

My Loved Ones:

James M. Black was a gifted song leader in his church and one who loved poetry. In his hometown of Williamsport, PA, he was running out of time, and decided to take a short cut to the town post office, but the short-cut went down an alley of utter poverty and misery. This spur of the moment decision changed him and English gospel songs.

As he walked down the alley, he came across a ramshackle house with a young girl sweeping the porch. She was dressed so poorly, and in her face were already lines of worry and neglect; her father was a drunk and abusive. Jim asked her if she went to church anywhere. She said that she'd like to, but felt bad that she didn't have anything decent to wear. He immediately contacted the church, and they gathered lots of clothes to match little Bessie's desires.

At this particular church, she attended Sunday School, which had a roll in which names were called at the beginning of the Sunday School hour for each class. Bessie never missed a meeting for a number of months. One day, though, she didn't respond when her name was called. Bessie's name was called again with no response. This was totally unlike her. Maybe her drunken father had forbidden her to come or had beaten her again. After church, Jim hurried to Bessie's house. When he arrived, he found a very sick girl. Jim called a doctor, who diagnosed with acute double pneumonia.

In walking back to his house, Jim couldn't shake the feeling he had when Bessie didn't answer the call at Sunday School that morning. The thought came to him that how much more terrible of a feeling it would be if people aren't able to answer the roll call of the Lamb's Book of Life: if their name was not written in it. That evening, he tried to find a song to express his thoughts, but there was none. So, he wrote one: the words came immediately to mind, and then he sat down at the piano and wrote the music. Four days later, Bessie went home to Heaven to answer her roll call. The song was first sung publicly at her funeral, in which Jim told the circumstances surrounding the writing of the song. It had a huge effect upon the large audience. The Lord took Bessie home, but in her place, He had given a song to keep reminding people to be ready for that great roll-call day.

Of course, you know the song as "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder, I'll Be There."
May we all be ready for that trumpet of the Lord to sound!

We love you and are praying for you today.