

Talk for Sacrament Meeting on the Hymns

Given by Mike Carson on September 9, 2007
Grove Creek Eighth Ward, Pleasant Grove, Utah

I remember a conversation I had many years ago in a dentist's waiting room. An older lady walked in and brought up the subject heavy on her mind: "I hate coming to the dentist," she said. I agreed with her and understood the sentiment. "But," she continued, "I sit in the chair and sing hymns to myself. And I have no pain." I was impressed with the power of hymns in her hour of need.

The Nourishing Power of Hymns

My own testimony and conversion to the restored gospel were strongly influenced by singing the hymns of Zion as a young boy. I grew up in Lehi, Utah, and attended the Lehi First Ward. It was one of six wards in the only stake in a town, which had no traffic lights. Today, there are at least five stakes in Lehi and many traffic lights.

My mother was my first piano teacher. When I was seven years old, I begged my mom through tears to begin me on the piano. One year later, I begged her through tears to let me quit. But she gently persisted, and, at age twelve, I was called to be the Mutual organist, and I have been playing the hymns ever since.

At my baptism, at age eight, I was touched with the spirit of the hymns as we sang "Come, Come Ye Saints" at the baptismal service. I truly felt the Spirit of the Lord confirm to my young heart that the restored gospel was true.

My experience that day was similar to that of President Hinckley when, as a deacon, he attended a stake priesthood meeting with his father. They sang "Praise to the Man." Later he would say, "I had an impression that has never left that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet of God."

I believe that many of us have similar experiences. Hymns play an essential role in spirituality, revelation, and conversion.

If I would teach with power
The doctrine and the plan,
I'd wish for gentle music
To prepare the soul of man.

And then to press forever
These truths upon his mind,
We'd sing the hymns of Zion,
With their messages sublime.

—Elder Stephen D. Nadauld
Second Quorum of the Seventy

In the April 2007 General Conference, President Boyd K. Packer told how, after having been called as a new General Authority, he felt somewhat inadequate and in need of spiritual strength. He entered the back of the Salt Lake Tabernacle to listen to a Primary conference. As the children's choir sang, accompanied by a simple organ arrangement, he was touched with spiritual feelings and described it as "a defining moment...[that] fixed deeply and permanently in my soul that which I most needed to sustain me in the years to follow."

President J. Reuben Clark said: "Sometimes I feel that we get nearer to the Lord through music than perhaps through any other thing except prayer."

"For My Soul Delighteth in the Song of the Heart"

Three months after the Church was organized, the Lord, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, instructed Joseph's wife, Emma, to make a selection of sacred hymns for the Church: "For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads" (D&C 25:12).

I own a replica of the 1835 hymnal, which was published as a result of that revelation. Its format is typical for the times: it is small enough to fit in a pocket, measuring only three inches by four and one-half inches; and it contains only the words—no tunes—for its ninety hymns. Between thirty and forty of these hymns appear to have been written by Latter-day Saints; the remainder were Protestant hymns.

Twenty-six of the hymns in Emma Smith's little volume were included in our 1985 hymnal. Some of the more familiar hymns that were included are:

Redeemer of Israel
He Died! The Great Redeemer Died!
Earth with Her Ten Thousand Flowers
Guide Us, O Thou Great Jehovah
Joy to the World!
Now Let Us Rejoice
Gently Raise the Sacred Strain
O God the Eternal Father
I Know That My Redeemer Lives
How Firm a Foundation
The Spirit of God

The preface to the 1835 hymnal reflected the early Saints' feeling that they needed a collection entirely their own: "In order to sing by the Spirit, and with the understanding, it is necessary that the church of the Latter Day Saints should have a collection of "SACRED HYMNS," adapted to their faith and belief in the gospel.... [I]t is sincerely hoped that the following collection...may answer every purpose till more [songs] are composed, or till we are blessed with a copious variety of the songs of Zion."

One hundred and fifty years later, our present hymnbook was published containing 323 hymn titles.

Music in Our Church Meetings

Perhaps the official statement of the First Presidency that is least familiar to Latter-day Saints is the preface to the 1985 edition of the hymnbook. In that pronouncement, the members of the First Presidency declare that:

Inspirational music is an essential part of our church meetings. The hymns invite the Spirit of the Lord, create a feeling of reverence, unify us as members, and provide a way for us to offer praises to the Lord.

The pronouncement continues:

Some of the greatest sermons are preached by the singing of hymns. Hymns move us to repentance and good works, build testimony and faith, comfort the weary, console the mourning, and inspire us to endure to the end.

Music has boundless powers for moving families toward greater spirituality and devotion to the gospel. Sister Marjorie Hinckley told of how the singing of a hymn opened the door to the blessings of the gospel to her family: “On a beautiful Sunday morning in the fall of 1841, my great-grandfather, William M. Evans, then sixteen years of age, was walking down the streets of Liverpool, England, on his way to church. Suddenly he heard singing that thrilled him beyond anything he had ever heard before. He followed the sound down an alley and up some rickety stairs into a room where a few people were holding a meeting. John Taylor, who later became president of the Church and who had a beautiful tenor voice, was the singer. The song he sang was so beautiful that William remained to hear the sermon. Upon returning home, William was reprimanded by his elder brother, David, for being absent from his accustomed place in the choir. Asked to give an account of himself, William replied, ‘I have been where you should have been, and I shall not be satisfied until you all hear the wonderful truth I have heard this morning.’ Before long, William and David were converted to the gospel and then helped convert other members of their family. Three of the brothers and their parents emigrated to Utah and raised a large posterity....”

Music in Our Homes

The First Presidency urges us to use hymns in our homes. Again, from the preface of the 1985 hymnbook:

Ours is a hymnbook for the home as well as for the meetinghouse. We hope the hymnbook will take a prominent place among the scriptures and other religious books in our homes. The hymns can bring families a spirit of beauty and peace and can inspire love and unity among family members.

Teach your children to love the hymns. Sing them on the Sabbath, in home evening, during scripture study, at prayer time. Sing as you work, as you play, and as you travel together. Sing hymns as lullabies to build faith and testimony in your young ones.

In a general conference address a few years ago, Elder Dallin Oaks told a personal experience regarding how the singing of a children’s hymn immediately changed the spirit of a family gathering:

Last spring some of our children and fourteen of our grandchildren had a family outing in the mountains. One of our activities was a meeting to share experiences and testimonies. We gathered at the appointed time, but the little people were only gathered in body. The large spirits in those little bodies were clamoring for more of the exciting outdoor activities they had been enjoying. The cabin where we met was too small to contain them, and it seemed as if a dozen restless children and their outcries were ricocheting off the walls in every direction. Grandparents will appreciate the apprehension I felt at trying to sponsor something serious in that setting. Suddenly the instinctive wisdom of young mothers rescued our efforts. Two mothers began to sing a song familiar to the children. Others joined in, and within a few minutes the mood had changed and all spirits were subdued and receptive to spiritual things (Dallin H. Oaks, “Worship through Music,” *Ensign*, Nov 1994, 9).

President Oaks said he “offered a silent prayer of thanks for hymns and for mothers who know how to use them!”

Music in Our Personal Lives

The First Presidency urges us to use hymns in our personal lives. Again, from the preface of our hymnbook:

...[T]he hymns can greatly benefit us as individuals. Hymns can lift our spirits, give us courage, and move us to righteous action. They can fill our souls with heavenly thoughts and bring us a spirit of peace.

The hymn “How Firm a Foundation” helped comfort the persecuted Saints in Missouri. After the massacre at Haun’s Mill in 1838, during which her husband and son were killed, Amanda Smith gathered with the mourning women and children at the home of one of the Saints. They prayed aloud for comfort. One day the state militia told the Saints that if they did not stop, they would be killed. It wasn’t safe to pray aloud in the house, so Amanda sneaked into a cornfield.

“When I emerged from the corn,” she said, “a voice spoke to me. It was a voice as plain as I ever heard one. It was no silent, strong impression of the spirit, but a *voice*, repeating a verse of the Saints’ hymn:

*“The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!”*
[Hymns, no. 85]

“From that moment,” Amanda said, “I had no more fear.” (See Karen Lynn Davidson, *Our Latter-day Hymns* [1988], 115.)

For many of us today, this hymn is still a reminder of the protecting power of the Savior.

Joy in God's Presence

The Lord wants us to find joy in gathering together to worship him in our meetings. Second Chronicles (5:13-14) describes a worship service the day the ark of the covenant was brought into Solomon's splendid new temple in Jerusalem.

...[T]he trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord...the house [of the Lord] was filled with a cloud... so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God.

Next to these verses, in the margin of his own bible, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote: "Where there is devotional music, God is always at hand with His gracious presence."

Devotional music can be a spiritual force in our lives, and combining our voices in the singing of the hymns of Zion is one of the best ways to put ourselves in tune with the Spirit of the Lord. When we sing together, we are able to unitedly bear our testimonies. Let us sing with one voice to give praise and thanks to the Lord. You do not have to sing on pitch or have a beautiful voice for the Lord to accept your song of praise. Also, some hymns are not as familiar as others, but I promise that as you try to participate, your life will be blessed. I invite you to always join in as we sing the hymns.

The First Presidency concludes the preface to our hymnbook with these words:

Brothers and sisters, let us use the hymns to invite the Spirit of the Lord into our congregations, our homes, and our personal lives. Let us memorize and ponder them, recite and sing them, and partake of their spiritual nourishment. Know that the song of the righteous is a prayer unto our Father in Heaven, "and it shall be answered with a blessing upon [your] heads."

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen