

Hymns: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” by Isaac Watts

Wendell Dean Bell, MD
2003

The hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” by Isaac Watts has been called the greatest hymn in the English language¹ and its author, Isaac Watts, is often called the father of English hymnology.

Isaac Watts’ Life

Isaac Watts was born in Southampton England in 1674. His father, Enoch Watts, was a cobbler, clothier, a boarding house manager, and a schoolmaster. Enoch Watts was also a reformation dissenter from the errors of the English Church, and he suffered persecution and several imprisonments for his sound theological convictions and “non-conformist” views in opposition to the State Church, the Church of England.

Isaac’s mother was of French Huguenot extraction, and the Huguenots were also reformers, who were persecuted for their sound theological beliefs in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church.

Isaac’s father was once imprisoned for six months for his theological convictions and was forced to leave his hometown for two years. Isaac’s father was in prison when Isaac was born.² During her husband’s imprisonments, Isaac’s mother would sit on a stone near the gate of the prison and repeatedly hold up the infant Isaac so his father could see him.³

Isaac was the first of nine children. He was a precocious child and early in his life he demonstrated an unusual ability to study and learn. He begged for books before he could talk plainly.⁴ He learned Latin at age five, Greek at age nine, French at age eleven, and Hebrew at age thirteen.⁵ He began writing poetry at age seven.⁶

Because of his demonstrated academic ability, Isaac was given an opportunity to study for the Church of England priesthood at either Oxford or Cambridge University. He turned down these offers to study at the non-conformist, independent academy at Stoke Newington.

After his period of formal study, Watts became a private tutor to the family of Sir John Hartopp, a duty he continued to perform for six years. During these six years, Watts devoted himself to intense private study of philosophy and theology. In 1702, at age 28 years, Watts’ study led to his ordination and installation as pastor of the distinguished Mark Lane Independent Chapel, a large Congregational church in London (at a time when the Congregational denomination was a theologically sound denomination in non-conformity with the Church of England).

¹ By the theologian, Matthew Arnold, not the Matthew Arnold of the American War for Independence.

² Kenneth Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, p. 278.

³ W. Thorburn Clark, *Hymns That Endure*, p. 68-69.

⁴ Amos R. Wells, *A Treasury of Hymn Stories*, p. 82.

⁵ Osbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

⁶ Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

During his ten-year tenure at Mark Lane Independent Chapel, Watts engaged in such intense theological study that his chronically poor health was further undermined. In 1712, Watts suffered a serious illness, and an assistant was hired to help him with his pastoral responsibilities. While he was ill, Watts was graciously taken into the home of Sir Thomas Abney for a week so he could recover. Watts came to be so loved by the Abney family that they kept him there from this time on until his death 36 years later.⁷ From this time on until his death, Watts lived in semi-retirement in the Abney home, serving as the chaplain to the Abney family and occasionally teaching in his church.

Despite his poor health, which had plagued him all his life, Watts continued to faithfully pastor his church, studied intently, took a leading part in the life of the dissenting churches, carried on a voluminous correspondence with the religious leaders of New England in America, published sixty books that covered many scholarly fields, and wrote over 750 hymns. Watts' writings ranged across the fields of theology and philosophy. In addition to being a student of the Word of God, of theology, and of philosophy, he was also an ardent student of geography and astronomy. He wrote books on all these subjects.⁸ Watts' book, *Logic*, was used as a textbook at Oxford for many years. In 1728, Watts was granted an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Edinburgh University.

Watts was very small of stature, being only about five feet tall. He is said not to have been physically attractive. He also suffered from poor health all his life. These physical infirmities apparently contributed to Watts' living a single life. As a young man, Watts loved a woman named Elizabeth Singer, and she evidently reciprocated his affections to some extent. However, when Watts proposed marriage to her, she rebuffed him rather cruelly, saying that she "loved the jewel but could not admire the casket that contained it." Miss Singer married someone else, and she herself attained some distinction as a poet.⁹

Though he never married and had no children of his own, Watts manifested a great consideration for children and wrote a number of poems for children. One of these is a cradle song that begins—

“Hush, my dear,
Lie still and slumber.”¹⁰

When Watts died in 1748, he was buried in the London cemetery for non-conformists, Bunhill Fields. He was buried near the graves of John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe.¹¹ In addition to the tombstone marking his grave at Bunhill, the people of his hometown of Southampton collected money and erected an imposing monument at his birthplace.¹² A monument was also erected to honor him in Westminster Abbey in 1779.

⁷Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁸Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 82-83.

⁹Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹⁰Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹¹Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 83-84.

¹²Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

Watts' Theology

Watts was first a devoted student of the Word of God, a theologian, and a teacher of the Word of God. He was only secondarily a hymn writer, and his hymns are built on his theology, not the other way around. Watts' theology, his pastoral work, and his hymns came out of the Protestant Reformation in England, Scotland, and Wales, and he dissented from the State Church, the Church of England. Watts developed an early form of dispensational theology, which recognizes the distinction between Israel and the Church and the distinctive periods of God's administration of history.

Watts' hymns reflect his sound theology, and his hymns are interplays between the teaching of the Word of God and the congregational singing about what they had been taught. His hymns are designed to remind the congregation of the doctrines of the Word of God which they have learned and to help them reflect on these doctrines. His hymns are designed to resonate primarily with the congregation's knowledge of doctrine. His hymns contain theological themes and extol the greatness and work of God. His hymns are not man-centered, and any emotional content is in response to reflecting on and appreciating the great truths of the Word of God.

Watts' Initiation into Hymn Writing

Even as a young boy, Watts displayed a genius for composing poetry and manifested this genius by making up so many rhymes that his father became annoyed and considered it advisable to forcefully curb what he found to be this annoying tendency in his son. He threatened to punish young Isaac if he did not stop his practice of continually making up rhymes on the spot. Isaac persisted, and his father apparently punished him by spanking him. But even in the midst of the spanking, Isaac could not contain himself and said—

“Oh, Father do some mercy take,
And I will no more verses make.”

Apparently seeing that Isaac could not be stifled, the elder Watts relented and allowed his son's talent to flourish and his son to pursue his own selected course.¹³

At age 18 years, Watts complained to his father, a deacon in the Congregational Chapel, about what he perceived to be the crudity of the music of the Sunday church service.¹⁴ At that time singing in the church consisted of slow, ponderous reciting of hymns in which each line was first read by an appointed person followed by the droning back of the line by the congregation. The contents of these hymns were often crude and inelegant.¹⁵

Watts' father responded sarcastically to his upstart son's complaint about the dreadful nature of this church music by saying, “Then give us something better, young man.”¹⁶ Young Watts rose

¹³ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁴ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Osbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

¹⁶ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

to this challenge from his father, and the next Sunday arrived at church with his first hymn, which began—

“Behold the glories of the Lamb
Amidst His Father’s throne
Prepare new honors for His name,
And songs before unknown.”

The congregation sang this new hymn that Sunday and asked for more, which Watts supplied week after week. For two years, Watts produced a new hymn every week.¹⁷

The last two verses of Watts’ first hymn were a description of his life of hymn writing—

“Prepare new honors for His name,
And songs before unknown.”

More than 750 hymns followed this one, and Watts became one of the greatest hymn writers in the history of the Christian church.¹⁸

The Characteristics of Watts’ Hymns

Watts’ hymns broke from the tradition of the dull hymn-singing characteristic of church singing of that time. Watts’ hymns took congregational singing beyond the mere words of Scripture to original expressions of devotion based on Scripture and scriptural themes. Though he departed from the rote repetition of direct quotations of Scripture, all of Watts’ hymns reflect faithfulness to the Word of God and an emphasis on God and His work for man, not on man himself.

Watts’ hymns are models of biblical truth expressed in simple terms, using the plain language of the common people. His hymns are relatively short, usually based on single scriptural themes. They have simple meters that are easily set to music, which can be easily sung by congregations.

Watts’ hymns are of two types. Many hymns are paraphrases in hymn form of Scripture or sermons on scriptural themes. Some of his hymns are devotional poetry.

Watts’ Legacy of English Hymnology

Though there were those who preceded him in some attempts to reform church music, Watts was the first to successfully bring this about.¹⁹ Watts established the foundation of English hymnology, and his hymns became the prototype for the hymn writing that followed his. Watts’ hymns are considered to be among the greatest hymns in the English language, and he is often referred to as the “Father of English Hymnology.”

¹⁷ Osbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

¹⁸ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

¹⁹ Watts was preceded in efforts to reform English hymnology by such pioneers as George Wither, George Herbert, John Milton, Richard Baxter, Samuel Crossman, John Bunyan, Thomas Ken, Benjamin Keach, and Nahum Tate. (Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology*)

Watts' hymns have several qualities, which established the qualities found in English hymns for many succeeding generations. They are simple in vocabulary and meter. They tend to open with a striking first line that tersely proclaims the theme of the hymn. They employ repetition and parallelism with a de-emphasis of perfect rhyming. They tend to be dramatic in their climax as expressed in final stanzas.²⁰

The contents of Watts' hymns are theological. They emphasize scriptural and doctrinal themes. Scripture is accurately paraphrased, and biblical language and thought is masterfully incorporated into the lyrics. There is an emphasis on the glory and sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, the sufficiency of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the security of believers. Jesus Christ is exalted and extolled above all else. He is viewed as the object of worship.²¹

Watts was followed in this model of hymn writing by some of the great hymn writers in the English language, writing mostly in the eighteenth century. He was followed by Charles Wesley, the great Methodist hymn writer, who is the author of dozens of well-known Christian hymns, and Wesley is Watts' only possible rival as the most prolific English hymn writer. Charles Wesley's hymns include such well-known hymns as "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "And Can it be That I Should Gain," "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "Jesus Lover of My Soul," and "Soldiers of Christ Arise."

Watts was also succeeded by the hymn writer William Cowper, who wrote the hymn "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood;" by the pastor and hymn writer John Newton, who wrote many hymns, including "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," and his most celebrated hymn, "Amazing Grace;" and by the Moravian-Methodist hymn writer James Montgomery, the author of many hymns including his best-known hymn, the Christmas hymn, "Angels from the Realms of Glory."

Watts is considered the founder of the type of hymns so well known to many succeeding generations of English-speaking people for over 300 years until these doctrinal hymns began to be neglected by Christians beginning in about 1965, when they began to be replaced in churches by the insipid, sentimental, man-centered, emotional-generating choruses arising out of the doctrine-rejecting apostasy of the modern church.

Watts' Well-Known Hymns

Watts' well-known hymns include: "Alas and Did My Savior Bleed (and Did My Sovereign Die)?" "Come We That Love the Lord," "Am I a Soldier of the Cross," "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," "Jesus Shall Reign," "Joy to the World," "At the Cross," "We're Marching to Zion," and "O God Our Help in Ages Past."

²⁰ Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology*, p. 134.

²¹ Eskew and McElrath, *op. cit.*, p. 134-135.

Watts' Greatest Hymn: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"

Watts' greatest hymn is considered to be "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," which Watts wrote to be sung at communion services he conducted. Some people consider this hymn to be the greatest hymn in the English language.²² Indeed, this hymn is perfectly suited for a communion service, which is intended to memorialize the work of Jesus Christ, and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," perhaps more than any other hymn, focuses one's attention on the work of Jesus Christ and the relative insignificance of everything else.

The words of this hymn are as follows—

“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.

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.

See from His head, His hand, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.²³

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!”

This hymn is based on Galatians 6:14, where Paul writes—

“May it never be that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.”²⁴

²² This accolade is ascribed as being made first by the theologian Matthew Arnold (not the Matthew Arnold of the American War for Independence), but it has been echoed by many other people since.

²³ This fourth stanza is not usually included in modern hymnals. In this fourth stanza the word “globe” is Watts' word for “world,” which in Scripture refers to the cultural system of the world.

²⁴ The Greek word here translated “boasting” is translated “glory” in the KJV, and this word is used in another hymn based on Galatians 6:14, the hymn, “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” by John Bowring, who, ironically, is reported to

The “world” here is the world system of Satanic-inspired culture, philosophy, and religion, and the context of this verse is Paul’s warning to the Galatian believers against the false doctrine of the legalism of the Judaizers, who perverted the grace of God relative to salvation and relative to the Christian life.

This theme of boasting only in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross is reminiscent of what Jeremiah writes in Jeremiah 9:23 and 24—

“Thus says Jehovah:

Let the wise person not take satisfaction (boast) in his wisdom;
Let the strong person not take satisfaction (boast) in his strength;
Let the wealthy person not take satisfaction (boast) in his wealth.

But let the person who takes legitimate satisfaction (boasts) in his accomplishments take satisfaction (boast) in this—

That he understands and knows Me;
That I am Jehovah,
Who exercises grace, justice, and righteousness on the earth;

Because in these (grace, justice, and righteousness) I have pleasure.”

Part of this Old Testament passage is quoted by the apostle Paul the same way in two places in the New Testament (I Corinthians 1:31 and II Corinthians 10:17), where the same Greek word used for “boasting” in Galatians 6:14 is employed in these passages, which both state—

“He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord.”

Paul’s theme in these and other places is for the believer not to become enamored of and influenced by the things and thinking of the world system but to keep his focus on Jesus Christ.

Similarly, in Colossians 2:8 he says, “Beware that no one capture you through philosophy and worthless deception according to the traditions of mankind, according to the principles of the world system, and not according to (the principle of the mind of) Christ.”

Likewise, Paul admonishes the Corinthian believers to remove “rationalizations and every exalted thing which raises itself against the knowledge of God” and to “bring every thought into subjection to the obedience of Christ” (II Corinthians 10:5).

Paul admonishes the believers at Rome to “not be conformed to this world system but be transformed by the renewing of your mind in order that you might demonstrate that good and satisfying and perfect will (purpose, plan, and policy) of God” (Romans 12:2).

have been born into a Puritan family but later became a Unitarian, the theology of which denies the deity and work of Jesus Christ.

So, in keeping with this theme, Watts, in “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” says in the second verse—

“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.”

The last part of Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:14 is “through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.” This is reminiscent of what Paul’s statement earlier in this Galatian letter in 2:20, where he says—

“I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live. Yet it is not I but Christ lives in me. And, the life which I know live in the flesh (in this life in time) I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Watts also reflects this theme of the believer’s death to the world system in a verse in “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” that is not usually published in hymnals. This is the fourth verse, which says—

“His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o’er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.”

(“Globe” is Watts’ word for “world.”)

The Impact of the Hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” has been said to be the greatest English hymn ever written. Perhaps no other hymn has been more forceful in fixing in the minds of a congregation on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, in reminding them of the insignificance of everything else in comparison to the cross of Christ, and in establishing an atmosphere of solemnity and worship.

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” is a model of a Christian hymn. It is based on a definite Biblical passage and accurately portrays the truth of this passage. It simply and clearly restates the content of the Biblical passage on which it is based. It states in plain language the profound truth of the centrality of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and the relative insignificance of anything else. It reminds one of the dangers of his own arrogance diverting him from his proper perspective about what should be most important for him, a believer in Jesus Christ, Who was sent because of the infinite love of God the Father and Who Himself lovingly and willingly died for the sins of all mankind on the cross. It reminds one that the only legitimate satisfaction that one should take is his knowledge of and relationship with God, His Savior, and that all other

things in this life pale into insignificance. It reminds one of the emptiness of the charms of the world system. It directs one to think about the work of Christ and consider the enormity of God's work in manifesting His great love toward man. It reminds one that such love from God should motivate one to devote himself totally to God.

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” stands in stark contrast with much of contemporary “Christian” music. Most contemporary “Christian” music is based on the culture, philosophy, and religion of the world, not in the Word of God. Most contemporary “Christian” music is doctrinally empty at best and doctrinally inaccurate at worst.

Most contemporary “Christian” music focuses one's attention on man and his problems without defining these problems correctly and without directing man to the proper solution to his problems. Most contemporary “Christian” music minimizes man's terrible sinfulness, arrogance, and hopelessness apart from God's solution as communicated in the Word of God. Most contemporary “Christian” music presents God as a master psychotherapist, who can solve man's mundane problems of life, without proclaiming accurately God's prescribed solution to man's problem as, first, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone and as, second, the Christian life as being by grace alone through knowledge and application of the Word of God alone.

Most contemporary “Christian” music emphasizes human experience rather than the Word of God and has lyrics and music designed to appeal to emotions rather than thinking. Most contemporary “Christian” music has lyrics and music and is performed in a way that creates an emotional excitement rather than a contemplative solemnity that directs one's attention to the doctrines of the Word of God. Most contemporary “Christian” music is performed by arrogant performers, who obviously model themselves after contemporary popular music performers, and in a style that calls attention to the performance rather than the content of the lyrics.

Contemporary “Christian” music is a multimillion dollar business. The writers of this contemporary “Christian” music, its promoters, its performers, and its consumers are arrogant and ignorant of Bible doctrine. It is unlikely that most of the people involved with contemporary “Christian” music have ever even heard of Isaac Watts, to whom they cannot even hold a candle, and of his hymns, especially to “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” the message of which they would be well-advised to heed.

The writers, promoters, performers, and consumers of contemporary “Christian” music have rationalized their actions as necessary for attracting the younger generation, but in making this argument they have failed to recognize that God does not bless incorrect methods. Contemporary “Christian” music has adopted the way of the world, but God does not honor such methods. These people would be well advised to learn the Word of God. They might then come to appreciate last two lines of a stanza from another one of Isaac Watts' hymns, “Am I a Soldier of the Cross,” that poses a rhetorical question which expects a negative answer—

“Is this vile world a friend to grace
To help me on to God?”

The neglect of the hymns of Isaac Watts and the hymns of the other hymn writers who followed in his model began in about 1965. It has been accelerating ever since, so that believers born after 1965 and attending contemporary conservative churches are now almost completely ignorant of them. This neglect of these wonderful hymns, which are solidly based on the Word of God and served conservative church congregations for 350 years to remind them of the doctrines of the Word of God which they had been taught, is symptomatic of the depths to which the apostasy of present day Christianity has reached. In times past, apostasy usually came in overt ways of denying the Word of God and its teachings. Now, the apostasy is within the ranks of people who have believed in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, who claim to believe the Word of God and its teachings, but have never learned anything about the true teaching of the Word of God because whenever it is ostensibly taught, its content is used only as a pretext for some psychological motivational talk.

References and Bibliography

Adams, Jere V. (Editor). *Handbook to the Baptist Hymnal*. Nashville: Convention Press, 1992.

Clark, W. Thorburn. *Hymns That Endure*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1942.

Eskew, Harry, and McElrath, Hugh T. *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology*. Nashville: Church Street Press, 1995.

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

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

Wells, Amos R. *A Treasury of Hymn Stories*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1945.

Young, Carlton R. *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.