

May Hymn of the Month

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



[Oh, What Songs of the Heart mp3](#)

The Hymn



It has been said that women are the heart of the home. The message of this hymn is an appropriate one for the month we celebrate women and mothers as it captures a wonderful vision of our heavenly home through the lens of the author's beliefs.

The author, Joseph Townsend, was a member

of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and the text reflects the teachings of the Church. The picture painted is one of joy and happiness in reunion with loved ones who have preceded us in death. The text encourages the reader to look forward to heaven instead of fearing death.

The beautiful scenes in heaven described by the hymn are a reminder that the families and relationships we build during our lives here on earth are of great importance, as are the covenants we make with God to bind ourselves to Him and to our families forever.

A theme of music runs through the entire work, very fitting for a hymn, with mention of songs in every verse. What are "the songs of the heart?"

Music by itself has great power to convey emotion and combined with lyrics it brings deeper meaning to thoughts expressed by the associated words. As the author indicates, a song can more adequately convey the highest feelings than words could do alone.

When we're feeling extremely happy, what would our feelings sound like if they were converted into music? If we tried to describe how we feel, what words would we set to the music? This is one way to define 'the songs of our hearts.'

The author uses the word 'rapture' (the most likely meaning being 'overwhelming emotion') in the third verse, to convey how we will feel when we see the wonders of heaven, and states that only songs can come close to describing them. A similar expression is given in the Bible by the Apostle Paul when he speaks to the Corinthians of the "things which God hath prepared for them that love him"

'Oh, What Songs of the Heart' was written over one hundred and thirty years ago, and it is instructive to note that this was a time before radio, phonograph or television. The scenes that were beloved by the author belonged to a small town in Utah where farming was the primary occupation.

There were no automobiles and no electricity. People generally lived in large families and spent much of their time at home, and in activities

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.

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.

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, just eight years after 'Oh, What Songs of the Heart' was first published, and before it was included in the LDS hymnal.

"Oh, What Songs of the Heart"
Text as found in the 1985 LDS Hymnal

Oh, what songs of the heart
We shall sing all the day,
When again we assemble at home,

involving manual labor. If they had music to accompany their daily tasks, it was of their own making.

In the Bible New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to God as the Father of spirits, and to Jesus as the firstborn of God. The hymn continues these thoughts and reflects the LDS belief that heaven is our eternal home, and we have Heavenly Parents there; that as our mortal physical bodies have two parents, our immortal spirits have a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father (God the Father.) That they know each of us, love us, and are waiting to welcome us home when we leave this mortal sphere is brought forward as the culmination of the piece.

When George D. Pyper was compiling his book, "Stories of Latter-day Saint Hymns, Their Authors and Composers," published in 1939, he contacted Joseph Townsend who was then about 90 years of age, and he kindly provided information about his motive for writing a few of his songs. 'Oh, What Songs of the Heart' he said was an inspiration intended "to put a brighter light on some of our doleful funerals."

'Oh, What Songs of the Heart' is said to have been first published in an 1879 issue of the LDS Sunday School magazine, 'The Juvenile Instructor.' This magazine, the forerunner of current children and youth church magazines, was begun in 1866 and was an integral part of Sunday School instruction for over one hundred years. The hymn was subsequently published in the church's 1894 Deseret Sunday School Song Book, with the title, "Songs of the Heart." It was included in the 1948 LDS hymnal with the current title, "Oh, What Songs of the Heart."

The hymn in 4/4 time continues to be sung in the 1985 LDS hymnal. Each of the last two editions has a slightly lower key than its predecessor, and each contains some minor revisions to punctuation and spelling.

The music was written for the text by the author's co-worker in the Payson, Utah, Sunday School, William Clayson. Five other hymns in the 1985 LDS hymnal are results of their similar collaboration.

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," "The Iron Rod," 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 is largely reproduced from the previous article.

When we meet ne'er to part
With the blest o'er the way,
There no more from our loved ones to roam!
When we meet ne'er to part,
Oh, what songs of the heart
We shall sing in our beautiful home.

Tho our rapture and bliss
There's no song can express,
We will shout, we will sing o'er and o'er,
As we greet with a kiss,
And with joy we caress
All our loved ones that passed on before;
As we greet with a kiss,
In our rapture and bliss,
All our loved ones that passed on before.

Oh, the visions we'll see
In that home of the blest
There's no word, there's no thought can impart,
But our rapture will be
All the soul can attest,
In the heavenly songs of the heart;
But our rapture will be
In the vision we'll see
Best expressed in the songs of the heart.

Oh, what songs we'll employ!
Oh, what welcome we'll hear!
While our transports of love are complete,
As the heart swells with joy
In embraces most dear
When our heavenly parents we meet!
As the heart swells with joy,
Oh, what songs we'll employ,
When our heavenly parents we meet!

Information in this article came from:

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