

“Nearer, My God, to Thee”

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Sarah Flower was born February 22, 1805 in Essex, England, the second daughter of Benjamin and Eliza Flowers. Sarah grew up in a home surrounded by poetry and song writing. Sarah married William Bridges Adams and moved to London where she attended the independent church begun by William Johnson Fox. She contributed thirteen hymns to his Hymns and Anthems, one of them being "Nearer, My God to Thee". This hymn was written to follow the preacher's sermon on Genesis 28:11-19, known as the story of Jacob's ladder, or Jacob's dream. Sarah wrote the hymn at her home "Sunnybank", in Loughton, Essex, England, in 1841 in a week, and her sister Eliza composed the tune. This short song written by the two Flower sisters for a small country church resonated with multitudes since then.

The Confederate army band played this song as the survivors of the disastrous Pickett's Charge during the Battle of Gettysburg returned from their failed infantry assault. The Rough Riders sang the hymn at the burial of their slain comrades after the Battle of Las Guasimas during the Spanish American war.

President William McKinley in September 1901 quoted as his dying words the first few lines of the hymn. In the afternoon of September 14, 1901, after five minutes of silence across the nation, numerous bands across the United States played the hymn, which was McKinley's favorite, in his memory. It was also played by the Marine Band on Pennsylvania Avenue during the funeral procession through Washington, and at the end of the funeral service itself, and at a memorial service for him in Westminster Abbey, London. The hymn was also played as the body of assassinated American President James Garfield was interred at Lakeview Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio, and at the funerals of former U.S. Presidents Warren G. Harding and Gerald R. Ford.

However, the most memorable use of the hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee" is associated with the sinking of the RMS Titanic, as some survivors later reported that the ship's string ensemble played it as the vessel sank. Wallace Hartley, the ship's band leader, who died when the ship sank (as did all other musicians on board), loved the hymn and had wished to have it performed at his funeral one day. It is truly ironic that he got to play it at his own passing. However, a record slip for a 1913 Edison cylinder recording of "Nearer, My God, to Thee," featuring the "Bethany" version, states that "When the great steamship 'Titanic' sank in mid-ocean in April 1912, it was being played by the band and sung by the doomed passengers, even as the boat took her final plunge." George Orrell, the bandmaster of the rescue ship, RMS Carpathia, who spoke with survivors, related: "The ship's band in any emergency is expected to play to calm the passengers. After the Titanic struck the iceberg the band began to play bright music, dance music, comic songs – anything that would prevent the passengers from becoming panic-stricken... various awe-stricken passengers began to think of the death that faced them and asked the bandmaster to play hymns. The one which appealed to all was 'Nearer My God to Thee'." (via Wikipedia, et al)

Gen. 28:11-12

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,
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'll fly,
Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee.
Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

There in my Father's home, safe and at rest,
There in my Savior's love, perfectly blest;
Age after age to be nearer, my God, to Thee.
Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

What is it about this hymn that resonates with the human heart and mind? The melody is slow and dirge-like, and considered simplistic in form. The lyrics, while spiritual and edifying, are obviously contrived to fit the theme of a sermon preached 180 years ago. It is not the melody nor the lyrics, but rather the message that reaches out and embraces an empty longing and an unending hunger in every life: to be nearer to the source of our creation, the fount of our sustenance, the author of our salvation, the beautiful, pure, loving, and eternal God. Singing that hymn enables us to express what is difficult for many to admit unless approaching the door to death.

Acts 17:26-27

Psalm 145:18

Psalm 34:18

2Cor. 6:16-18

James 4:8

Those who want to be near to God in this world and with God in the world to come, do so by purposefully drawing near to Him by His word. It is foolish to wait until the ship we are aboard is sinking in the cold, swallowing sea. (Paul R. Blake)