

Paul exhorts the Colossians, *"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."* (3:16)

There is an enlightening assertion in this exhortation: Singing has a peculiar ability to penetrate to the heart and resonate with the soul.

Looking back over your life I dare say words of songs come to your mind much more easily than do verses of Scripture or paragraphs from books.

Therefore what we sing isn't merely a filler of time, an option for the enthusiastic or a showcase of our musical ability.

Singing is a God ordained means to grow hearts that are overflowing with the message of Christ.

We sing to help us learn of, focus on, and respond to God in corporate worship.

If this is the case then Isaac Watts is a man worthy of our study – the man aptly described as the Father of Hymnody, the pastor-hymnologist, the scribe of experiential doctrine.

Theology must necessarily lead to doxology, that is the truth about God must lead us to praise and worship of God. Theology without doxology is just cold dry orthodoxy, whereas doxology without theology is idolatry as we worship for worships sake and that is inevitable worship absent of a knowledge of God.

So let us pray and then I want us to have a look at Isaac Watts together.

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
With all Thy quick'ning powers;
Kindle a flame of sacred love
In these cold hearts of ours.

Look how we grovel here below,

Fond of these trifling toys;
Our souls can neither fly nor go
To reach eternal joys.

In vain we tune our formal songs,
In vain we strive to rise;
Hosannas languish on our tongues,
And our devotion dies.

Dear Lord! and shall we ever live
At this poor dying rate?
Our love so faint, so cold to Thee,
And Thine to us so great!

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
With all Thy quick'ning powers;
Come, shed abroad the Savior's love
And that shall kindle ours.

Sing – Give to our God Immortal Praise

1 - Life & Times of Isaac Watts

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In 1674 – the year of Watts' birth, Britain was deeply troubled.

Eleven years before – the Bubonic plague had swept through the country, killing more than 100,000 people in London alone, more than a quarter of the population of the city.

The city of Southampton where Watts was born was almost completely depopulated by the outbreak, streets were deserted and overgrown with weeds.

1666 saw the great fire of London that had largely levelled the nation's capital.

However the nation was also in a tumultuous state – there was a struggle for religious and political power that was to directly impact Watts for all of his early years.

The first half of the 17th century saw the Roman-Catholic Stuart monarchs try to assert their divine right to rule as absolutists over both state and church. Parliament increasingly became tokenistic and with rising tension the two were inevitably going to come to blows.

In 1642 Charles the first, engaged in a civil war with Parliament that ended in the defeat of the royalists and Charles being beheaded.

Oliver Cromwell assumed the role of Lord Protector and commenced efforts to unite the country in what was called the commonwealth, but he quickly found himself at odds with the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and so another civil war ensued.

Finally in 1660, Parliament invited Charles the first's son, Charles the second to assume the throne thus restoring the monarchy.

Charles the second sought to assert his divine right to rule both over the political and the religious. This meant that he passed a law that the Anglican Church was the only legitimate church and that everyone in the realm must attend only an Anglican Church.

The state of the Anglican Church at the time is the subject of this painting by William Hogarth. Hogarth depicts a minister preaching, but he has his head buried in his book rather than looking at the congregation. He has clearly been speaking for a long time because the hourglass next to him has run through. Most of the congregation are fast asleep, even with mouth open to indicate they are snoring. The main exception is a clerk who is taking the opportunity to admire the bosom of a sleeping young lady. The text the minister is preaching on is, 'Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest.'

Thus the act of Uniformity was passed in 1662.

Around 2000 Anglican ministers left the Church of England and became 'non-conformists.'

These Anglican Ministers thought that the liturgy of the Church of England was still far too Roman-Catholic and organised more by the traditions of men than the content of the Bible.

Nonconformists were considered a threat to the Government and a potential cause of civil unrest. There were a series of laws inflicting heavy penalties for not conforming. Ridiculous fines, hefty prison sentences and even hanging were dished out arbitrarily on those refusing to attend an Anglican Church.

This is where we get characters like John Bunyan who was locked up for 12 years for being a non-conformist during which time he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Nathaniel Robinson left the Church of England where he had been the rector of All Saints Church to set up a non-conformist congregation in Southampton, called Above Bar Church right in the city centre. (My parents went there when they lived in Southampton and it is a thriving congregation today.)

One of the church leaders of Above Bar, a deacon was a man called Isaac Watts Senior, a cloth maker.

So on 17th July 1674 the day Isaac Watts Junior was born, his Father was serving a second prison sentence for being a non-conformist.

His mother Sarah Taunton Watts was a descendent from a French Protestant family who had fled France in 1572 after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. She would nurse Isaac outside the prison whilst talking to and encouraging her husband through the bars.

Isaac Watts Senior would be in and out of prison for all of young Isaac's childhood and when not locked up was often in forced exile in London.

However, even in absence, Isaac Watts Senior took great responsibility for bringing his children up in the things of God. In total Isaac Senior and Sarah would have 8 children of which Isaac Junior was the oldest although their two youngest daughters didn't live beyond their first year of life.

In a letter he wrote to his children during one of his stints in London we can see just how spiritual he was as a man and how devoted he was as a husband and father.

"My dear children, though it has pleased God to suffer the malice of ungodly men, the enemies of Jesus Christ (and my enemies for his sake), to break out so far against me, as to remove me from you in my personal habitation, thereby at once bereaving me of that comfort, which I might have hoped for in the enjoyment of my family in peace, and you of that education, which my love as a father and duty as a parent requires me to give; yet such are the longings of my soul for your good and prosperity, especially in spiritual concernments, that I remember you always with myself in my daily prayers addressed to the throne of grace."

Later on in the letter he gives some specific instructions:

On the Bible:

"I charge you frequently to read the holy scriptures; and not as a task or burden laid on you, but get your hearts to delight in them."

On their sinfulness and God's Salvation:

"Consider seriously and often the sinful and miserable estate you are in by nature, and that you are liable to eternal wrath thereupon; also think upon the way of fallen man's recovery by grace, according to the foundational principles of the Christian religion, which you have learned in your catechism; and beg of God by prayer to give you understanding in them, and faith to believe in Jesus Christ, and a heart willing to yield obedience to his gospel commands in all things."

On their growth and knowledge of God:

"Learn to know God according to the discoveries he has made of himself in and by his word, in all his glorious attributes and infinite perfections; especially learn to know him in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, and to be acquainted with this blessed redeemer of God's people."

On Worship:

"Remember that God is your Creator, from whom you received life and being; and as such you are bound to worship him; much more when you consider that he is your Benefactor, from the fountain of whose goodness all your mercies come..."

"Know this, that as you must worship God, so it must be in his own ways, with true worship and in a right manner; that is according to the rules of the gospel, and not according to the inventions or traditions of men."

He finishes the letter with these words:

"Do not entertain any hard thoughts of God, or of his ways, because his people are persecuted for them. For Jesus Christ himself was persecuted to death by wicked men, for preaching the gospel and doing good, and the holy apostles and prophets were cruelly treated for serving God in his own way."

"Consider, she [Mother] is left alone to bear all the burdens of bringing you up; and is as it were, a widow. Her time is filled up with many cares, and therefore do not grieve her by any rebellious or disobedient ways, but be willing to learn from her and be ruled by her, that she may have some comfort in seeing your obedient carriage; and that it will rejoice me to hear it."

"These things I charge and command you with the authority and love of a father. Now commending you to God, and what I have written to his

blessing upon your hearts, through Jesus Christ, with my dear love to your mother."

Isaac was a precocious child. He started to learn Latin from his father at the age of four, Greek at nine, French and ten and Hebrew at thirteen.

When he was 6 he started The Free School in Southampton, now called King Edward VI Grammar School. (My Dad went there).

When Watts was 7 his mother found some handwritten poems and asked whether Isaac had written them. Isaac said he had but his mother doubted that a child so young could write such verses. So she got Isaac to sit at the kitchen table with a pen and paper to write a poem to test him.

He wrote this 10 line poem instantly:

*I am a vile polluted lump of earth;
So I've continued since my birth;
Although Jehovah grace does daily give me,
Asa sure as this monster 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 sing Thy praises too.*

Now you have to say that his a pretty remarkable thing to be penned by a 7 year old, however when you look at the lines you see that it is also an acrostic poem and the first letter of each line spells out Isaac Watts.

It was while at the Free School that he wrote these words in his diary – *'Fell under considerable convictions of sin, 1698, and was taught to trust in Christ, 1689.'*

On leaving the Free School (1690) Watts had a massive decision to make.

Dr. Speed [A wealthy local] took a keen interest in Isaac Watts and offered to pay for him to go to university, there were only two options for university Oxford or Cambridge. However they were not open to non-conformists. Isaac had to make a decision of education or conviction. He declined the offer as a committed non-conformist.

He enrolled in a 'dissenting academy' in Stoke Newington just outside London under the tutelage of Mr. Rowe.

He writes in his journal – '1690, left grammar-school, and came to London to Mr. Rowe's to study philosophy etc.

That little word etc. is short for – Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Maths, History, Geography, Natural Science, Logic, Rhetoric, Ethics, Metaphysics, Anatomy, Law and Theology.

This was in the midst of the Enlightenment where a revolution of thought was taking place. Traditional education of maxims and givens was being undercut by investigation, evidence and reason. The same school of thought that would see the conception of theological liberalism.

One Sunday in 1690 Watts was at home and on a family walk after the church service when he said "*The singing of God's praise is the part of worship closest to heaven, but its performance among us is the worst on earth.*"

Church singing was almost exclusively Psalm singing with the occasional singing of either the Lord's prayer or the 10 commandments. Watts described them as "ugly hymns" and that "he was offended by the gawkiness, dullness and crudity of expression."

Isaac Watts Senior replied, "If you do not like the hymns, young man, then give us something better."

That afternoon, Watts inked his quill and wrote a hymn of eight stanzas based on Revelation 5:6-12.

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

*Let elders worship at His feet,
The Church adore around,
With vials full of odors sweet,
And harps of sweeter sound.*

*Those are the prayers of the saints,
And these the hymns they raise;
Jesus is kind to our complaints,
He loves to hear our praise.*

*Eternal Father, who shall look
Into Thy secret will?
Who but the Son should take that Book
And open every seal?*

*He shall fulfill Thy great decrees,
The Son deserves it well;
Lo, in His hand the sovereign keys
Of Heav'n, and death, and hell!*

*Now to the Lamb that once was slain
Be endless blessings paid;
Salvation, glory, joy remain
Forever on Thy head.*

*Thou hast redeemed our souls with blood,
Hast set the prisoner free;
Hast made us kings and priests to God,
And we shall reign with Thee.*

*The worlds of nature and of grace
Are put beneath Thy power;
Then shorten these delaying days,*

And bring the promised hour.

The amazing thing is it is not just a new hymn, but it is a new hymn about singing new hymns. That night it was sung for the first time by the congregation at the Above Bar with enthusiasm and joy.

Watts left the 'dissenting academy' in 1694 and returned home, he simply writes in his diary – *Dwelt at my father's house 2 years and a quarter years.*

In 1696 Isaac Watts was asked by Sir John Hartopp, a wealthy, influential and devoted non-conformist, to become the tutor of his children, six daughters and one son. Watts accepted and moved into the family's estate back in Stoke Newington. He performed this role for three years.

During this time he wrote lots of text books to help the children in their studies and they were of such quality that they were widely circulated and used extensively by many others.

Watts also took the responsibility of teaching the Hartopp children about the Christian faith and became very skilled at communicating the gospel to young hearts. Something that he would return to in later life.

He also wrote a book on *Logic: The right use of reason in the inquiry after truth, with a variety of rules to guard against error in the affairs of religion and human life, as well as in the sciences.* It was a book to kick against the philosophy of the time that was using reason instead of revelation to understand theology. It was so good that it became the core textbook on logic at Oxford, Cambridge and Yale, the very institutions who would not allow him due to his non-conformity.

One of the great threads of Isaac Watts theological writings which are extensive was his desire to make the Christian faith REASONABLE, he was if you like an 18th century apologist. Some of his writings are sublime, some are not. In trying to make the trinity rational in some of his works he only succeeds in making it more irrational.

In 1698 on his 24th birthday Isaac preached his first sermon at Mark Lane Church, a very famous non-conformist church whose previous pastors included John Owen, John Owen's widow still attended. The current pastor was Dr. Chauncy. This was the church that the Hartopp family attended. Isaac's straight forward exhortation and illuminating illustration was met with great warmth by the congregation.

In 1699 in his diary there are simply the words – *Preached first sermon as Dr. Chauncy's Assistant at Mark Lane Church & suffered after with fever and weakness.*

Fever and Weakness would become a constant battle in Isaac's life.

Dr. Chauncy was a learned and able pastor but the Mark Lane church was not doing well under his leadership. It had shrunk to 60 members and from the church records it seems to have been in large part to the stubbornness in controversy, tediousness in preaching and rigidity in matters of church discipline. Two years after Watts became his assistant, Dr. Chauncy resigned.

The congregation at first decided to look for a replacement whilst keeping Watts on as the assistant. However Watts was not well, in June 1701, just after Dr. Chauncy's resignation, his notebook says, *'Went to Bath by the advice of Physicians.'*

A few months later the church was still vacant and the church record says, *'Assistant Pastor Watts under continued indispositions of body and weakness in the country, he has given us little encouragement to expect his return amongst us.'*

The church held a day of Prayer and Fasting specifically for the 'restoration of Mr. Watts' health and for the provision of a pastor for this church.' After 5 months away Watts returned to London and the church called him to be their pastor. Watts hesitated in accepting the call claiming that his illness would prevent him from preaching twice on a Sunday, the congregation persisted, and Watts wrote to them says,

'Your perseverance in your choice and love, your constant profession of edification by my ministry, the great probability you show in building up this famous and decayed church of Christ, if I accept the call, and your prevailing fears of its dissolution if I refuse, have given me ground to believe that your corporate voice is the voice of Christ by you... I accept your call, promising the presence of God and his saints, my utmost diligence in all the duties of a pastor, so far as God shall enlighten and strengthen me; and I leave this promise in the hands of Christ our Mediator, to see it performed by me unto you through the assistance of his grace and Spirit.'

He was ordained as the pastor of Mark Lane church on 18th March 1702 and Thomas Rowe his old tutor at the 'dissenting academy' preached, he spoke on Jeremiah 3:15 – 'And I will give you pastors according to mine own heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.'

Under Watt's ministry the church started to grow. Within two years they had to move out of Mark Lane to go to Pinner's Hall to accommodate the many new people. Four year later the church moved again to a new purpose built hall, and the total number of members had swelled to 428 in the 6 years Watts had been preaching.

However Watts' health continued to plague him, he regularly writes in his note book things like 'seized with violent jaundice and cholice', 'had very slow recovery from most recent bout of fever – eight or nine weeks ill.' At this time Watts employed a personal assistant to help with his reading and writing the reason he quotes was because of 'my great indispositions of body and weakness of head.'

However after the church moved to the new premises Watts enjoyed a sustained period of reasonably good health over the next decade and was able to minister without significant interruptions.

Watts also started to become known as an author. In 1706 he had a book of poems published called *Horae Lyricae*, in 1707 an essay entitled *Against Uncharitableness* was published and later that year 1707 his famous book of Hymns and Spiritual songs was published.

This first book of hymns was revolutionary, by the time of his death some 41 years later it was in its 16th edition, it was used by Whitfield in his preaching and translated for an American audience by Benjamin Franklin. Watts writes this in the preface, 'These songs are suited for the expression of the general state of the gospel, and the most common affairs of Christians..... I have aimed at making these songs recitable by large numbers, with smoothness of sound, and endeavoured to make the sense plain and obvious to all.'

Watts was not the first person to write hymns for the church, some had endeavoured to do so. Watts therefore is not called the Father of Hymnode because he was the first but because he wrote better and more than all those before him. Before him was a trickle of new hymns, he broke the dam.

One of the hymns contained in this volume is my favourite Watts hymn,

Alas and did my Saviour bleed,
And did my Sovereign die?
Would he devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?

Thy body slain, sweet Jesus, thine,
And bath'd in its own blood,
While all expod's to wrath divine
The glorious Sufferer stood.

Was it for crimes that I had done
He groan'd upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And loved beyond degree!

Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut his glories in,
When God the mighty Maker dy'd
For man the creature's sin.

Thus might I hide my blushing face

*While his dear cross appears,
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt me eyes to tears.*

*But drops of grief can ne'er repay
The debt of love I owe;
Here, Lord, I give myself away,
'Tis all that I can do.*

It's also in this volume that we find Watts' most famous hymn, When I survey the Wondrous Cross. A hymn that Charles Wesley allegedly said he would give up the 6000 hymns that he penned in his life if he could have only written this on.

Let's sing it now, When I survey the Wondrous Cross.

It was during this period as his reputation and writing spread that he has his only romantic encounter. A lady called Elizabeth Singer had read Watts' poetry and loved it, so much so that she wanted to meet the author.

However, Watts was not an attractive man: he was short, sallow faced, deathly pale and had a crooked-hooked nose. Miss Singer by contrast was beautiful. They after lengthy letter correspondence, did eventually meet and Watts was smitten and eventually proposed to her. Miss Singer's reply has to be one of the best rejections in history: 'Mr. Watts, I only wish I could say that I admire the casket as much as I admire the jewel.' In other words – I love you're beautiful poetry but you yourself are ugly. Watts would stay single for the rest of his life.

In 1712 the old tiresome sickness returned and Watts effectively left pastoral ministry for the next four years. One biographer speaks of his ailment being a 'violent fever which introduced a state of nervous agitation of the most painful and distressing kind.' His assistant at the church Samuel Price was appointed as Co-Pastor during this time, something Isaac was greatly in favour of given his incapacitation.

This state of illness came to the attention of Sir Thomas Abney, a successful businessman, one of the first directors of the bank of England and also for a period Lord Mayor of London. Sir Thomas was a generous benefactor and zealous Christian. The Abney's invited Isaac to stay with them in their Herefordshire palatial estate, Abney Park, to regain his health. Watts intended to stay for two weeks so as not to be a burden to them, but he remained at the insistence of his host – for 36 years. It would be Adney Park where Watts would die aged 74 years old.

This time at the Abney Estate was very productive in the life of Isaac. In 1715 he wrote a book called *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*.

Much of his skill in teaching children had been honed during his time with the Hartopp children and in fact this book was dedicated to Sir John Hartopp. The words in the preface again are worthy of note, *'To All that are concerned with the education of Children, you have been given an immense and important charge, the seeds of misery or happiness in this world, and that to come, are oftentimes sown very early, and therefore whatever may conduce to give the minds of children a relish for virtue and religion must be your primary concern.'*

He also defends verse as an effectual means of enabling children to retain information. Watts suggested also that the book should be used as families and that the parents and teachers should have their children learn one a week.

I love his chorus about the excellence of the Bible,

*Great God, with wonders and with praise
On all thy works I look:
But still thy wisdom, power, and grace
Shine brighter in book.*

*The stars that in their courses roll
Have much instruction given;
But thy Word informs my soul
How I may climb to heaven.*

*The fields provide me food, and show
The goodness of the Lord;
But fruits of life and glory grow
In thy most holy Word.*

*Here are my choicest treasures hid;
Here my best comfort lies;
Here my desires are satisfied;
And hence my joys arise.*

*Lord, make me understand thy law:
Show what my faults have been;
And from thy gospel let me draw
Pardon for all my sin.*

*Here would I learn how Christ has died
To save my soul from hell:
Not all the books on earth beside
Such heavenly wonders tell.*

*Then let me love my Bible more;
And take a fresh delight
By day to read these wonders over
And meditate by night.*

He also in his life wrote a book on helping children to pray called, *Prayers for the use and imitation of Children.*

The third thing Watts provided for children was a series of catechisms, question and response exercises in order to teach children the foundations of the Christian faith. These he did with tireless work he writes, *What laborious diligence has been used to seek out the plainest and most familiar forms of speech, that the great things of God and the mysteries of the gospel might be brought down to the capacities of children.*

Here is an extract,

Q: Do you know who Jesus Christ is?

A: He is God's own Son, who came down from heaven to save from our sins, and from God's anger.

Q: What has Christ done toward the saving of men?

A: He obeyed the law of god himself, and has taught us to obey it also.

Q: And what has Christ suffered in order to save men?

A: He died for sinner who have broken the law of God, and deserved to die themselves.

Q: Where is Jesus Christ now?

A: He is alive again, and gone to heaven to provide a place there for all that serve God and love his son Jesus.

Q: Can you of yourself love and serve God and Christ?

A: No, I cannot do it of myself, but God will help me by his own Spirit if I ask him for it.

These catechisms were so useful and so successful in teaching children the gospel that CH. Spurgeon, a century after Watts, would make the following comment about their use in his upbringing.

'Dr. Watts' Catechism, which I learned myself, is so simple, so interesting, so suggestive, that a better condensation of Scriptural knowledge will never be written; and the marvel is that such a little of instruction should have been laid aside by so many Sunday School teachers.'

It was also at Abney Park that Watts produced his greatest work in my opinion. A re-rendering of the Psalms Christologically. Many churches in England were still singing exclusively Psalms from the, as Watts described them, offensive and gawky translation, of Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. Watts asked himself, 'Why may we not sing of Christ as God? When God makes all things new, why must our praises remain in the Old Covenant?'

It was from this questioning that Watts hit upon a new way of interpreting the Psalms, the so called redemptive-historical hermeneutic employed by the best preachers. This is described by J.I. Packer as, 'Christ is the subject matter of Scripture: all was written to bear witness to him. He is the sum of the whole Bible, prophesied, typified, prefigured, exhibited, demonstrated, to be found in every leaf, almost in every line, the Scriptures being but as it were the swaddling bands of the child Jesus.'

So Watts set about re-rendering the Psalms and eventually published a glorious book called, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Applied to the Christian State and Worship*.

He writes this in the preface,

'Where the Psalmist speaks of the pardon of sin through the mercies of God, I have added the merits of a Saviour. Where he talks of sacrificing goats or bullocks, I rather choose to mention the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. Where he promises abundance of wealth, honour, and long life, I have changed some of these typical blessings for grace, glory, and life eternal, which are brought to light by the Gospel, and promised in the New Testament. And I am fully satisfied, that more honour is done to our blessed Saviour by speaking his name, his graces, his actions, explicitly in his own language, according to the brighter discoveries he hath now made, than by going back again to the Old Testament forms of worship, and the language of types and figures.

So for example he takes Psalm 72, the English version begins, 'Give the King your justice, O God,' and clearly in context it is a psalm about King Solomon. But through the redemptive-historical theology employed by Watts and his poetic skill, it becomes a Jesus-centred declaration of the gospel foreshadowed in the psalm and fulfilled in Christ, so we get:

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journey run;
His kingdom stretched from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

To him shall endless prayer be made,

*And praises throng to crown his head;
His name, like sweet perfume, shall rise
With every morning sacrifice.*

*Blessings abound where'er he reigns:
The pris'ner leaps to lose his chains,
The weary find eternal rest,
And all the sons of want are blest.*

*Let every creature rise and bring
Peculiar honours to our King;
Angels, descend with songs again,
And earth repeat a loud amen.'*

Why don't we all sing it together? Jesus Shall reign where'er the sun.

There was a lot of opposition from some camps about what Watts had done, accusing him of tampering with Scripture. However there were a vast majority who were incredibly appreciative of what Isaac had done.

Isaac's younger brother Enoch, a notable poet himself wrote this to celebrate his brothers work, '*Yours is the old truth stripped of its ragged ornaments and apparels, if we may say so as younger by ages, in a new fashionable dress. There is in the old psalms we used to sing a mighty deficiency of that life and soul which are necessary to raise our fancies and kindle our passions. Not so with yours, they are incendiary to the soul, magnifying of Christ and glorious to recite. I have been persuaded for some time now that were David to speak English he would choose to make use of your style.*'

We'll sing another great Watts rendered Psalm in a few minutes to close our time with O God our Help in Ages past.

Watts continued preaching, writing and reforming for the next twenty years. He became not just a renowned preacher of the gospel but also became very active in society in reforming it by the gospel. He wrote and

spoke of social ills like drunkenness, he was a keen advocate for free and accessible education for the poor.

He was also someone who was caring and loving to his flock at the church. There are many very tender letters preserved that express not just a sincere love for people but a real desire to see them no matter what they are facing to do so in a Christ like, God glorifying way.

In 1746 near the end of his life Watts wrote a hymn to introduce a new book called the World to come. The hymn is about death and is called There is a Land of Pure delight,

There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign;
Infinite day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain.

There everlasting spring abides,
And never withering flowers;
Death, like a narrow sea divides,
This heavenly land from ours.

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
Stand dressed in living green;
So to the Jews old Canaan stood,
While Jordan rolled between.

But tim'rous mortals start and shrink,
To cross the narrow sea;
And linger, shiv'ring on the brink,
And fear to launch away.

O could we make our doubts remove,
Those gloomy doubts that rise,
And see the Canaan that we love,
With unclouded eyes.

It's very pastoral and very honest like the rest of the book, *The World to come* which is well worth a read. In it he finishes with some reflections for his readers.

1 – How valuable time is: 'every hour you live is an hour longer given to you to prepare for dying, and to save a soul.

2 – We should be aware of the advance of time and the arrival of the end. Each new day, birthday, new year or bereavement, should make us think: "Take this warning, O my soul and think of thine removal."

3 – What stupidity it is to be aware of the coming end and yet to waste time given to us, looking for ways to 'kill time': O that these loiterers would once consider, that time loiters not!

4 – Learn that God is merciful in warning us that time will end and in giving us time to respond: 'Every day and every hour is a mercy of unknown importance to sinful men.

5 – How useful it is to picture ourselves at the end of time: 'imagine ourselves... at the tribunal of Christ and to call our souls to a solemn account.'

6 – Learn the wonderful happiness of those who have used the time they have been given well and look forward to Jesus' return: 'Happy souls indeed, who have so valued time, as not to let it run off in trifles, but have obtained treasures more valuable than that time which is gone, even the riches of the covenant of grace, and the hopes of an eternal inheritance in glory.' The time of struggle, pain and battle is over; joy and delight has come.

Watts met some of his slightly later contemporaries. He met Whitefield and the Wesley brothers. He lives to see the great awakening through the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. The church had seen a seismic and glorious shift in the course of his life from a dry, emotionless, formal gathering in the 1670's to a revival of enthusiasm and life by his death in 1748. All of these gatherings would have been belting out many of the hymns that he penned, as we are today.

On the 25th November 1748 at the Abney estate, Watts commented to his personal secretary Joseph Parker,

"It is a great mercy to me that I have no matter of fear or dread in death. I could if God please, lay back my head and die without terror this

afternoon or night. My chief supports are from my view of eternal things and the interest I have in them. I trust all my sins are pardoned through the blood of Christ. I have no fear of dying; it would be the greatest comfort to lie down and sleep and wake no more."

Watts in one of his meditation on death wrote, "in heaven, new and unknown powers and glories, brighter flames of imagination, richer scenes of wit and fancy, and diviner talents.' That makes one wonder: majestic as they are on earth, what would a Watts hymn sound like in heaven?

*There we shall see His face,
And never, never sin;
There from the fountain of His grace
Drink endless pleasure in.*

So What can we learn from Watts? – Many things but here are a few I thought of...

1 – Light then heat. In all his hymn writing Isaac Watts was very careful in stating truth about God before penning an appropriate response to God. It was always informed worship and never mere emotionalism. In our day where a catchy tune accompanied by evocative language can easily be heat driven without much light.

2 – In an age of enlightened think and rationalism Isaac Watts is reasonably but remarkably emotional about his love for Jesus. He gives great credence to not just the truths about the gospel but the feelings that the gospel births in the life of the believer. In an age and a church culture where knowledge so readily supplants responding to truth with feeling another important point.

3 – Gospel faithfulness in weakness. Watts was ill for so much of his life but this turned him to prayer and dependence rather than an excuse.

4 – Investment in Children – Despite often being ridiculed for the time he took writing and seeking to educate children he persisted. He knew that God loved children and bringing them up and teaching them the things of

God was by far the best investment and use of his time. Father and Mother.

5 – Christ Centered Praise – In an age of moralism and scepticism Watts absolutely kept the main thing the main thing. He opened his Bible and made a bee-line for Jesus.

6 – using his gifts for the Highest Purpose – Watts was that brilliant and that talented that he could have been a famous novelist, a university principle, a politician so eloquent was his use of language. However he knew from the earliest age that to bring glory to God and the gospel to people was by far his greatest use and calling.

7 – Harmony – I disagree with Mr. Watts profoundly but I find myself loving him dearly.

At his funeral Service David Jennings prophetically said these words –

‘While Isaac Watts is now celebrating the new songs of heaven, how many thousands of pious worshippers are this day lifting up their hearts to God in the sacred songs he taught them on earth! Though his ‘voice’ is not any longer heard by us, yet his ‘words’, like those of the days and night, are ‘ gone to the end of the world.

Let’s Pray

Why don’t we finish by singing the hymn – **O God our Help in Ages Past – Watts’ rendering of Psalm 90.**

