

## A Titanic Hymn

Throughout history certain songs have become connected to historical events. The best example of this is the hymn Nearer My God To Thee. The sinking of the Titanic is considered the greatest of all ocean catastrophes and this hymn has long been associated with the great lost. On that fateful night of April 15, 1912 1,595 souls would step into eternity as the gigantic ship was swallowed up by the Atlantic sea. The ship's band was topside on deck as the ship went down trying to calm the passengers with their playing. Survivors later reported that the last song from the band was the hymn Nearer My God To Thee. Could this be true?

Sarah and Eliza Adams were asked by their Unitarian pastor, Rev. William Johnson Fox, to aid him in the compiling of a new hymnal. The year was 1841 and the place was London, England. Soon the sisters were busily involved in this worthwhile project. As the completion of the hymnal drew nigh, the pastor remarked that he needed a hymn to conclude a sermon he was preparing. The pastor's message was based on Genesis 28:10-22, Jacob's ladder experience of angels ascending and descending out of heaven.

Sarah accepted the challenge and after studying the Genesis account for much time, she began to write. By the end of the day the five stanzas of "NEARER MY GOD TO THEE" were completed. The hymn would be included in the new hymnal for Fox's Unitarian congregation in London.

At first the hymn received a luke warm acceptance by Evangelical churches. It was criticized because there was no reference to the person and work of Christ. This was probably a result of Sarah's association with the Unitarian Church. There is evidence though, that shortly before her early death, at the age of forty-three, Sarah Adams had a conversion experience and joined a Baptist congregation in London. Today, the hymn is found in nearly every published hymnal and is loved by believers around the world.

Besides being a great hymn of the church, "NEARER MY GOD TO THEE" is also a great hymn of the movie screen because of its association with the sinking of the Titanic on April 15, 1912.

Once again the song would cause controversy because many in England pointed out that the tune was of American origin. Lowell Mason, the father of American church and school music had written the music in 1853 for American churches to use. The British went on to add that no respectable bandleader from Southampton would have played an American tune at such a pivotal hour.

Wallace Hartley, the ship's band leader, had remarked that he liked the hymn and had wished to have it played at his funeral. The version he referenced certainly would have been the English one since his father was a Methodist choirmaster there in England. I think the recollection of Harold Bride, the wireless operator, provides the answer to the mystery. He said that he heard the song *Songe d' Automne* being played as the ship went down. More than likely the Titanic legend came from the sinking of the S S Valencia six years earlier as these passengers did sing Nearer My God To Thee as their ship went down.

None the less the hymn "NEARER MY GOD TO THEE" has provided the comfort and the assurance that was needed when that final hour came, and today continues to do the same for those who are willing to trust in Christ and Him alone for a safe arrival in Heaven. In Psalm 23 we are reminded that our walk need not be alone. Ask in prayer and "NEARER MY GOD TO THEE" will be a living reality, not only for this life, but for all eternity to come.

Nearer, my God to Thee, nearer to Thee, E'en tho it be a cross that raiseth me; Still all my song shall be, Nearer my God to Thee.

Tho like a 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

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.

Then with my waking thoughts, Bright with Thy praise, Out of my stony griefs, Bethel I raise; So by my woes to be Nearer my God to Thee.

