"WHEN I SURVEY THE WONDROUS CROSS"

HYMN HISTORY

COMPOSITION

- **Text** – Isaac Watts, 1648-1748
- **Tune Origin ("Hamburg")** – Traditional Gregorian Chant
- **Tune Arrangement** – Lowell Mason, 1792-1872

BIOGRAPHY OF ISAAC WATTS

Beginnings

- Born 1674 in Southhampton, England, as the first of 9 children to Isaac Watts (Sr.)
- Watts, Sr., was a deacon in a Congregational Church.
  - Jailed twice for his non-conformist beliefs and refusal to attend Anglican services
  - Jailed during the birth of his son, Isaac
  - His wife nursed the newborn on the steps of the jailhouse so Watts, Sr. could hear his son's voice.
- Bright young student
  - Studied at King Edward VI School
  - Learned Latin at age 5, Greek at 9, French at 11, Hebrew at 13
  - Chose to study French so he could talk with French refugees who had become neighbors
- Began writing poetic lines while still young
  - Reprimanded one day for keeping his eyes open during prayer, he responded with a poetic line:

    A little mouse for want of stairs
    Ran up a rope to say its prayers

  - Though corporally disciplined for this, he responded:

    O father, father, pity take
    And I will no more verses make

  - Fortunately, he did not keep that fictive promise.
  - Wrote over 750 poems, songs, and psalm adaptations

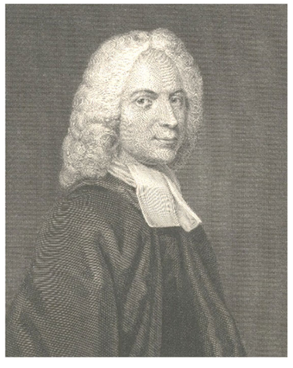
Ministerial Training

- Wealthy townsfolk offered to pay his way through Oxford or Cambridge. But to study at those schools, Watts would have to become Anglican which he refused.
- Instead, he went to Dissenter's Academy (London) at age 16 where he took collegiate ministerial training.

Pastoral Ministry

- After college Watts became pastor of Mark Lane Independent Chapel (London), a leading Congregational church.
- He would pastor the congregation for 46 years, even as it changed locations twice.
  - There he helped to train others for ministry regardless of their denominational affiliation.
  - Watts was a Protestant ecumenist, willing to work across denominational lines.
- He remained a committed non-conformist throughout his life, refusing to require the enforcement of creeds.

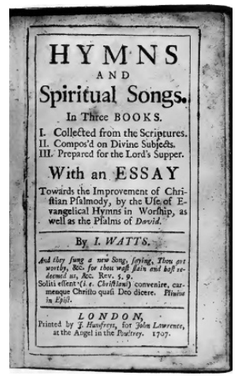
Personal Life



- Watts suffered from poor health throughout his life.
  - His nerves were shot and he suffered from insomnia.
  - He stood only 5 feet tall and was very thin and pale. Portraits often render him in flowing robes to bulk him up.
  - He required an assistant throughout his ministry.
- Watts never married, though he did propose to a Miss Elizabeth Singer.
  - She apparently could not get past his homeliness.
  - A biographer noted, "Though she loved the jewel, she could not admire the casket [case] which contained it."

Literary Output

- He is most well-known for his poems and hymns, and earned the nickname, "The Father of English Hymnody."
- His love for writing music stemmed from his disdain for the state of church music in his day.
  - English Protestant churches followed Calvin's regulatory principle which only allowed psalm singing.
    - The psalms were rendered into English poetry (often poorly) and moaned by the congregation.
    - In Watts's childhood church, a deacon would read a line & the congregation droned it in reply.
  - Watts complained about this from his childhood.
    - His sympathetic but slightly annoyed father urged him one Sunday to come up with something better.
    - Before the evening service, he had written his first hymn, "Behold the Glories of the Lamb."
    - Over the span of two years, he wrote a new song every week, and they were enthusiastically received.
    - Within Congregational churches his music caught on quickly and dominated their worship for the better part of a century.
  - He greatly influenced other English musicians who followed in his train over the next couple centuries.


HYMNS
AND
Spiritual Songs.
In Three BOOKS.
I. Collected from the Scriptures.
II. Compos'd on Divine Subjects.
III. Prepared for the Lord's Supper.
With an ESSAY
Towards the Improvement of Christian Psalmody, by the Use of Evangelical Hymns in Worship, as well as the Psalms of David.
By I. WATTS.
LONDON,
Printed by J. Humfreys, for John Lawrence, at the Angel in the Poultrey. 1707.

- His first songbook wasn't published until 1707, the same year he wrote, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."
- Other well-known hymns of Watts which continue to be sung today include:
  - Joy to the World
  - O God, Our Help in Ages Past
  - Am I a Soldier of the Cross?
  - Jesus Shall Reign (Premillennial)
  - I Sing the Mighty Power of God (children's hymn)

- Watts was also an accomplished academic writer.
  - Before his pastorate began, he published works on astronomy, science, logic, and philosophy.
  - His work on logic served as a standard text at Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, and Harvard for a century.
- Later in life wrote treatises on various topics, including issues of theology.
  - It was these writings that drew him into the most heated controversies of his life.
  - While he never abandoned trinitarianism, his articulation of the doctrine generated conflict.

Controversies

- Watts's musicology was criticized heavily in his day.
  - His songs were viewed as too experiential.
  - His detractors often sarcastically called his songs, "Watts's Whims" (instead of "hymns").
- Not only were his songs disliked by traditionalists, but his adaptations of the Psalms were deemed too expansive.
  - Watts noted that exclusive psalmody resulted in Christians not singing about Christian realities.
  - Thus he made applicational paraphrases of the Pss.
  - He argued, "They ought to be translated in such a manner as we have reason to believe David would have composed them if he had lived in our day."
- Some of his psalm renderings only very loosely resemble the psalms themselves.
  - "Joy to the World" is his rendering of Psalm 98.
  - "Jesus Shall Reign" is his rendering of Psalm 72.
  - "O God Our Help in Ages Past" is from Psalm 90.

- His greatest controversies revolved around the Trinity.
  - In his discussions of the Trinity (which he affirmed), Watts used experimental language, partly in an effort to win over Arians and Socinians.
  - As a non-conformist, he did not feel obligated to maintain the wording of creeds and confessions.
  - Critics accused him of innovation in his theology just as he had been innovative with church music.
- After Watts's death, a leading Unitarian scholar claimed Watts was a late-in-life convert to Unitarianism.
  - This claim was proven false in the 1800's as more of Watts's last writings were uncovered.
  - The trinitarianism in Watts's hymns is unimpeachable.

BACKGROUD TO THE HYMN

- Considered by some the greatest hymn in English
- Written in 1707 for a communion service, it was originally entitled, "Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ."
- Published in *Hymns & Spiritual Songs*, his first hymnal.
- The most common tune used in America is "Hamburg."
  - Arranged in 1824 by Lowell Mason, "The Father of American Public School & Church Music"
  - Adapted from a Gregorian chant "in the first tone."
    - Being derived from a Gregorian chant, pitch changes never jump more than a full step.
    - Only 5 notes are intoned in the entire melody.
- The tune more often used in Great Britain and Ireland is "Rockingham." Several other tunes fit the text, as well.

TEXT

Stanza 1
When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Stanza 2
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God.
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

Stanza 3
See from His head, His hands, His feet;
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did ere such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Stanza 4
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

EXPLICATION

Whole Song

- This song is strong in its experiential expression, containing 11 first-person pronouns.
- In Watts's day experiential songs like these were called, "hymns of human composure."
  - They were often criticized as being man-centered.
  - But Watts is mimicking the Psalms in their very notable uses of first-person references.
  - The song is clearly Christocentric.

Stanza One

- Watts imagines himself present at the crucifixion, but he does not yet reflect on the darkness of the event.
- Here he speaks in terms of wonder and glory and value.
- Pondering the costly exchange of the "Prince of glory" sacrificed for himself, he sees all possessions and achievements as loss and contemptible.
- The last two lines echo Phil. 3:8-10 and Gal. 6:14.

Stanza Two

- The language here derives more directly from Gal. 6:14.
- Whereas Stanza 1 was a statement of reflection, Stanza 2 is a prayer of dedication and commitment.
- Watts addresses the Father in expressing loyalty to Christ.

Stanza Three

- This stanza turns to the language of directed reflection as he counsels others to behold the sight with him.
- The focus is fully on Christ with no first-person mentions.
- Describing the agony of the cross, Watts sees an ironic glory in it, perceiving the value of Christ's sufferings.

Stanza Four

- The language returns to dedication though it is unclear whether these words are intended as prayer or testimony.
- No gift of gratitude can match the work of Christ. Even if Watts could give Christ all creation, it would not suffice.
- Watts confesses Christ is worthy of his all-out devotion.

YouTube Recordings

Hymns of Grace

Grace Church

Classic Hymns

(Rockingham)