

ISAAC WATTS

One of the greatest results of the Reformation was that the Bible was made increasingly available in the language of the people. In England, instead of Latin, (a language unintelligible to all but the educated), English was employed to communicate divine truth. This extended to the hymns as well. Rather than hymns being chanted in Latin, hymnody was set free to soar in language the common people could understand.

However, many people still felt that it was irreverent to sing anything but the Psalms. Consequently, many hymn-writers simply worked on producing Psalms in verse form. These became the hymns used for worship in English. Rather than “soar,” many of these adaptations were sore to the ear. Here is a typical rendition of one of the Psalms. *Aren't you glad we're not singing this way today?*

**“Ye monsters of the bubbling deep
Your Master’s praises spout;
Up from the sands ye coddlings peep,
And wag your tails about.”**

And that is how matters stood for years until, on July 17, 1674, a baby boy was born in Southampton, England. Named after his father, Isaac Watts was the eldest of what would be a large family of four sons and five daughters. Young Isaac’s father was a dissenting (non Church of England) Gospel preacher who would suffer for his faith by being banished from home on more than one occasion by religious leaders.



Even as a small boy, Isaac showed a great interest in versifying. Once, during family prayers, he began to laugh. His father asked him why. He replied that he had heard a sound and opened his eyes to see a mouse climbing a rope in a corner, and had immediately thought,

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

His father thought this irreverent, and was about to discipline his son with something more than mere words. Realizing his fate, Isaac called out,

“Father, father, mercy take,
And I will no more verses make.”

While Isaac was still a young boy, his mother found a copy of verses. She doubted that he had written them. To prove to her that he had, he penned the following acrostic based on his name:

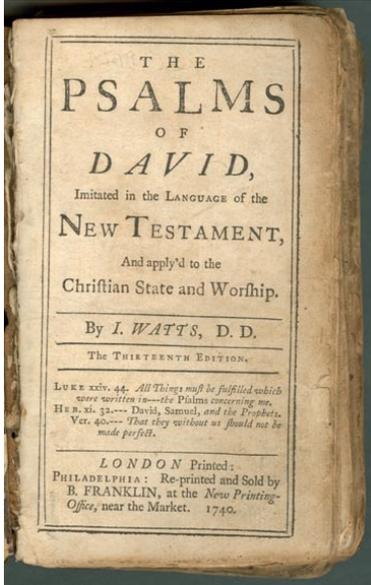
I am a vile polluted lump of earth
So I’ve continued ever since my birth
Although Jehovah grace does daily give me
As sure this monster Satan will deceive me
Come therefore Lord from Satan’s claws relieve me

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 sing Thy praises too

At the age of fifteen he trusted Christ and recorded the event:

**“Fell under considerable convictions of sin – 1688
And was taught to trust in Christ I hope – 1689”**

On one occasion, when he was in his early 20s, he complained of the bad quality of writing in the metrical Psalters of his day. He later wrote what were his sentiments at the time: *“While we sing the Praises of God in His Church, we are employ’d in that part of Worship which of all others is the nearest a-kin to Heaven; and ‘tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon Earth ...”* His father promptly challenged him to do better, and he undertook the effort. During his lifetime he wrote about 600 hymns altogether.



Many of Watts’ hymns are based on psalms, some more loosely than others. However, many of his hymns were also original heart-expressions rather than straightforward verse translations or songs taken from the Scriptures. For this Watts was criticized by those who thought it wrong to sing “uninspired hymns.” He replied that, “if we can pray to God in sentences that we have made up ourselves (instead of confining ourselves to the ‘Our Father’ and other prayers taken directly from the Scriptures), then surely we can sing to God in sentences that we have made up ourselves.” He added that the Psalms do not deal with specifically Christian themes except in hidden

language, and that it is fitting that Christians should include in their worship open and clear proclamations of the acts of God in Christ. Kenneth Osbeck points out that Watts’ hymn, “Come Ye that Love the Lord,” was no doubt written in part “to refute his critics, who termed his hymns ‘Watts’ Whims,’ as well as to provide some subtle barbs for those who refused to sing his hymns.”

“Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God;
But children of the heavenly King may speak their joys abroad.”

Among his memorable works are:

Alas, and did my Savior bleed
Am I a soldier of the cross?
Blest morning, whose first dawning rays
Come we that love the Lord
I sing th’almighty power of God
I’m not ashamed to own my Lord
Jesus shall reign where’re the sun
Join all the glorious names
Joy to the world! The Lord is come
O God, our help in ages past
When I survey the wondrous cross

One historian wrote: *“Although Watts was an Independent, or Congregationalist, and wrote primarily for such congregations, his psalms and hymns gave English-language hymnody in general a significant new beginning. Some have therefore called him ‘the father of the English hymn,’ which is somewhat misleading, since there were English hymn writers before him. A better title would be, to borrow from Erik Routley, ‘the liberator of the English hymn.’ Not only did he produce superlative examples of his new approach to congregational song, he also opened the way for others to follow, notably Doddridge, Wesley, Newton, and a whole host of others. The psalms and hymns of Watts quickly became popular and went through literally hundreds of editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For American Presbyterians and Congregationalists, his psalms and hymns were almost the only songs they sang in*

their worship. Watts' influence was so pervasive that editors of the many American hymnals and tune-books of the earlier nineteenth century often attributed an anonymous text to Watts—presumably on the assumption they had a 90-percent chance of being right! The hymns and psalms of Isaac Watts remain central to the basic corpus of English hymnody."

Isaac Watts' collection of hymns and psalms was still selling as many as 60,000 copies per year over 100 years after it was published. His Psalms of David went through 31 editions in its first 50 years, including a 1729 reprinting issued by Benjamin Franklin.

Serious illness in 1712 brought Watts to the home of Sir Thomas Abney, and there he remained for life, tutoring the children and pastoring his nearby church when he was physically able. Despite poor health he served in this capacity for about fifty years. Watts died in 1748. Samuel Johnson observed: **"Few men have left behind such purity of character or such monuments of laborious piety."**

F. W. Boreham wrote: *"A monument marks his resting-place at Bunhill Fields; another is to be found in Westminster Abbey. Other statues stand at Southampton and elsewhere. But his most fitting memorial is the stained-glass window at Freeby in Leicestershire which represents him as still surveying the Cross—that wondrous Cross on which the Prince of Glory died—around which all his minstrelsy had moved."*



Historical (USA) footnote

"Give 'em Watts, boys!"



James Caldwell was a minister-leader in the Revolution. His church, the First Presbyterian Church of Elizabethtown, NJ, counted among its members such noted men as William Livingston, the governor of the state and Abraham Clark, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, as well as more than 40 commissioned officers of the Continental Army. In 1776 Caldwell was named chaplain of the regiment that was largely composed of members of his church. Known among the troops as the "Soldier Parson," Caldwell was a zealous proponent of the patriots' cause. **During the Battle of Springfield, NJ, (June 23, 1780)**, the Americans ran out of wadding for their guns -- a problem just as serious as having no ammunition. Caldwell recognized the perfect solution; he ran inside the church and returned with a stack of Watts' Psalms and Hymns and distributed the Hymnals among the soldiers. Caldwell took that hymn book -- the source of great doctrine and spiritual truth -- raised it up in the air, and shouted to the Americans, **"Give 'em Watts, boys!"** This famous cry inspired a painting of the same title.