

Power and Protection Provided by Worthy Music

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It is a joy for my wife, Wendy, and me to be with you, my dear brothers and sisters. From the BYU Marriott Center in Utah, we are broadcasting to many congregations throughout the world. Thanks to each of you for being with us.

We extend a special welcome to those who will soon be finishing high school and are attending a CES fireside broadcast for the first time. As you enroll in institutions of higher learning and continue your education, I hope you will participate in institute classes so that you may have this strong spiritual resource to balance your secular learning. You will also have opportunities to attend future CES firesides such as this. Take advantage of those occasions. They will enlighten and encourage you.

The title of my message tonight is “Power and Protection Provided by Worthy Music.” This topic is especially applicable to young adults. As you know, people of your age have made many significant contributions as writers, composers, and connoisseurs of worthy music.

Power

The power of worthy music was felt tonight as we sang these words in our opening hymn:

*Come, ye children of the Lord,
Let us sing with one accord.
Let us raise a joyful strain
To our Lord who soon will reign.¹*

Through music we raised our voices in powerful praise and prayer.

Such a hymn provides a pattern of worship that is pleasing to God. His prophet taught us to “praise the Lord with singing, with music, . . . and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving” (D&C 136:28).

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Ogden Institute of Religion choir. Thank you, Brother Ritchie, Brother Simon, and members of the choir, for your magnificent music. It has not only honored the Lord, but it has also touched our hearts deeply.

As the choir sang “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” I was deeply moved. The message focuses on the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Written by the English poet Isaac Watts, those words bear repetition:

Russell M. Nelson was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was delivered on 4 May 2008.

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord! that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God:
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

.....

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.²*

Indeed, Isaac Watts did demand much from himself. In his lifetime he wrote approximately 600 hymns. Two of his most productive years were between his graduation from school at age 20 and his taking a job teaching when he was 22. At that young age many great hymns flowed from him. Lyrics by Isaac Watts in our book of hymns include, among others, “Joy to the World,” “Sweet Is the Work,” and “He Died! The Great Redeemer Died.”

Even as a small boy, Isaac Watts had poetic potential.

*Once, during family prayers, he began to laugh.
His father asked him why. [Isaac] replied that
he had heard a sound and opened his eyes to see
a mouse climbing a rope in a corner, and had
immediately thought,*

*A little mouse for want of stairs
ran up a rope to say its prayers.*

*His father thought this irreverent, and proceeded
to administer [physical] punishment, in the midst
of which Isaac called out,*

*Father, father, mercy take,
and I will no more verses make.³*

I would like to comment on another song in our hymnbook. The text of “How Great Thou Art” was first written by a young minister in Sweden. His name was Carl Gustav Boberg. He was only 25 years old. After attending a church meeting, he walked two miles along the southeastern coast of Sweden in a thunderstorm. The experience inspired him to write the words, which were later translated into English by Stuart K. Hine:

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy pow’r thru-out the universe displayed;
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,
How great thou art! How great thou art!⁴*

On one occasion I was in a mission conference when a missionary with great compassion, with tears in his eyes, asked me, “Why did the Savior have to suffer so much?” I reached for our hymnbook, turned to this song, and answered his question with this verse:

*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.⁵*

Jesus suffered so much because of His love for you and me. What a message! Worthy music is powerful. It has power to make us humble, prayerful, and grateful.

Prophets through all generations have taught the importance of worthy music in our expressions of worship. A few citations from the scriptures may serve to illustrate.

An Old Testament scripture bids us to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise” (Psalm 98:4). In the Hebrew language, those words literally mean to *burst* forth into song and to *shout* for joy. Contrast that spirit of enthusiasm with scenes we may see at church

when some sing only passively and without a spirit of joy.

A New Testament scripture counsels me and you to have a well of good music within:

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;

Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. [Ephesians 5:19–20]

Another New Testament verse says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you . . . ; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16).

From the New Testament we also learn that the Lord and His Apostles concluded the Last Supper with a hymn before leaving for the Mount of Olives (see Matthew 26:30). That tradition continues in our day. Each time members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles meet in the temple, we begin with a hymn. It sets a sweet, spiritual tone for our deliberations.

The Book of Mormon teaches that one’s desire to sing praises to the Lord comes with one’s complete conversion to Him. Alma asked this penetrating question:

I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now? [Alma 5:26]

Ammon later exclaimed:

Blessed be the name of our God; let us sing to his praise, yea, let us give thanks to his holy name, for he doth work righteousness forever. [Alma 26:8]

Complete conversion is the key to our experiencing God’s greatest blessings. In

the Doctrine and Covenants, we read this expression from the Lord:

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]

In the preface to our book of hymns, the First Presidency has provided this statement:

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.

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.

We hope to see an increase of hymn singing in our congregations. We encourage all members, whether musically inclined or not, to join with us in singing the hymns. We hope leaders, teachers, and members who are called upon to speak will turn often to the hymnbook to find sermons presented powerfully and beautifully in verse. . . .

. . . Latter-day Saints should fill their homes with the sound of worthy music. . . .

Hymns can also help us withstand the temptations of the adversary. We encourage you to memorize your favorite hymns and study the scriptures that relate to them. Then, if unworthy thoughts enter your mind, sing a hymn to yourself, crowding out the evil with the good.⁶

Worthy music also has the power to persuade. We learn this lesson from the writings of John Jaques. He was born in England in 1827, a son of Wesleyan Methodist parents. In his youth John earnestly sought the true religion. He studied intensively with Latter-day Saint missionaries and, at the age of 18, became

a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

John's austere father, upset upon hearing this news, wrote: "I wished you . . . to attend the Wesleyan Chapel. They [the Mormons] do not teach you . . . [to] honor and obey your parents. I . . . hope you will give up the idea of belonging to such a party. . . . It is fiction."

*John's reply, written March 14, 1847, when he was but twenty years of age, included these words: "Dear Father: I would pray . . . that I may understand the things of the Kingdom of God and carry my ideas to you. . . . Since I [joined the Church] my eyes have been opened, and I have been able to understand the truth. I can bear testimony to the truth . . . of the doctrines . . . in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."*⁷

Three years later, at age 23, John Jaques wrote the words to this hymn that we know and love:

*Oh say, what is truth? 'Tis the fairest gem
That the riches of worlds can produce,
And priceless the value of truth will be when
The proud monarch's costliest diadem
Is counted but dross and refuse.*

*Yes, say, what is truth? 'Tis the brightest prize
To which mortals or Gods can aspire.
Go search in the depths where it glittering lies,
Or ascend in pursuit to the loftiest skies:
'Tis an aim for the noblest desire.*

*The sceptre may fall from the despot's grasp
When with winds of stern justice he copes.
But the pillar of truth will endure to the last,
And its firm-rooted bulwarks outstand the rude blast
And the wreck of the fell tyrant's hopes.*

*Then say, what is truth? 'Tis the last and the first,
For the limits of time it steps o'er.
Tho the heavens depart and the earth's fountains
burst,*

*Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst,
Eternal, unchanged, evermore.*⁸

John stood firm in his conviction of the truth. He remained true and faithful and ultimately served as assistant to the Church historian from 1889 until his death on June 1, 1900.

Music has a sweet power to promote unity and love in the family. Not only is it an important component of family home evenings, but it can exert a continuing influence for good well beyond times when children are small. For my gift to the family last Christmas, I prepared a compact-disc recording of musical memories. I sat at the piano and recorded a variety of music that I had sung or played to the children through the years. They liked it. Some of the grandchildren told me that the CD was "cool."

To illustrate the enduring benefits of worthy music in the home, I have asked our available daughters to sing for you tonight. Since their childhood, they have enjoyed singing together.

Daughters, I'm going to introduce you. Perhaps each of you can wave to the congregation as I mention your name: Marsha Workman, Wendy Maxfield, Gloria Irion, Brenda Miles, Sylvia Webster, Julie Wittwer, Laurie Marsh, Rosalie Ringwood, and Marjorie Helsten.

Our son's wife, Britney, would like to have been here, but she is excused. She had a baby 11 days ago. Two other voices are missing—our deceased daughter, Emily, and her angel mother, Dantzel. Perhaps they are looking in from their windows in heaven. Our son, Russell, and I also enjoy singing with them, but we will not impose that upon you tonight.

To illustrate the multigenerational merits of worthy music in the home, our daughters will be accompanied by two of their daughters: Katie Irion Owens on the piano and Rachel Miles on the flute. They will sing and play for you "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee." After their music, I will resume my message.

[Elder Nelson's daughters and granddaughters sang and played "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee."]

Thank you so much, daughters and granddaughters. Wendy and I love you dearly, as do your husbands and your families.

Many of you folks will be able to influence music that is selected in Church services in the future. A few thoughts may be helpful to you. Remember, music has power to provide spiritual nourishment.⁹ It has healing power.¹⁰ It has power to facilitate worship; it allows us to contemplate the Atonement and the Restoration of the gospel with its saving principles and exalting ordinances. Music provides power for us to express prayerful thoughts and bear testimony of sacred truths.

Music has power to overcome language barriers. In my experience, some of the most moving congregational singing has been rendered in languages that are foreign to me. Yet it spoke strongly to my soul.

The purpose of music in our Church services is not for performance but for worship. Prayerfully selected compositions and excellent performances are appropriate in our worship services when and if members feel a spirit of worship and of revelation. Church music should be supportive of the Lord and His work and not attract attention to itself.

Protection

Worthy music not only has power, but it can also provide protection. For many years President Boyd K. Packer has taught this concept. He has often quoted another statement issued by the First Presidency many years ago:

*Music can be used to exalt and inspire or to carry messages of degradation and destruction. It is therefore important that as Latter-day Saints we at all times apply the principles of the gospel and seek the guidance of the Spirit in selecting the music with which we surround ourselves.*¹¹

Brethren and sisters, wherever we are, we should carefully choose what we see and hear. Some of you would not knowingly tolerate pornography in your homes, yet you would allow music into your lives that can be just as devastating.

Many youth listen to music that can be described as loud and fast, becoming louder and faster. It aims to agitate, not to pacify; to excite more than to calm. Beware of that kind of music.

As you know, continued exposure to loud sounds will, in time, damage delicate organs of hearing. In like manner, if you overindulge in loud music, you will more likely become spiritually deaf. You may not be able to hear the still, small voice. A scripture states:

The Lord your God . . . hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words. [1 Nephi 17:45]

Do not degrade yourself with the numbing shabbiness and irreverence of music that is not worthy of you. Delete the rubbish from your minds and your iPods. Protect your own personal standards! Be selective! Be wise!

Do not allow unworthy, raucous music to enter your life. It is *not* harmless. It can weaken your defense and allow unworthy thoughts into your mind and pave the way to unworthy acts. Please remember:

That which [does] not edify is not of God, and is darkness.

That which is of God is light. [D&C 50:23–24]

Dear brothers and sisters, please fill your minds with worthy sights and sounds. Cultivate your precious gift of the Holy Ghost. Protect it as the priceless gift that it is. Carefully listen for its quiet communication. You will be spiritually stronger if you do. You know the proverb "As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). As you control

your thoughts, you control your actions. Indeed, worthy music can provide power and protection for your soul.

For the closing hymn for our fireside tonight, the Ogden LDS Institute of Religion choir will sing “Our Prayer to Thee.”¹² I wrote the words to that song as my prayerful feelings for our Father in Heaven. Please receive this prayer as part of my testimony that God is our Father and that we are His children. I know that He lives. Jesus is the Christ and the Head of this Church that bears His holy name. Joseph Smith is the Prophet of this dispensation. President Thomas S. Monson is the Lord’s prophet on the earth at this time. I so testify and express my love and blessing for each of you, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “Come, Ye Children of the Lord,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 58.
2. B. B. McKinney, ed., *The Broadman Hymnal* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1940), no. 191.
3. “Isaac Watts, Hymn-Writer”; <http://elvis.rowan.edu/~kilroy/jek/11/25c.html>.
4. “How Great Thou Art,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 86; see footnote on the author’s original words in the hymnal.
5. *Hymns*, 1985, no. 86.
6. “First Presidency Preface,” *Hymns*, 1985, ix–x.
7. Russell M. Nelson, *The Power Within Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 90–91; see Stella Jaques Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jaques* (Rexburg, Idaho: Ricks College Press, 1978), 19–21.
8. “Oh Say, What Is Truth?” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 272.

9. See Jay E. Jensen, in *CR*, April 2007, 9–11; or “The Nourishing Power of Hymns,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 11–13.

10. See “The Healing Power of Hymns,” *Ensign*, April 2008, 66–69.

11. *Priesthood Bulletin*, August 1973; quoted in Boyd K. Packer, in *CR*, October 1973, 21; or “Inspiring Music—Worthy Thoughts,” *Ensign*, January 1974, 25.

12. In Russell M. Nelson, *CR*, April 2003, 7; or “Sweet Power of Prayer,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 9; both words and music are found inside back cover, *Ensign*, May 2003:

Our Prayer to Thee

*We pray to Thee, our Heav’nly Father,
With grateful hearts and fond emotion.
We thank Thee for our great Exemplar—
Thy beloved and atoning Son—
Who gave Himself as sacred ransom,
That we could live again with Thee!
Our joy is full, our song so gladsome;
Renew our faith and hope in Thee.*

*We pray to Thee, our Heav’nly Father,
With thankful hearts and adoration.
We thank Thee for our loving Savior,
Who redeemed us from death and sin;
He gave to us His truth to brighten
Our path, to help us walk His way,
To love and serve, to lift and lighten
The lives of all who will obey.*

*We pray to Thee, our Heav’nly Father,
With gratitude and deep devotion
For loving faith and endless splendor—
Eternal glory—bound as one!
We pray for mercy and forgiveness
And hope to know Thy holy will.
We yearn for Thee, we plead in meekness,
Thy trust in us may we fulfill.*