

ISAAC WATTS

(July 17, 1674 - November 25, 1748)

Isaac Watts has been called the “Father of English Hymnody”. He has been credited with writing as many as 750 hymns. His prolific writing leaves a legacy of 52 other works, including a book of logic used in the universities, books on grammar, pedagogy, ethics, psychology, astronomy, geography, three volumes of sermons, and 29 treatises on theology.

Young Isaac showed genius at an early age. He was learning Latin by age 4, Greek at 9, French at 11, and Hebrew at 13. Watts was brought up in the home of a committed religious Nonconformist — his father, also Isaac Watts, had been imprisoned twice for his controversial views. Unable to attend either Oxford or Cambridge on account of his non-conformity, he went to the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington in 1690. Much of his life centered around that village, which is now part of Inner London.

His education led him to the pastorate of a large independent chapel in London, where he helped train young preachers. His religious opinions were more non-denominational or ecumenical than was popular at that time. He had a greater interest in promoting education and scholarship than preaching for any particular ministry or denomination.

Though he had a beautiful soul, he was apparently quite homely. He was frail, often sickly, and his head seemed much too large for his five foot tall body. He also had small piercing eyes and a hooked nose that did not enhance his appearance. One disillusioned admirer fell in love with his poetry, but backed out of marriage when she met him.

Though German Lutherans had been singing hymns for 100 years, English Protestants followed the teaching of John Calvin and sang only Psalms taken from the Bible. Watts was discouraged by the dismal singing in the church and after a heated discussion with his father was challenged write a hymn on his own. Isaac accepted the challenge and composed his first hymn based on the 5th chapter of Revelation. It was first published in 1707 and is considered the first hymn in English designed for congregational use. This hymn was so well received that the congregation requested that he write a new hymn every week. He happily agreed, and the next two and one half years were perhaps the richest hymn writing period in his life.

In 1712 Isaac suffered a breakdown from which he never fully recovered. He asked the church to discontinue his salary. Fortunately they raised his salary and hired a co-pastor to assume most of his duties. Millions of believers have benefitted from their investment in this gifted man. In 1715 he published *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* that sold 80,000 copies the first year, and is still being purchased today.

As he lay on his death bed for three weeks in November of 1748, he gathered his strength and said to his friends: “*If God should raise me up again, I may finish some more of my papers, or God can make use of me to save a soul, and that will be worth living for. If had 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.*” (Quote taken from *Then Sings My Soul*, p. 67, by Robert J. Morgan)

Unfortunately, the issue of singing hymns versus singing the Psalms split churches, including the famous Bedford Church once pastored by John Bunyon. The controversy crossed the Atlantic and in May of 1789 the Rev. Adam Rankin told the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia: “*I have ridden horseback all the way from my home in Kentucky to ask this body to refuse the great and pernicious error of adopting the use of Isaac Watts’ hymns in public worship in preference to the Psalms of David*”. (Ibid p. 57) Certainly we need to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19), and just perhaps, Isaac Watts has helped us to obey this Scripture.