

Nearer, My God, to Thee

November 2012 - Hymn of the Month



The Hymn



This classic hymn has been encouraging people to draw nearer to God through their hardships, or "crosses" for well over a century.

In most of the text the author accomplishes this by likening our lives to the Biblical account of Jacob ("the wanderer") as he flees the threat of death at the hand of his brother Esau. At the direction of his mother and father, he travels from his home in Beer-sheba, about forty miles southwest of Jerusalem, to sojourn and seek a wife in the land of Padan-aram or Haran, hundreds of miles away in what, today, is the area of southern Turkey. This was a difficult situation at best. Stopping for the night ("the sun gone down") he gathers a pile of stones for a pillow ("my rest a stone"), and in the night has a vision ("yet in my dreams") of a ladder reaching to heaven ("steps unto heav'n"), with angels moving up and down upon it ("angels to beckon me"), and sees the Lord in heaven who promises him great blessings ("all that Thou sendest me.") He awakens, ("with my waking thoughts") makes a pillar out of the stones, ("out of my stony griefs") and pours oil upon it, calling it Beth-el, or House of God (Bethel I'll raise), feeling that the place must be the house of God and the gate of Heaven. He then makes his own promises to the Lord.

This great scriptural account set in poetical form continues to be inspiring as we put ourselves into the place of the wanderer. The author seems to be encouraging us to consecrate our trials, as though anointing them with oil, to God, that through them we may answer the beckoning of the angels to draw nearer to God and receive his blessings, whether in grief or "on joyful wing."

The frequently repeated lines add emphasis to the entreaty to be nearer to God.

It is believed that the text, written by Sarah F. Adams, first appeared in the publication *Hymns and Anthems* about 1841, and it has been sung to a number of alternate tunes. Lowell Mason set the text of *Nearer, My God, to Thee* to music and published it about 1856 in a collection known as the *Sabbath Hymn and Tune Book*, which is believed to have led to the hymn's popularity. It is interesting to note that the author never heard the music which today is most commonly associated with her

The Author



Sarah Flower Adams was born in 1805 at Harlow, Essex, England, about twenty-seven miles north-northeast of London. She was the youngest daughter of Benjamin Flower, a journalist, publisher and politician. It is believed that Benjamin was the editor of

the *Cambridge Intelligencer* for a time, which was thought to be a rather radical newspaper. Sarah is reported to have been interested in literature at an early age.

She was of the Unitarian faith and it is said that her pastor was reform-minded and published *The Repository*, a newspaper of advanced ideas to which she and her husband-to-be, William Bridges Adams, a civil or railway engineer, contributed. It is believed that she was a friend of Leigh Hunt, Robert Browning and other literary figures of the day.

Sarah Adams wrote many magazine articles, poems, and hymns. It is said that the *Hymns and Anthems* volume in which "Nearer, My God, to Thee" first appeared in 1841 contained twelve other pieces by her. It was published by William Johnson Fox, the minister of the South Place Unitarian Church, Finsbury, London, which church she attended at the time.

It is believed that "Nearer, My God, to Thee" was written in response to a request by Reverend Fox for a song to conclude a sermon on Jacob and Esau and that Sarah spent a week in prayer and scripture study while writing the text. It is interesting to note that, although a Unitarian and thereby believing in only one God, and denying the divinity and mission of Christ, her hymn has been adopted and sung by Christians everywhere.

Sarah is believed to have been close to her only sibling, her sister, Eliza, who was an accomplished musician, and with whom she worked and consulted. It is said that Sarah cared for Eliza when she was stricken by tuberculosis. The disease eventually claimed Sarah's life also, two years after her sister. She died in 1848 at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Middlesex, England at the age of forty-three.

Nearer, My God, to Thee – Text

Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee!
E'en though it be a cross
That raiseth me.

The Composer



Lowell Mason was born in 1792 at Medfield, Massachusetts, about twenty miles southwest of Boston. It is said that he showed a great interest and ability in music from his childhood on, and attended his first

singing-school in about 1805. He had a practical side, however, and worked as a bank clerk in his early years, living in Savannah, Georgia and pursuing music on the side.

He is said to have been a charter member of the First Presbyterian Church there, and served as choir director and organist. It is believed that he studied harmony and composition with Frederick L. Abel, and began composing and arranging his own music. He sent a collection of his work to numerous publishers in Philadelphia and Boston, but was rejected until about 1822 when the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, Massachusetts accepted him and published *The Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection of Church Music*. The collection did not carry his name, though, as at that time he was a bank officer and did not wish to be known as a musical man, not intending to ever make music his profession.

This often rejected collection became a great success, however, reportedly selling tens of thousands of copies, and being adopted by New England singing schools and church choirs. This success brought him back to Massachusetts about 1826, and he began part-time work as a church director of music while holding a job as a bank teller. He compiled what is believed to be the first Sunday-School collection with music, the *Juvenile Psalmist*. It is said that he served for fourteen years at the Bowdoin Street Church.

In Boston it is believed Lowell became the first music teacher at an American public school, co-founding the Boston Academy of Music with George Webb. He became music superintendent of the Boston school system about 1838 and it is said that during his career he traveled in Europe and brought back English, French and German music, expanding available resources for music education. His efforts have led some to refer to him as the "Father of American music education."

His musical career also produced over 1,600 religious works and he is commonly known as the "Father of American church music." His

text. She had passed away eight years before it was composed.

The music in the current 1985 edition of *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* has a different rhythm than the earlier editions of the hymnal. The frequency of dotted quarter notes was reduced to make the music flow more smoothly.

It is commonly believed that *Nearer, My God, to Thee* was played by the orchestra on the Titanic, as it sank, and perhaps sung by the doomed passengers.

The hymn is also reported to have been played at memorial services for assassinated American President William McKinley, and that on his deathbed in 1901 he murmured the words, "Nearer, my God, to Thee, e'en though it be a cross, has been my constant prayer."

Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Though like the wanderer,
The sun gone down,
Darkness be over me,
My rest a stone,
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

There let the way appear,
Steps unto heav'n;
All that Thou sendest me,
In mercy giv'n;
Angels to beckon me
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Then with my waking thoughts
Bright with thy praise,
Out of my stony griefs
Bethel I'll raise;
So by my woes to be
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

Or if, on joyful wing
Cleaving the sky,
Sun, moon, and stars forgot,
Upward I fly,
Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

efforts to improve the music in the churches of America have had lasting impact. The current LDS Hymnal contains five of his compositions and arrangements, including *Joy to the World*. Lowell Mason concluded his long and productive life in 1872 at Orange, New Jersey.



Information in this article came from:

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