The story of . . .

ONWARD, CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS

“Fight the good fight of the faith.” 1 Timothy 6:12

Words: Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924)
Music: Arthur S. Sullivan (1842-1900)

Have you ever tried writing a hymn? How would you begin? Perhaps you would first consider a topic for your hymn like Christmas, or family, or prayer. Next you would have to begin writing your poetry so each line of every stanza had the correct number of syllables. If you want it to rhyme, you must carefully choose your words. Many hymn writers change their lyrics again and again until the words say exactly what the writer wants them to. When you are finished with the text, you can then begin working on the melody. There are some writers who write the words to a melody they already have, or who write both the words and the melody at the same time. You want your hymn to be something that people will enjoy singing, and that will be remembered.

Rev. Baring-Gould was born in England, in 1834. His father worked for the East India Trading Company, but because of ill health he was forced to retire and spent his later years traveling with his family. That meant that Sabine spent year after year traveling from one place to another. Finally, when he was old enough, he went to college to become a teacher. His students remembered him because he often came to class with a live pet bat on his shoulder.

Mr. Baring-Gould loved to write. He wrote over 100 books plus many poems and hymns. Mr. Baring-Gould also loved to teach Sunday school to his church children. One year at Pentecost, a neighboring church in Yorkshire invited his Sunday school class to come to their church festival. To make the short trip more interesting, Mr. Baring-Gould hoped to teach his children a traveling song, but he could find nothing. Finally, he decided to sit down and write his own hiking hymn. He wanted to make the song sound as if the children were soldiers going to battle against Satan, so his first line began, “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.”

Mr. Baring-Gould later said about writing this now famous hymn, “I wanted the children to sing when marching from one village to the other, but couldn’t find anything quite suitable, so I sat up at night resolved to write something myself. ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’ was the result. It was written in great haste, and I’m afraid some of the rhymes are faulty. Certainly nothing has surprised me more than its popularity.” The melody Mr. Baring-Gould wrote didn’t last too long, for a few years after he wrote the hymn, Mr. Arthur Sullivan—also a great musician—wrote his own melody to the song which we still enjoy singing today.

What a wonderful hymn Mr. Baring-Gould wrote that shows how we should stand up to fight our battles against Satan wearing the full armor of God. He clearly shows us that all our strength comes from our royal Master. As you sing the hymn, place yourself on that path to Yorkshire singing the hymn with the rest of your Christian soldier friends. Also notice that stanzas two and four are often not included in most hymnbooks.
Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before.
Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe;
Forward into battle see His banners go!

Refrain
Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before.

* At the sign of triumph Satan’s host doth flee;
On then, Christian soldiers, on to victory!
Hell’s foundations quiver at the shout of praise;
Brothers lift your voices, loud your anthems raise.

Refrain

Like a mighty army moves the church of God;
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.
We are not divided, all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

Refrain

* What the saints established that I hold for true.
What the saints believed, that I believe too.
Long as earth endureth, men the faith will hold,
Kingdoms, nations, empires, in destruction rolled.

Refrain

Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,
But the church of Jesus constant will remain.
Gates of hell can never ‘gainst that church prevail;
We have Christ’s own promise, and that cannot fail.

Refrain

Onward then, ye people, join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices in the triumph song.
Glory, laud and honor unto Christ the King,
This through countless ages men and angels sing.

Refrain

1. Why is the cross of Jesus such an important symbol for us?
2. Who is the foe?
3. Why did armies take banners into battle with them?
4. Why does the devil hate our songs of praise?
5. Who makes up the church of God?
6. Who are the saints? How do we walk their paths?
7. What is doctrine? Why is it important that our doctrine be pure?
8. The Apostles’ Creed shows us what the saints believed.
9. Why will the church of Jesus remain forever?
11. How can we get others to join us in this song?
12. How can we say that when we sing this song we are really singing with all the saints who have gone on before us?
13. Find some parts in this hymn that remind you of Mr. Baring-Gould traveling with his students.
14. How can this song make us feel that we are not alone in fighting our battles?
15. What kind of armor should God’s army wear? See Eph. 6:10-17.
16. Memorize the first and last stanzas and one in between.

* Not included in most hymn books today.

Your Project . . .
Make a drawing showing the armor of the Christian as mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-17.