.

The Stephens family were reported to be a devout Christian family with several Independent (or non-Church of England) ministers in their line. About 1849, Dan Jones, a native Welsh missionary of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) began serving in the area, and was reported to be instrumental in teaching the Stephens family. Most of the family were converted and baptized. Later the small branch of the church met in their home while Evan's father served as Branch President.

Evan was baptized in 1863 at about the age of nine, in a local stream, and from his infancy had heard of the family's plan to emigrate to the United States to join with the main body of LDS church members in Utah. It is said that his older brother saved enough money from his employment to send one of their sisters with a group of emigrating church members in 1863 and followed himself the next year. Later that year the family received some funds from these two siblings along with money from the church's Perpetual Emigration Fund, which along with some borrowed money allowed most of the family to take their journey. Three adult children remained behind.

They departed in May of 1866 taking a train to Liverpool where they boarded a ship with several hundred other emigrating church members. After a five

Him. He will give us comfort and gladness, or cheer, as we deal with trials and the challenges of defending our beliefs when others subject us to derision, or contemptuous ridicule. Recent surveys by Pew Research Center show that the United States has become less religious in recent years, with only 53% stating in 2014 that religion is very important to them. This statistic indicates that our hymn is even more applicable today than when it was written. Although the hymn text was apparently intended for the author's denomination, the message applies to all Christians today.

Evan Stephens is known to have conducted a 'Sunday School Juvenile Chorus' in Salt Lake City after 1882. Our hymn, "Let Us All Press On," is said to have first been published in 1888, and it seems likely that he wrote it for his Sunday School Chorus. The text of the song appeared in "Hymns and Sacred Songs, Designed for the Use of the Children of the Latter-day Saints," published by the Deseret Sunday School Union and printed at the Juvenile Instructor Office in Salt Lake City, Utah, 1888. The 'Juvenile Instructor,' was the children's Sunday School magazine of the LDS Church at the time. An image of this publication may be seen at the top of the next column and is available online.

The hymn was not included in the 1894 Deseret Sunday School Song Book or the 1889 LDS Psalmody, but was apparently not forgotten as it appeared in the 1948 Edition of "Hymns, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (LDS Hymnal). It continued in the current 1985 LDS Hymnal with text unchanged except for punctuation. The music notation was updated and revised from six lines to eight, and the music of the bass clef was edited in several areas.

This timeless hymn continues to encourage us to persist in good works,

week voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, they traveled by steamboat and train to Wyoming, Nebraska, the launching point for immigrant wagon trains. The transcontinental railroad was not yet completed. They were required to wait a few weeks for wagons and oxen to be procured, and then departed on the first of August for Utah with the Rawlins company.

It is recorded that twelve-year old Evan walked all the way and found the journey to be an experience of pleasure. They had challenging encounters with Native American warriors, river crossings and a snowstorm, but fared well, arriving in Salt Lake on the first of October.

The brother and sister that had preceded them were living in Willard, Utah, about fifty miles north of Salt Lake City, a small farming community located on a narrow bench between the mountain range and the Bear River Bay of the Great Salt Lake. It is said that the established siblings were tenant farming and had no home of their own but brought their parents to the new home they had found, an abandoned one-room log cabin from which they drove rattlesnakes and tarantulas.

Life in the pioneer community had many challenges, and it is noted that the family arrived with almost no money. Young Evan was hired to herd sheep for a neighbor, and the other siblings found jobs also. The community amusements consisted of dances and literary societies. The community also had a school which Evan is said to have attended sporadically.

At the Sunday church services, a young Welshman who directed the ward choir is said to have lit the musical fire which led Evan Stephens to his future accomplishments. It is reported that on a visit to the family's second home, Evan was heard singing in the cellar, accompanying himself with milk pans filled with varying amounts of water. The choir director invited him to sing with the choir and asked him to learn the alto part

and not just walk along, but 'press' or push on against whatever challenges we may encounter.

under the tutelage of one of the men. The men in the choir treated him with love and kindness and he became very attached to them.

Evan borrowed choir books and began to study. An older brother who had remained in Wales, immigrated to join the family in 1868 and brought music books with him which he was also able to study.

At the age of fifteen, Evan traveled to Salt Lake City to attend the general conference of the church, and heard the Tabernacle Choir and the organ, which sparked an interest in the organ in addition to the choir.

Evan participated in a singing class and in 1870, his brother bought a small cabinet organ which Evan learned to play. His interest in music deepened and he began to learn to compose. It is noted that these activities took place after each full day of hard labor. He worked for a mason and had chores at home.

About this time, his parents and older brothers had an opportunity to homestead about sixty miles north near Malad, Idaho and moved there. Evan was about sixteen at the time and did not want to leave his friends. He remained in Willard, living with a friend's family. This turned out to be a crucial decision for his future, as the Willard choir and several other outlying choirs were invited to sing with the Tabernacle Choir at general conferences of the church in October of 1872, and again in 1873.

At the age of nineteen, Evan was asked to take the place of the ward choir leader and prepared the Willard choir to participate with others in the October 1873 general conference. Their success buoyed his enthusiasm and confidence. He read everything about music he could and was inspired by great choral works. He organized classes of singing students and composed and presented musical dramas with them in addition to the music for Church services which he provided.

In 1875 his first composition was published in the LDS Church Sunday school magazine, 'The Juvenile Instructor.' These would be followed by many more through his lifetime.

Evan took a job with the railroad to allow more time for music. It is said he took a small cabinet organ with him on the railroad, teaching and organizing his co-workers. Their traveling boxcar music concerts led to his notice in the northern Utah community of Logan, the railroad headquarters, where he eventually became a full-time musician, employed as the Logan Tabernacle organist and teaching singing classes. His work with his musical dramas and other presentations was continued in Logan and he achieved notable success.

In 1882 Evan moved to Salt Lake City to study organ with Joseph J. Daynes, the first Tabernacle organist. He also began teaching. His Sunday School Juvenile Chorus became a success and the proceeds of their quarterly concerts was his income as agreed with the Sunday School Union officers.

By the end of the year, Evan Stephens was also singing in the Tabernacle Choir and was teaching multiple singing groups. He wrote a music reading primer which was published in 1883.

In 1884 he was offered a position at the University of Deseret, the predecessor of the University of Utah, to teach vocal music. He was said to have had an excellent baritone voice as well as a very good falsetto.

In 1895 he took a leave of absence and went to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory for a year. Although receiving offers to remain, he returned to his work in Utah. He is reported to have said, "Music should be a consistent and faithful servant to the Church and neither its master nor its slave, but always consistently harmonious with its aims, sentiments, and spiritual emotions and feelings."

Evan Stephens participated on the committee responsible for the 1889 LDS Psalmody, the first LDS Hymnal to include music, and was involved in many musical publications and teaching endeavors with choral groups. In 1890 he was called to succeed Ebenezer Beesley as the director of the Tabernacle Choir.

It is noted that Evan Stephen's goal to build up the size and quality of the choir was aided by his many former students, and he was reported to be a strong disciplinarian who was vigorous and rather autocratic in having things his way. A year later the choir had 375 voices and the Tabernacle was being remodeled to accommodate them.

A suggestion was made and accepted by the Church leaders that the Tabernacle Choir should enter the Eisteddfod (Welsh Music Festival) competition to be held at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. This was also the year that the Salt Lake Temple would be dedicated. The preparation tasks were daunting and after the choir sang at the Temple dedication, the World Fair trip was almost cancelled due to the hardships and financial burden. However, with much faith, the Church leaders gave the instruction to proceed. President Wilford Woodruff and the First Presidency of the LDS Church accompanied 250 choir members on the rail journey as the choir performed their first concert tour.

This was done as part of the trip to the World's Fair in Chicago to pay the costs of the trip. They performed in Denver Colorado, Independence and St. Louis Missouri, and Omaha Nebraska as well as Chicago. Their performance at the World's Fair brought acclaim to the choir and its conductor, and earned them the second place prize. It is reported that while at the World's Fair, President Woodruff said in praise of Evan Stephens, "A shepherd boy came down from the mountains and is here today to contest in this great competition." After returning home, they presented a benefit concert to finish paying for the trip.

After the excitement of the tour, everyday life resumed and within a few years, Evan felt the Tabernacle Choir's abilities had decayed and he became so frustrated with the lack of attendance at rehearsals and the ability to do only the simpler repertoire that he threatened to quit in 1901. President Joseph F. Smith, LDS Church President at the time, noted the good will that the choir was bringing to the church and announced a decision to treat membership in the choir as a mission and a sole church duty. This relieved the conflict many had experienced with fulfilling their local church callings. This decision apparently did not last and was resisted by local church leaders, as similar issues arose in later years and Evan offered his resignation several times after this.

In spite of challenges, the Tabernacle Choir continued successfully and Evan Stephens arranged seven additional concert tours for the choir, which began a tradition still followed today.

Although he traveled quite often and visited Wales and Europe several times, he was noted as a champion of home grown music and the training of the youth of the church. It is said that his greatest reward was the accomplishment of the work, he wanted no other recognition, although much came to him, including an honorary Bachelor of Music Degree.

In 1916, at the age of 62, Evan Stephens was released as Director of the Tabernacle Choir. He had served for twenty-six years and it is reported that three honorary retirement concerts were given. He continued in other musical endeavors, writing cantatas, anthems and hymn tunes, and serving on the LDS Church Music Committee. Nineteen of his hymns and hymn tunes are found in the current 1985 LDS Hymnal.

Evan Stephens never married, although it is said that he was engaged as a young man and was much affected by the death of his fiancée.' in 1903 he hired his grand-niece, Sarah Daniels, recently immigrated

from Wales to keep house for him, which she did for almost thirty years. He was noted to love nature and the home he built in Salt Lake City included a very large yard which he planted with native Welsh flowers.

In October of 1930, three weeks after his last public appearance as a guest conductor of the Tabernacle Choir at the October General Conference of the Church, Evan Stephens passed away at the age of 76. The Tabernacle Choir sang a number of his hymns at his funeral services and speakers included LDS Church Apostles, and other leaders, who paid tribute to him and the service he had rendered through his remarkable life. Through unceasing effort and the blessings of Providence he raised himself from a poverty stricken shepherd boy who did not own a pair of shoes, to national acclaim and great success.

Evan Stephens was also the composer of the March 2015 Hymn of the Month, "Today, While the Sun Shines," and the above is reproduced from the previous article.



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