

~Other Speakers G-L: Hymn Stories:

Author --Elizabeth P. Prentiss, 1818-1878

Composer --William H. Doane, 1832-1915

Tune Name --"More Love to Thee"

"And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ." Philippians 1:9, 10

Mrs. Elizabeth Payson Prentiss, born in Portland, Maine, on October 26, 1818, was known throughout her life as a saintly woman, who continually practiced the presence of Christ. Those who knew her best described her as "a very, bright-eyed, little woman, with a keen sense of humor, who cared more to shine in her own happy household than in a wide circle of society. " Though Elizabeth was strong in spirit, she was frail in body. Throughout her life she was a near invalid, scarcely knowing a moment free of pain. She once wrote these words:

"I see now that to live for God, whether one is allowed ability to be actively useful or not, is a great thing, and that it is a wonderful mercy to be allowed even to suffer, if thereby one can glorify Him."

On another occasion she wrote:

"To love Christ more is the deepest need, the constant cry of my soul ... out in the woods, and on my bed, and out driving, when I am happy and busy, and when I am sad and idle, the whisper keeps going up for more love, more love, more love!"

Early in life, Elizabeth demonstrated a gift for writing both prose and poetry. At the age of sixteen, she became a contributor to the Youth's Companion, a magazine of high spiritual and literary standards. After a period of teaching school in Massachusetts and Virginia, in 1845, she married Dr. George L. Prentiss, a Presbyterian minister, who later became a professor of Homiletics and Polity at Union Theological Seminary. Mrs. Prentiss continued to write and publish her literary works, and one of her books, Stepping Heavenward, sold over 200,000 copies in the United States alone.

"More Love to Thee" was written by Mrs. Prentiss during a time of great personal sorrow. While ministering to a church in New York City during the 1850's, the Prentiss' lost a child, and then a short time later their youngest child also died. For weeks, Elizabeth was inconsolable, and in her diary she wrote, "Empty hands, a worn-out, exhausted body, and unutterable longings to flee from a world that has so many sharp experiences." From her broken heart came this touching poem:

I thought that prattling boys and girls
Would fill this empty room;
That my rich heart would gather flowers
From childhood's opening bloom:
One child and two green graves are mine,
This is God's gift to me;
A bleeding, fainting, broken heart,
This is my gift to Thee."

During this period of grief, Mrs. Prentiss began meditating upon the story of Jacob in the Old Testament, and how God met him in a very special way during his moments of sorrow and deepest need. She prayed earnestly that she too might have a similar experience. She also thought about Sarah Adams' hymn text, "Nearer, My God, to Thee" (See 101 Hymn Stories, No. 61). While she thus meditated and prayed, she began writing her own lines in almost the same metrical pattern that Sarah Adams had used in writing her poetic version of Jacob at Bethel. Mrs. Prentiss completed all four stanzas that same evening; but evidently she did not think very highly of her work, for she never showed the poem to anyone, not even her husband, for the next thirteen years. The poem was first printed in leaflet form, in 1869, and later appeared in the hymnal, Songs of Devotion. This hymn has since been translated into many languages, including Arabic and Chinese, indicating that it is a universal response from sincere believers around the world. Mrs. Elizabeth Prentiss died on August 13, 1878, at her summer home in Dorset, Vermont.

The composer of the music, William Howard Doane, was a successful businessman who wrote more than 2,000 gospel song tunes, but always as an avocation. He was Fanny Crosby's principal collaborator in writing gospel music, contributing music for such well-known hymn texts as: "Rescue the Perishing," (101 Hymn Stories, No. 76), "Pass Me Not," "I Am Thine, O Lord," "Near the Cross," "To God Be the Glory," and also the music for Lydia Baxter's hymn text, "Take the Name of Jesus With You" (No. 84). Mr. Doane left a fortune in trust, which has been used in many philanthropic causes, including the construction of Doane Memorial Music Building at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

William H. Doane composed this music especially for Mrs. Prentiss' text and included it in his hymnal, Songs of Devotion, published in 1870.

"We are not to make the ideas of contentment and aspiration quarrel, for God made them fast friends ... A man may aspire, and yet be quite content until it is time to rise; and both flying and resting are but parts of one contentment. The very fruit of the gospel is aspiration. It is to the heart what spring is to the earth, making every root, and bud, and bough desire to be more." --Henry Ward Beecher

"Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost,
Taught by Thee, we covet most,
Of Thy gifts at Pentecost,
Holy, heavenly love.

"Love is kind, and suffers long,
Love is meek, and thinks no wrong,
Love than death itself more strong;
Therefore give us love.

"Faith and hope and love we see,
Joining hand in hand, agree;
But the greatest of the three,
And the best, is love."
--Christopher Wordsworth