

Episode 1

History of Hymns

WE THANK THEE, O GOD, FOR A PROPHET

NARRATOR:

The views and opinions expressed here are those of the guests and are not the official position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

William Fowler was born in 1830 in Australia to an English father, John Fowler, and an Irish mother, Bridget Niel.

[BEGIN MUSIC]

His father was in the British military and when Fowler was three, his father was relocated to India.

When William was nine, his father was honorably discharged from the army and the family moved to Sheffield, England, John Fowler's original home.

Two years after they moved to England, John Fowler died, and less than four years later, Bridget Fowler also died. So at age 15, William Fowler was left an orphan.

Bridget had been raised in the Roman Catholic faith but had joined the Wesleyan Methodist religion as had John Fowler, who was originally an Anglican.

William Fowler was introduced to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and he was baptized by J. V. Long in 1849. After being baptized, Fowler was fired from the factory in Sheffield, where he had worked as a cutler.

Fowler and his wife, Ellen Bradshaw, had three children.

From 1850 to 1854, Fowler served as an LDS Church missionary in England.

Fowler wrote the hymn text "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" sometime between 1860 and 1863. President Joseph F. Smith in his lifetime related that when he was in England, "Brother Fowler brought his new song to meeting where it was sung for the first time."

Fowler immigrated to Utah Territory in 1863 and died two years later at the age of 35.

From his "Beloved Hymns of the Restoration," we hear Michael Dowdle's setting of FOWLER, the tune name for the melody of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet."

The composer of the tune, Caroline Elizabeth Sarah Norton, also known as Caroline Sheridan Norton, is remembered principally as a poet and pamphlet writer and champion of women's rights in Great Britain.

Her unhappy and tumultuous marriage gave impetus for her fight for greater rights for women. But Caroline's musical instincts were good and she is also the composer of the song "Juanita, a Song of Spain," which enjoyed great popularity in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

When an acquaintance of hers, an English officer of high rank, was killed in the battle of Balaklava during the Crimean War, she wrote both words and music to "The Officer's Funeral March." The first verse is as follows:

Hark to the shrill trumpet calling!
It pierces the soft summer air;
Tears from each comrade are falling,
The widow and orphan are there.
The bayonets earthward are turning,
And the drums' muffled breath rolls around:
Yet he heeds not the voice of their mourning
Nor wakes to the bugle sound.

With slight adaptation, the melody of that composition served William Fowler as the setting for his new hymn text. His use of that hymn tune guaranteed its immortality, for there has been no other use of that melody as a hymn tune. Therefore, the tune has been given the name FOWLER.

Caroline Sheridan Norton was not aware during her lifetime of this new use of her tune, which has come to be one of the best-loved of all the Latter-day Saints' hymns, and one of only a handful commonly identified with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Merrill Jenson's cinematic setting of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" is found on his "High on the Mountain Top" album.

(Music: Merrill Jenson, "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet")

Michael Dowdle has two settings of the hymn "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet." This one is from his "Fifty Favorite Hymns" series.

(Music: Michael Dowdle, "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet")

Enoch Train created a tribute to the early native American converts to the Church in its arrangement of this melody, which they named "Little Soldiers Fowler" in honor of one of Utah's first native American converts, Little Soldier.

(Music: Enoch Train, "Little Soldiers Fowler")

Reid Nibley plays his arrangement of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" from "Twelve Hymn Preludes."

(Music: Reid Nibley, "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" [instrumental])

Also on Reid Nibley's "Twelve Hymn Preludes" is this two-part invention setting of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet."

(Music: Reid Nibley, "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" [instrumental])

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square perform Mack Wilberg's setting of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" from their album "Praise to the Man."

(Music: Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square, "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet")

[END MUSIC]