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Mormonbasics.com is humbled to bring you a commentary on the hymns published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This commentary is presented in a two-column format. The original text, as presented in the hymnbook published by the LDS Church, is in the left column. The comments on the right are provided by mormonbasics.com. We have even changed the color of the text so there won't be any question as to who wrote what.

Personal note from the commentator:

The hymns of the Church are sacred text. The Lord has made it very clear to us through his prophets that the singing of hymns is a form of prayer, and as such is sacred communication. Much of the sacred Spirit and reverence we experience in our meetings, especially Sacrament Meeting, comes from the Spirit that accompanies the singing of the hymns.

The hymns are written in poetic form, and as such are able to take certain licenses and liberties with the English language that cannot normally be expressed in any other way. It is certainly not the aim of this commentary to improve on the beauty of the poetic expressions found in our sacred hymns. As a teacher of English to those who speak other languages, I have found that many of the hymns have expressions that are difficult for some people to understand.

Because hymns are written to fit a set rhythmic pattern or meter, often the expression has to be condensed to fit in a small space, but still convey its intended meaning. It is the combination of the rhythm, text, and music that create such a powerful Spiritual experience when singing the hymns. My attempts to explain some of the meaning behind the text should not detract from the original meaning, nor should it replace the original meaning. Hymns, like parables, take on different meanings as the circumstances of our lives change. My commentary is only a starting point for (hopefully) a better understanding of the overall meaning of the hymn in this work. Anyone else writing this same commentary would have different perspectives and points to make. That is the nature of a commentary. I pray that what I say will, in some way, help in your understanding of this hymn. Since this is a personal study of the hymns, I will sometimes use the first person when writing the commentary.

Kelly P. Merrill

The Wintry Day, Descending to Its Close

1. The wintry day, descending to its close,
 Invites all wearied nature to repose,
 And shades of night are falling dense and fast,
 Like sable curtains closing o'er the past.
 Pale through the gloom the newly fallen snow
 Wraps in a shroud the silent earth below
 As tho 'twere mercy's hand had spread the pall,
 A symbol of forgiveness unto all.

2. I cannot go to rest, but linger still
 In meditation at my windowsill,
 While, like the twinkling stars in heaven's dome,
 Come one by one sweet memories of home.
 And wouldst thou ask me where my fancy roves
 To reproduce the happy scenes it loves,
 Where hope and memory together dwell
 And paint the pictured beauties that I tell?

3. Away beyond the prairies of the West,
 Where exiled Saints in solitude were blest,
 Where industry the seal of wealth has set
 Amid the peaceful vales of Deseret,
 Unheeding still the fiercest blasts that blow,
 With tops encrusted by eternal snow,
 The tow'ring peaks that shield the tender sod
 Stand, types of freedom reared by nature's God.

4. The wilderness, that naught before would yield,
 Is now become a fertile, fruitful field.
 Where roamed at will the fearless Indian band,
 The templed cities of the Saints now stand.
 And sweet religion in its purity

This is a beautiful poem of deep and sincere reflection about the place in which the author lives, which is Utah. The language of this hymn is meant to conjure images of the season of winter, which is a season of rest from labor, and death, which whispers of new life to come.

As the wintry day is coming to its end (descending to its close) it acts like an invitation to all nature to rest (repose) from its labors. The shadows (shades) of the night are growing or intensifying quickly (falling dense and fast), like black (sable) curtains over the day (past). Softly (pale) through the darkness (gloom) the newly fallen snow lays a blanket on the silent earth like a shroud (a covering put over a dead person). It is as though it is the hand of Mercy herself that spreads this whiteness (pall), which is a symbol of cleansing, a symbol of forgiveness for all.

I am not able to sleep, so I stay a while longer in my thoughtful state by my window, while sweet memories come to my mind one by one like the stars that appear in the heavens in the evening. If you were to ask me where my thoughts wander (my fancy roves), they are showing me (reproduce) the happy times (scenes) in my life where my hopes and memories live together and paint for me beautiful pictures of my past.

My thoughts are beyond the prairies of the West, where the Saints who had been exiled, driven from their homes at last, by themselves (in solitude) were blessed (blest), where hard work (industry) the emblem (seal) of wealth has been placed in the middle (amid) the valleys (vales) of Deseret. (Deseret is the Book of Mormon word for the honey bee, the symbol of industry and hard work. Deseret was used by the Saints as the name for many things, including as a generic name for all of Utah where they lived.) The Saints were now living in the tops of the Rocky Mountains. The winters were fierce and harsh, hence the reference to the fiercest winds (blasts) that blow, and the eternal snow that caps some of the mountains. Did you know that Mt. Timpanogos has a glacier on the back side of it? It is one of the most southern glaciers in the whole hemisphere. These tall (towering) mountain tops (peaks) protect (shield) the fertile soil (tender sod) where the people who act as symbols of freedom are being raised by nature's God.

This wilderness, before the Saints arrived would not allow anyone to grow anything here (that naught [nothing] before would yield). But now it has become a fertile and a fruitful field. Once only the fearless Indians roamed here, but now there are cities of Saints with temples. The gospel of Christ (sweet religion in its purity) invites all men to come to its

Invites all men to its security.
There is my home, the spot I love so well,
Whose worth and beauty pen nor tongue can tell.

safety (security). This is where my home is, the spot I love so well, whose worth and beauty neither written nor spoken word can describe.

MUSIC

Edward P. Kimball, 1882-1937

TEXT

Orson F. Whitney, 1855-1931

SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 51:3, Isaiah 2:2-3