

Count Your Blessings!

Intro: This is Johnson Oatman, Jr. He was one of the most prolific gospel song writers of the 19th and early 20th century. Oatman was born in NJ in 1856. He was the son of a businessman who was engaged in the mercantile trade. He joined with his father in business for many years. Later after his father's death he would head a large insurance company. Though engaged successfully in secular work he also had spiritual interests. He joined the Methodist Episcopal church at the age of 19 and studied to become a Methodist preacher and was apparently used by various churches as needed.

As a boy Johnson loved to sit near his father who is said to have had a deep and rich singing voice. However not being able to sing like his father, Oatman beginning about 1892, when he was 36 years old, started writing hymns for others to sing. His poems proved highly successful as texts for gospel songs. Over his lifetime he would write over 5000 hymn texts that were put to music by others. You will recognize many of those songs: "Higher Ground," "No, Not One," "Hand In Hand With Jesus," "Sweeter Than All," "The Last Mile Of The Way," "What Shall It Profit A Man?", "I'll Be a Friend to Jesus," But tonight let's consider what many would consider his best poem. It was written in 1896-97.

In that year Oatman wrote a spiritual song that urged others to live a life of gratitude for God's blessings in their lives and which sought to communicate the practical benefits of a life of thanksgiving. You'll immediately recognize the words of its refrain:

"Count your blessings, name them one by one, count your blessings see what God hath, count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."

The music to Oatman's poem was written by Edwin .O. Excell. The song was first published in a volume of songs for young people; and surely they need to be taught the importance of gratitude. But "count your blessings" teaches a message that those of us who are older need as well.

We need to count our blessings!

Though the Scriptures never use the expression "count your blessings," the principle of counting our blessings is surely biblical.

We are a blessed people!

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Ephesians 1:3)

We are urged in Scripture to acknowledge God as the source of our blessings.

"Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow." (James 1:17)

God gives only good gifts. Everything good in this world comes from God. If it did not come from God, it is not good. If it comes from God, it must be good, even if we do not see the goodness in it immediately.. The way God gives is good. We can translate the second clause “and every act of giving.” The value of a gift can be diminished by the way it is given to us. But when God gives us a blessing, He does it in a loving, gracious manner. What He gives and how He gives are both good.

He gives constantly. “Cometh down” is a present participle: “it keeps on coming down.” God does not give occasionally; He gives constantly. Even when we do not see His gifts, He is sending them. He gives consistently. There are no shadows with the Father of Lights. It is impossible for God to change. He cannot change for the worse because He is holy; He cannot change for the better because He is already perfect

We need to honor God by giving thanks for our blessings.

To the shame of the Gentiles Paul wrote:

“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” (Romans 1:21)

In contrast God’s people are constantly exhorted to be grateful:

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (Colossians 3:15–17)

What strikes me especially about Oatman’s song about our blessings is the exhortation to “count them” and “name them one by one.” The idea is not to know how many with numerical precision, but rather to enumerate them so that the abundance of them is impressed upon our minds.

It is interesting to note the difference in the way our prayers may change with age. When a little person prays, he may say something like “thank you for Mommie, for Daddie, for naming every family member and maybe even the family dog. Then there is a list of other things that are likewise named in detail. But by the time we get older, our prayers become quite generic, “Thank you for our many blessings.” In a sense we quit counting or enumerating them. But is there not some value in naming them? In counting them? Doesn’t that in some way train us to think more comprehensively about what God is doing in our lives? It’s worth thinking about.

Four Practical Benefits from Counting Our Blessings

It is good for each of us periodically to take time to rediscover the simple but profound truths expressed by Oatman in the four stanzas of this hymn. In the first verse he affirms that counting our blessings serves as an antidote for life's discouragement.

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. Oatman likens our life to a ship on the sea where the waves not merely gently propel us along but rather toss us about as in a tempest or storm. We may feel a bit “seasick” by the unpleasant things life may bring. In addition life surely has its moments of discouragement in which we may think “all is lost.” It would likely be the time when we are least inclined to give thanks, but rather instead to murmur and complain to others.

Yet this would be a really good time to “*count our blessings, naming them one by one*” By counting our blessings we realize that “all is not lost,” and that God has done so much for us even in those times when we are discouraged by life's problems.

Consider Paul's words to the Philippians:

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6–7)

There is wisdom in Oatman's exhortation. In times of trouble we become quite narrow-minded in our perspective. We get focused on the bad and forget about the good in our lives. Thanksgiving adds proper perspective to life. It corrects our pessimism and negativity about life. It makes us aware of God's graciousness toward us.

Consider Paul's words to the Thessalonians:

“pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18)

In the second verse he affirms that counting our blessings will strengthen our faith and enhance our joy.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care? Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear? Count your many blessings—ev'ry doubt will fly, and you will be singing as the days go by.

Indeed Paul said:

“For each one shall bear his own load.” (Galatians 6:5)

And Jesus said we have a cross to bear.

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (Matthew 16:24)

Surely every person can think of times when we have been burdened with a load of care and when the cross we carry has seemed too heavy for us. But again counting our blessings reminds us that we can trust our needs to God.

“And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:19)

And He promises to give us strength to bear up under the load.

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.” (1 Peter 5:10)

As a result doubt is replaced with faith, complaining is replaced with singing.

The third stanza of this hymn teaches us that counting our blessings can be a means of placing material possessions in proper perspective when compared to the eternal inheritance awaiting believers.

When you look at others with their lands and gold, think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold; count your many blessings—money cannot buy your reward in heaven nor your home on high.

Like Asaph we can be tempted to envy the wicked in their prosperity:

“For I was envious of the arrogant, As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” (Psalm 73:3)

What he came to see is that the wicked are destined for destruction and that he enjoyed spiritual blessings of incomparable value.

It is why Jesus said:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;” (Matthew 6:19–20)

Peter reminds us of our inheritance:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” (1 Peter 1:3–4)

No matter how rich someone is, he does not have enough money to buy this inheritance which is freely given to all who believe.

In the fourth verse we are reminded that God is in control and that we will have His help and comfort as long as we live.

So amid the conflict, whether great or small, do not be discouraged. God is over all; count your many blessings—angels will attend, help and comfort give you to your journey’s end.

While life can be filled with many conflicts, we can be assured that God is still on His throne and that His angels await His instruction to serve His saints.

“Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14)

We can access God’s help and comfort through prayer.

“Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

Conclusion: For the Christian, gratitude should be a life attitude. Each of us could spare ourselves much despair and inner tension if we would only learn to apply the practical teaching of this hymn to our daily living.