



Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. (James 1:17)

This is a most delightful hymn with a mild rebuke implied. What is the rebuke? It counsels us to lay greater store in the blessings we receive and less on the perceived shortcomings of life. How often do we wake up with a headache and feel somehow slighted by our Lord for it while, at the same time, we fail to give thanks for the blessing of thousands of mornings without the headache? Or how put out we are at the seeming slight of a friend who has done many wonderful favors for us for which we may have given no thanks. But the real Friend and Benefactor of our souls is constant in blessing and sparing with His chastisements. So we must be more aware of those marvelous blessings He places before us each day of a life that is, itself, a gift and blessing of our great Maker. We carry many burdens to God in prayer. Unfortunately, we are far more disposed to that prayer of need than of the prayer of thanksgiving. When was the last time (meals excepted) that you simply knelt and prayed a prayer of humble thanksgiving to God for His marvelous provision and the gloriousness of His Person?

To fully appreciate a work of art, we should know something of the artist and his disposition to paint. The same is true of this hymn. The author is Johnson Oatman of New Jersey who wrote the hymn in order to teach young people that it is impossible to be hateful, ill-natured, difficult with others, etc., when we are thankful to God. But those of the Kingdom of God are all young in heart compared with the Eternity that lies ahead; so Oatman's hymn applies to every heart reading this devotion. The music (of same name) was composed by Edwin O. Excell. But before further discussion, let us review about Oatman a bit more.

Oatman was born in New Jersey just before the War Between the States. His father owned a mercantile business at which he was very successful, but he also had a deep rich voice with which he praised and glorified God at Church by singing every Sunday. Johnson proudly stood beside his father each Sabbath day to hear that strong voice and to grow in his appreciation of the God of his father and the beauty of praise. Later, he stood by his father in his mercantile business as well and became successful in that business by his own right. He was ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church at age 19, but never entered the full time ministry. He preferred to raise support for himself and retain the freedom of preaching without cost (as did Paul the Apostle). In his mid-thirties, Johnson began to write hymns. The memory of his father's voice no doubt kindled the fire of his love of them. In all, Oatman wrote more than 5,000 hymns – enough to fill ten hymnals! Among his more famous hymns are, "Higher Ground," "No, Not One," "The Last Mile of the Way," and "Count Your Blessings!" (1897)

Count Your Blessings

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Refrain

Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,
And you will keep singing as the days go by.

Refrain

When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings. Wealth can never buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.

Refrain

So, amid the conflict whether great or small,
Do not be disheartened, God is over all;
Count your many blessings, angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.

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*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

Billows are a seaman's description of a great and building wave of the sea. But it has come to mean any such threatening emergence of fire, smoke or water that enfolds more and more on itself. It can also mean the spiritual billows of life itself. We are tossed about with many cares – most of which are imagined and not real. But many of the truest stock of Christ are truly tossed about on an endless sea of trouble, pain, and persecution. It is a great glory to suffer thusly for Christ's sake: ¹¹ *O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires.* ¹² *And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones.* ¹³ *And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children.* ¹⁴ *In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear: and from terror; for it shall not come*

near thee.” (Isaiah 54:11-14) When tossed about on that sea of doubt, look to heaven and recount those many times when God has blessed you without measure and how, even with affliction, we are blessed to suffer it for His sake. Do not simply consider that you are blessed, but remember every individual blessing that God has granted.

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

Actually, it is quite true that we will be surprised by the vast storehouse of blessings with which we have been gifted by God when we pause to consider them one-by-one. First, we are given life itself and a privilege to come into that life eternal that He offers. And we are given a heart to provide life-giving blood to our every organ, and to know God and to be that Temple of His. We are given loved ones and we are given love to return to them. Our daily bread has never once failed. The air, the trees, the green grass and flowers – all are freely given. We cannot reasonable count every blessing from God since there are so many that they defy number.

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,
And you will keep singing as the days go by.*

As we each carry the light cross of life that God has given, it may, at times, rub callouses on our shoulders and hands. We complain of the mild discomfort until we recall that rough-hewn and heavy cross that our Lord bore on the Via Dolorosa for us. His back was marked with many open stripes and wounds, His head bore a cross of sharp thorns, and He was spit upon and ridiculed before being ruthlessly nailed to that cross. Please try a little practice that has often brought sunny skies to my cloudy days: When you are discouraged, disappointed, and disparaged, try singing one of the old and great classical hymns of the church. You may find that your troubles are quickly forgotten and your grief is turned to joy.

*When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings. Wealth can never buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.*

When I was a young boy, I used to look at the very wealthy people with their homes built upon the mountain overlooking our little town. I envied them because I knew that their children did not want for every pleasing gift money could buy – great clothing, best bicycles, trips to exotic places, etc. As I got to know some of those people, I discovered that many were among the unhappiest people on earth. Having all that money could buy, they were unsatisfied for there was nothing left for them to want. They had no idea that there was a greater and grander spiritual wealth that lay before them for the asking.

*So, amid the conflict whether great or small,
Do not be disheartened, God is over all;
Count your many blessings, angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.*

When the booming guns of the battlefield are at their highest pitch, and the smoke and confusion of battle is at its worst in life, do not look back at the trenches of

security from which the line sprung; but look forward and up to that blue, white, and scarlet banner that floats at the leading edge of the battlefield. It is held aloft by one who dares the enemy to take it. God has a glorious flag as well that precedes His soldiers into battle. It is an Ensign that beckons the weary to rally and not faint – our Lord Jesus Christ is that Ensign that was lifted up for us at Calvary. Read this proclamation from Isaiah and be encouraged: *26 And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly: 27 None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken: 28 Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind: 29 Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions.* (Isaiah 5:26-29) Victory has already been declared for the people of God – fear not: *16 And the LORD their God shall save them in that day as the flock of his people: for they shall be as the stones of a crown, lifted up as an ensign upon his land.* (Zech 9:16) The fading and desultory fires of the enemy shall echo less and less as the trumpet notes of the Lord are more resoundingly heralded in the ears of the saints.