

Episode 22

History of Hymns

THE SPIRIT OF GOD

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.

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: The Spirit of God like a fire is burning! The latter-day glory begins to come forth; the visions and blessings of old are returning, and angels are coming to visit the earth.

In these beginning lines of the great anthem by W. W. Phelps, the foundation of the restoration is laid forth. The very words quicken our hearts, seeming to be an opening through which we can glimpse the latter-day glory, and we feel like singing and shouting with the armies of heaven in gratitude for the blessings which are ours.

This hymn goes back to the early foundations of the Church and is richly entwined with the history of the restoration. In July of 1830, in what is now designated as Section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord instructed Emma Smith, wife of the prophet, to make a compilation of hymns for the new Church, which had been officially organized on the 6th of April, only three months before. "... it shall be given thee," the Lord says, "to make a selection of sacred hymns, ... which is pleasing unto me, ... 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" (see D&C 25:11-12). In a meeting of the high council held in Kirtland on September 14, 1835, it was decided that Sister Emma Smith proceed to make a selection of sacred hymns according to the revelation and that President W. W. Phelps be appointed to revise and arrange them for printing. Thus, from the inception, the spirit of William Phelps was felt in the music of the Church. Indeed, though some hymns already existing in various Christian hymnals were selected for this compilation; many new hymns were created to fit the peculiar needs, experiences and sentiments of the Latter-day Saints. Even in our current hymn book, there are 15 hymn texts authored by Brother Phelps with many well-loved favorites among them: "Now Let Us Rejoice," "Redeemer of Israel," "High on the Mountain Top," "Gently Raise the Sacred Strain," "If You Could Hie to Kolob," and "Praise to the Man." "The Spirit of God" is a gem among these. What sort of young man was William Phelps who could embody in words those spiritual truths, experiences and feelings, which are almost beyond mortal expression?

(Music)

NARRATOR: William Wines Phelps, born February 17, 1792 in Hanover, New Jersey—a forested rural area 20 miles northwest of New York City—was the first of twelve children. In 1815, he married Sally Waterman. By the 1820s, he was living in New York State, and on April 9, 1830—just three days after the organization of the Church—he purchased a copy of the Book of Mormon from Parley P. Pratt. He approached the book and the Church it represented cautiously yet with sincere intent, recording in a letter that he spent ten hours discussing Mormonism with Sidney Rigdon. He was twice thrown into prison, reportedly for other incidental causes, but in part, as he expressed it, “to keep me from joining the Mormons.”

(Music)

NARRATOR: In June of 1831, he arrived in Kirtland and immediately requested a revelation from the Prophet Joseph. In what is now Section 55 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord called him to be baptized and ordained to assist Oliver Cowdrey in the printing office and to accompany Joseph and many of the other apostles to Missouri. He was baptized and left two days later to preach the gospel. Three months later, he was ordained to the high priesthood by the prophet and from the start, his capable qualities and exceptional gifts were put to use for the sake of the kingdom.

(Music)

NARRATOR: Brother Phelps reveled in the work. He bound himself by sacred covenant to God and his prophet. He organized assistance for the poor, superintended the printing of the Book of Commandments and edited the first issues of the Evening and Morning Star.

(END MUSIC)

(BEGIN MUSIC)

NARRATOR: Jenny Oaks Baker and Jenny Richards’ arrangement of “The Spirit of God” underscores the continuation of our story.

(Music, Jenny Oaks Baker and Jenny Richards, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: In Missouri, after his house was burned and his goods destroyed, he was assigned with Orson Pratt, David Whitmer and Lyman Wight to visit the churches throughout Missouri and assist members in escaping the cruelty and devastation of their enemies. His spirit expanded and for a period he was full of obedience and dedication. At one time, he alone subscribed \$500 for the building of the house of the Lord. In Kirtland, beginning in May of 1835, Brother Phelps lived in the home of the prophet while he worked on the Book of Commandments, or what we know as the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church. He wrote to his wife Sally:

(MALE) NARRATOR: “The Saints are so emphatic about the Word of Wisdom that they drink cold water and don’t even mention tea and coffee. They pray in the morning and in the evening. A new

idea, Sally. If you and I continue faithful to the end, we are certain to be one in the Lord throughout eternity. This is one of the most glorious consolations we can have in the flesh.”

NARRATOR: On Sunday, March 27, 1836, the Kirtland Temple was dedicated. By 7 o’clock, over a thousand people were waiting by the doors of the temple, which opened at 8. The meeting began at 9, Sidney Rigdon speaking for 2 ½ hours and Joseph reading the dedicatory prayer, which had been revealed to him. The music for the service included three of Brother Phelps’ songs: “Now Let Us Rejoice,” “Adam-ondi-Ahman” and the grand finale following the dedication, “The Spirit of God like a fire is burning,” proclaiming the experiences which were even then moving with power and wonder through the souls of those present. As the blessings of heaven were poured out upon their heads, many of the Saints spoke in tongues, while others were given the power to interpret. Many saw angels atop the temple roof or heard heavenly singing, and there were wonderful manifestations of healings, of visions and dreams. The Savior himself appeared in five different meetings held in the temple, and visions were given to many of both the Father and the Son.

A house had been built where the Savior might come to his people, and the promises He had made them were fulfilled—even to honoring His humble people with the glory of His own presence. But Brother Phelps’ far-ranging intellect, his curious mind and his intense pride led him to slip to be diverted. He began to rely upon his own wisdom and pay heed to his own personal desires and interests apart from those of the kingdom. In March of 1839, he was excommunicated.

(Music, Jenny Oaks Baker and Jenny Richards, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: From this experience, W. W. Phelps suffered the devastation of living without the Spirit and without the companionship of the Saints and of the prophet he loved. In a letter written in the early days of the Church 1831, he had testified:

(MALE) **NARRATOR:** “Now, notwithstanding my body was not baptized into this Church until June 1831, yet my heart was there from the time I became acquainted with the Book of Mormon and my hope steadfast like an anchor and my faith increased like the grass after a refreshing shower when I for the first time held a conversion with our beloved Brother Joseph.”

NARRATOR: In June 1840, Brother Phelps wrote to Joseph Smith, pleading for forgiveness. The prophet’s reply has become a tender and powerful part of the heritage of faith, of gospel principles in action, which Brother Joseph has passed on to his people:

(MALE) **NARRATOR:** “I feel a disposition to act on your case in a manner that will meet the approbation of Jehovah whose servant I am, and agreeable to the principles of truth and righteousness which have ever characterized the dealings of our Heavenly Father towards the humble and penitent. I feel disposed to copy the example, cherish the same principles and by so doing be a savior of my fellow men.”

(Music, Jenny Oaks Baker and Jenny Richards, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: Because of the mercy and love extended to him by Brother Joseph, W. W. Phelps went on to write of his love for this great prophet in the hymn “Praise to the Man.” Brother Phelps traveled to Utah in 1849, served a mission in southern Utah Territory and on the territorial legislature and on the first board of regents for the University of Deseret.

(Music, Jenny Oaks Baker and Jenny Richards, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: He died on March 7, 1872 in the Salt Lake Valley, true to the faith as he told his wife Sally he desired to be.

(END MUSIC)

(BEGIN MUSIC)

NARRATOR: Octapella sings their a-cappella arrangement of “The Spirit of God.”

(Music: Octapella, “The Spirit of God.”)

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Michael Dowdle’s guitar rendition of “The Spirit of God” underscores our next segment.

(Music: Michael Dowdle, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: It is interesting to note that the minutes of the dedication of the Kirtland Temple indicate that “The Spirit of God” may have been sung to the same tune as “Now Let Us Rejoice.” Two verses recorded in Emma Smith’s hymn book of 1835 have been omitted in modern Church hymnals: “We’ll wash and be washed, and with oil be anointed, withal not omitting the washing of feet; for he that receiveth his penny appointed, must surely be clean at the harvest of wheat. Old Israel that fled from the world for his freedom, must come with the cloud and the pillar amain; A Moses, and Aaron, and Joshua lead him, and feed him on manna from heaven again.”

(Music: Michael Dowdle, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: The somewhat obscure nature of these words and their lack of immediate application to the latter-day experiences makes the omission understandable but the powerful message of the hymn stands firmly without them. The present tune ASSEMBLY was first published in 1844 in a small hymnal for the use of missionaries in New England. It may have been an existing hymn tune; it may even have been HOSANNAH, the tune used at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. Research still leaves the details of its origin obscure.

(Music: Michael Dowdle, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: Today this magnificent hymn speaks to more than 13 million members in so many countries in 166 different languages. It has been sung by Saints at every one of the 130 temple dedications in this dispensation, which include five temples in the Salt Lake Valley alone and will soon embrace the temple to be raised in Japan.

(Music: Michael Dowdle, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Enoch Train’s African-inspired arrangement of “Assembly” follows.

(Music: Enoch Train, “Assembly”)

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Lex de Azevedo’s setting of “The Spirit of God” follows.

(Music: Lex de Azevedo, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: “The Spirit of God like a fire is burning” embodies the grand scope of knowledge and power which have come through the restoration of the priesthood keys and the doctrine of the kingdom in these latter days.

(Music: Lex de Azevedo, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: The hymn also embraces the intimate, sacred experience of each individual who accepts truth and loves truth, whose heart echoes the words of praise than can never dim.

(Music: Lex de Azevedo, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

NARRATOR: Hosanna, hosanna to God and the Lamb! Let glory to them in the highest be given, henceforth and forever, amen and amen.

(Music: Lex de Azevedo, “The Spirit of God” [instrumental])

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Larry Green’s classical guitar rendition of “Assembly,” the tune to which we sing “The Spirit of God” follows.

(Music: Larry Green, “Assembly” [instrumental])

[END MUSIC]