

## The Music Herald

*“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”*

*Colossians 3:16*

### Songs Before Unknown

The name Isaac Watts is known the world over. His more than 600 hymns can be found around the globe wherever Christians are found singing and giving praise to their Lord.

But at his birth, few would have guessed that this would be his destiny. Isaac was born a tiny, premature baby on July 17, 1674, in Southampton, England. At the time, his father, a clothier and a deacon at Above Bar Congregational Church, was in prison for dissenting from the established church of England and clinging instead to the simple worship described in Scripture. Isaac's mother brought the baby often to the prison, sitting for hours on a hard stone outside the gate so that her husband could lay eyes on his firstborn of what would be nine children.

In God's goodness, this imprisonment did not last long, but his father's early and continued example of firm conviction and loyalty to Scripture made a lasting impression upon young Isaac. He would later write a hymn, perhaps inspired by his father's example:

*I'm not ashamed to own my Lord  
Or to defend his cause.*

As the baby grew, it became apparent to all that he was no ordinary child. He seemed especially gifted with words and language. Even before he could speak plainly, the tiny child would cry out, *“A book! A book! Buy a book!”* He devoured books, and by the age of five, he had learned the Latin language.

Soon he had developed a habit of speaking everyday speech in the form of rhymed verse. One night, during family prayers, the lad caught sight of a mouse climbing up a bell rope beside the fireplace. When the prayers ended, he burst out with:

*A mouse, for want of better stairs,  
Ran up a rope to say his prayers.*

On another occasion, he had been rhyming so much in conversation that his father began to reprimand him. The quick-witted boy replied:

*Oh, Father, do some pity take,  
And I will no more verses make.*

But his verses were not all light-hearted. The Lord did a work of grace in his young heart, and at the tender age of seven, he wrote a very serious poem testifying of his own utter corruption and God's unmerited grace to him. Taking his own name as an acrostic, he wrote:

*I am a vile, polluted lump of earth  
So I've continued ever since my birth  
Although Jehovah, grace doth daily give me  
As sure this monster, Satan, will deceive me  
Come therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me  
Wash me in Thy blood, O Christ  
And grace divine impart  
Then search and try the corners of my heart  
That I in all things may be fit to do  
Service to Thee, and Thy praise too.*

Writing of himself as a *“vile, polluted lump of earth,”* he already acknowledged the corruption that he would later testify of in the famous line of his hymn, *“such a worm as I.”* Little did young Isaac Watts know how the Lord would answer that prayer and transform that *“polluted lump”* and fit him to do *“service to Thee, and Thy praise too”* in a remarkable way.

His progress continued. By the age of nine, Isaac had learned the Greek language; by eleven, the French language; and by thirteen, the Hebrew language. The learning of the Biblical languages would especially serve him well, for his later hymns demonstrate a level of understanding of the text of Scripture that can be had only through understanding its original tongues.

At the age of fifteen, Isaac was smitten with smallpox, which left him scarred for life. Short and having a large head, prominent nose, and tallowy skin, he was regarded as singularly unattractive. It was no doubt a blow to Isaac Watts that when he proposed marriage to Elizabeth Singer, his physical appearance alone stood in the way. She replied, *“I admire the jewel, but I cannot accept the casket [jewel chest].”* He was consequently to remain unmarried.

Yet it seems that the Lord sometimes in this way sets apart a chosen vessel for His service, in order to magnify His own name. It would certainly not be Watts' physical appearance that would earn him a name in history but the work of God's grace within him, the jewel within the casket. Perhaps it was through this trial that he learned to say such words as:

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,  
Save in the death of Christ my God.*

After recovering from smallpox, the brilliant student was given the offer by a benefactor of having a fully paid education at Oxford. It seemed like the opportunity of a lifetime. But though he desired learning, it was not Isaac's chief desire; there was something dearer to his heart. In order to go to Oxford, he would have to become an Anglican and deny his convictions as a dissenter, the convictions for which his father had endured imprisonment and his mother hardship when he was an infant. He would not and chose instead to go to a dissenters' school in Stoke Newington, London.

After receiving his education from that school, Isaac returned home at the age of nineteen. It was then that he began expressing to his father his concerns over the state of singing in churches. The tunes sung were almost unrecognizable due to their being sung at a very slow tempo, with much embellishment, and with interruption between each line so that the next line could first be read by the leader before it was sung. Watts voiced his concerns in this paragraph:

*“While we sing the praises of God in His Church,  
we are employed in that part of worship which of all others is the nearest akin to heaven and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon earth . . .  
That very action which should elevate us to the most de-*

lightful and divine sensations doth not only flat our devotion, but too often awakens our regret and touches all the springs of uneasiness within us.”

Watts was also concerned that the texts sung in churches were becoming stale. Over the centuries, there has been much debate among Christians over the use of Psalms and hymns in worship. Good men have argued on both sides, some for Psalms exclusively and some for both Psalms and hymns. We are not attempting to settle that question here, only to say that it was a very real and often-debated question in Watts' day and even continues so today. Watts was of the opinion that Scripture did not require Psalms exclusively, but that it sanctioned the singing of hymns. He sought to see that carried out, as well as the improvement of singing in general.

He and his father talked much on these subjects, and one day as they walked home from church together, his father challenged him to write something better to sing. The nineteen-year-old accepted the challenge, turned to Revelation 5, and produced his first hymn,

“Behold the Glories of the Lamb.” This hymn almost seems to speak prophetically of Watts' own future of hymn writing:

*Prepare new honors for His Name,  
And songs before unknown.*

This hymn was presented to the church the following Sunday and was received with sincere and unfeigned pleasure. Indeed the congregation so loved Watts' work that they asked the young deacon's son to write a new hymn for them every week. This he did for two years.

While it would be easy to become heady over such popularity, Watts gives us a glimpse into his own humility and singleness of purpose, when he says, “I have made no pretense to be a poet. But to the Lamb that was slain, and now lives, I have addressed many a song, to be sung by the penitent and believing heart.”

At the end of those two years, Watts was called away to London to tutor the children of a dissenting family there. There he began attending the dissenting church

## Behold the Glories of the Lamb

This is Watts' first hymn, written by him at the age of nineteen. William Tans'ur, the composer of the tune “St. Martin's,” was regarded as one of the best composers of his day. It is impossible that this is the tune that Watts' hymn was first sung to because it was not composed until the year of Watts' death, but it sprung up as part of the overall musical improvement Watts was advocating, is typical of that movement, and is very fitting for this text.

### Behold the Glories of the Lamb

Isaac Watts, 1693 ST. MARTIN'S William Tans'ur, 1748

Treble

Alto

Tenor (Melody)

Bass

1. Be - hold the glo - ries of the Lamb A - midst His Fa - ther's throne. Pre -  
 2. E - ter - nal Fa - ther, who shall look In - to Thy se - cret will? Who

3. Now to the Lamb that once was slain, Be end - less bless - ings paid; Sal -  
 4. Thou hast re - deemed our souls with blood, Hast set the pris - 'ner free; Hast

pare but new hon - ors for His Name, And songs be - fore un - known.  
 but the Son should take that Book And o - pen ev - 'ry seal?

va - tion, glo - ry, joy re - main For - ev - er on Thy head.  
 made us kings and priests to God, And we shall reign with Thee.

Mark Lane Independent Chapel. Over the next several years, Watts gradually grew in leadership in the church. On July 17, 1698, his twenty-fourth birthday, he preached his first sermon there. Then in 1702, he became the pastor of the church, and under his preaching it thrived.

In 1707, Watts published his first collection of hymns, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, the first production of those hymns for which he was to become known and which would earn him the title “The Father of English Hymnody.” Most of the hymns in this collection were those he had written during his two years in his father’s church, but he had continued writing all the intervening time as well. It was the very fulfillment of his own first hymn text:

*Prepare new honors for His Name,  
And songs before unknown.*

In 1712, Watts suffered a severe illness, which left him so weak and frail that he thought himself unfit to continue as pastor of his church. The congregation, however, would not let him resign. Instead, they gave him an assistant, and a wealthy family in the church, named Abney, asked their beloved pastor to come spend a week of rest and recuperation on their large estate outside London, named Theobalds.

Watts accepted the kind offer, and his week’s stay there turned into one of thirty-six years. The devoted family made a comfortable home for their pastor until his death, who never fully recovered from his illness and remained a semi-invalid for the rest of his life. But he was resigned to it, as his hymn testifies:

*I’ll bear the toil, endure the pain,  
Supported by thy word.*

This family’s loving care and provision for him during these years enabled him to continue his valuable ministry of preaching and hymn-writing.

It was during these years that some of his most beloved and important works were produced. In 1715, he published a book of hymns for children, *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, the first hymnbook ever produced specifically for children. Though capable of writing for the most elevated and educated minds of his day, he also wrote very simply and humbly for children. He said of these hymns, “*I have endeavored to sink the language to the level of a child’s understanding, and yet to keep it, if possible, above contempt.*”

In 1719, Watts produced his most massive work, in which he cast the Psalms in metrical verse and shed New Testament light upon them. He explained, “*I have . . . expressed myself as I suppose David would have done if he lived in the days of Christianity, and by this means, perhaps I have sometimes hit upon the true intent of the Spirit of God in those verses farther and clearer than David himself could ever discover.*” Isaac Watts here testifies with Paul the apostle that the “mystery” of the Gospel, as Paul called it, was hidden to David and the Old Testament prophets, but is now fully revealed to us.

This work was published as *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. It is not a Psalter in its strictest definition, but perhaps better classified as a collection of hymns drawn from the Psalms

(all but twelve Psalms), seeking to capture their prophecies of Christ.

After suffering a stroke in 1739, Watts could no longer write, but he still dictated hymns to a secretary. Gradually weakening over the next several years, he died on November 25, 1748, at the age of seventy-four, surrounded by those who loved him. He said as he died, “*If God has no more service for me to do, through grace I am ready; it is a great mercy to me that I have no manner of fear or dread of death.*” At last he could, as he had written in a hymn years before, “*read his title clear to mansions in the sky.*” He could “*bid farewell to every tear and wipe his weeping eye.*”

Perhaps more than any other man, Isaac Watts has put Scripture into the hearts of men and women, boys and girls. Open your church hymnbook today, and probably the author with the most texts in the book is Isaac Watts. To sing his hymns is to sing the words of Scripture itself, committing them to memory and tucking them away in the depths of the heart, even subconsciously so that the next time you read those passages, you find to your surprise that you are already familiar with them.

In total, Watts left behind over 600 hymns. This is especially remarkable when we realize that he also wrote 52 other books on many varied topics, including theology, logic, grammar, astronomy, philosophy, and geography. He also published catechisms and three volumes of his sermons. Though he never attended Oxford, his book on logic was adopted by that university as its logic textbook, a higher honor than he could have had as a mere student there.

Isaac Watts’ body was buried in Bunhill Fields Cemetery, and a statue of him was placed in Westminster Abbey, the highest honor man could confer upon him. Perhaps the best summation of his life is this statement written by Samuel Johnson, an Anglican who disagreed with Watts’ dissenting but who admired him nonetheless: “*Few men have left behind such purity of character or such monuments of laborious piety.*”

But Watts’ desire was not for fame or monuments. He said, “*My design was not to exalt myself to the rank and glory of poets, but I was ambitious to be a servant to the churches, and a helper to the joy of the meanest Christian.*” Indeed we can testify that this prayer has been answered. Thanks to this life that the Lord raised up, we have over 600 hymns, “*songs before unknown,*” which have become a part of our everyday life, putting the words of Scripture into our lips and enabling us to better render praise to Jesus Christ.

Guye Johnson, *Treasury of Great Hymns and Their Stories*, Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1986.

Robert Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul, Book 1*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003.

Robert Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul, Book 2*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004.

Kenneth Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1982.

Kenneth Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1985.

Isaac Watts, *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts*, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997.

### Joy to the World

While most everyone knows this beloved hymn by Isaac Watts, few know that it was written based on Psalm 98. It was written as part of his *The Psalms of David Imitated*. Thus, without the kindness of the Abney family to provide a home for their pastor, it may never have been written. In this hymn, Isaac Watts takes Psalm 98 in New Testament light, foretelling the birth of Christ and how that birth would be the beginning of Christ's reign on earth.

In 1836, Lowell Mason wrote this tune for it, and it has stuck ever since. It is said that Mason wrote this tune based on pieces of George Frederick Handel's music. Most scholars believe these pieces to be "Lift Up Your Heads" and "Comfort Ye." "Lift Up Your Heads" can be heard in the opening phrase of this tune, and "Comfort Ye" can be heard in the lines "And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing."

This arrangement is slightly different from that found in most hymnals. Notice that the melody (in the third line) does not repeat "And heav'n, And heav'n." Instead, the other parts sing the second "And heav'n."

## Joy to the World

Isaac Watts, 1719

ANTIOCH

Lowell Mason, arranged from Handel, 1836

The musical score is written for four voices: Treble, Alto, Tenor (Melody), and Bass. It is in the key of B-flat major and 3/2 time. The lyrics are: "1. Joy to the world! the Lord is come; Let earth re-ceive her King; Let ev' - ry heart pre - pare him room, And heav'n and na - ture sing, And heav'n and na - ture sing, And heav'n and na - ture sing." The score includes a second system of music with lyrics: "And heav'n and na-ture sing, And heav'n and na-ture sing, And heav'n and na - ture sing." The melody line (Tenor) is distinct from the other parts.

2. Joy to the earth! the Saviour reigns;

Let men their songs employ;

While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,

Repeat the sounding joy.

3. No more let sins and sorrows grow,

Nor thorns infest the ground;

He comes to make his blessings flow

Far as the curse is found.

4. He rules the world with truth and grace,

And makes the nations prove

The glories of his righteousness,

And wonders of his love.



Mary Huffman: The Music Herald

423 Lucinda Avenue

Belleville, IL 62221