

# Songs of Praise

## A Service to Commemorate the 350th Anniversary of the birth of Isaac Watts

### Introduction

#### **In Psalm 9 we read:**

I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.

The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you. Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done.

The Psalms were one of the greatest inspirations for Isaac Watts in the writing of his 600+ hymns in the course of his lifetime. In this service, you will be glad to know, we will use just 5 out of those 600+ hymns, in a celebration Songs of Praise, acknowledging this year as the 350th anniversary of his birth. We will hear something of his life, we will hear from the Word of God and we will give praise to God.

*Give to our God immortal praise*, is our opening hymn. This hymn, written by Isaac Watts, encourages us to praise God because of His mercy which endures forever. The text is based on Psalm 136 and expresses praise to God because of His greatness and what He has done. Originally eight verses long, this hymn now appears in most hymnbooks with just five verses.

As we consider all that God has done for us physically and spiritually, and what he will do for His people eternally, there is every reason in the world for us to “*Give to Our God Immortal Praise.*”

### Hymn – Give to our God Immortal Praise

### Prayers

#### **Prayer of Thanksgiving and Confession**

Heavenly Father, we bow our hearts to you and pray. We give you thanks for all you've done.

Thank you for being our refuge and our strength. Thank you for your goodness in our lives. When we wake each day, receive the praise of our hearts. We give thanks to you that no matter what the circumstances, we can count on you to shelter us and to give us strength.

Almighty God, Merciful Father, we your people, in humble sorrow and regret, confess to you all our failings and our sins, those known and unknown. We are not perfect and we fall

short every day of our lives. But we thank you for your mercy and your grace and your forgiveness.

We make these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, and together we say the prayer that Jesus taught all his disciples, saying, Our Father ...

Our gospel reading comes from ...

[Mark 4:35-41](#)

### **Jesus calms the storm**

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side.' Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?'

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'

They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'

The reading that precedes this one in the lectionary cycle is the illustration of the growth of seed, and the Mustard Tree. This week the calming of the storm. The hymns of Isaac Watts are also dominated by the world around us that God has created, and this is seen in our next hymn, *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun*.

Isaac Watts' published his last collection of hymns in 1719, entitled *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. It was quite controversial at the time, as churches almost exclusively sang metrical psalms — the biblical Psalms translated into English rhyme and metre. Isaac Watts, however, took great liberties in paraphrasing the Psalms, rather than seeking to retain as much as possible of the specific meaning and original wording of the biblical text. He defended his work in the preface to this collection, saying that he had written these songs "as David would have done, had he lived in the days of Christianity."

This hymn is based on Psalm 72, and every verse underlines the inevitable truth that *Jesus shall reign*. His kingdom will stretch from shore to shore, for as long as the sun and moon endure, and His kingdom will never end!

[Hymn - Jesus shall reign.](#)

## 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, 'In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.'

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.

We put no stumbling-block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange – I speak as to my children – open wide your hearts also.

## 1 Samuel 17

### **David and Goliath**

Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah.

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His shield-bearer went ahead of him.

Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, 'Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us.' On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

Early in the morning David left the flock in the care of a shepherd, loaded up and set out, as Jesse had directed. He reached the camp as the army was going out to its battle positions, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines were drawing up their lines facing each other. David left his things with the keeper of supplies, ran to the battle lines and asked his brothers how they were. As he was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it.

David said to Saul, 'Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.'

Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armour on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.

'I cannot go in these,' he said to Saul, 'because I am not used to them.' So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield-bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him. He said to David, 'Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?' And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. 'Come here,' he said, 'and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!'

David said to the Philistine, 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands.'

As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly towards the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

Our next hymn might seem odd being sung at any other time than Advent, but it's perfectly right to do so.

*Joy to the world* is a very popular Christmas hymn, popular for all the wrong reasons. First of all, it is based on a psalm, and, second, it celebrates Christ's second coming much more than the first.

This favourite Christmas hymn is the result of a collaboration of at least three people – Isaac Watts, George Frederic Handel and American Lowell Mason - and draws its initial inspiration not from the Christmas narrative in Luke 2, but from Psalm 98: Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing.

Whilst Watts and Handel both lived in London in the same era, Mason lived in Boston in the next century and in his role as a music teacher combined three musical themes from Handel's *Messiah* to compose the hymn tune *Antioch*, which is now always associated with this hymn.

We might feel more at home singing this on December 25th, but *Joy to the World* inspires us to look forward to the future, at times when sin will finally be evicted, and all of humanity will bask in the glory of the God's righteousness.

[Hymn – Joy to the world](#)

## Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we come to you with hearts that need to be opened to your word and your love. There is so much around us that tears at us and causes us to tremble. Keep us ever mindful of your presence and the hope that you have given us in your Son Jesus Christ.

Guide us, we pray, as your church, to spread the good news. Keep us focused on the mission and ministry to which you have called us and lead us forward. We know that there will often be bumps and holes in the road along the way. Save us from dwelling on them and make us secure in the tasks you have placed before us.

Hear our prayers for all who need your tender touch of healing in their lives — those we name before you each day, and those who are known only to you in the depths of our hearts. Be with those who mourn. May we all remember the love and grace that your faithful people have brought to our world. We pray especially for ...

We pray for all your creation. Guide our leaders and those of other nations that this world might truly be as you created it to be — a world of peace, hope and love. We pray for peace because of tension in Israel and Gaza, Ukraine, Yemen and Sudan. We pray for hope for all those who feel vulnerable and afraid. We pray for love, that it may conquer hatred and fear, and join all people together.

We know that you hear the cries of our hearts and respond always in love. Help us to place our complete trust in your never-ending compassion.

These are our prayers, together with those that lie on the hearts of all your faithful people, which we offer to you in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As Congregationalists we are immensely proud of the part played by Isaac Watts in radicalising the writing of hymns. We are big fans of his, as were John and Charles Wesley. The Wesley brothers made extensive use of Isaac Watts hymns. John Wesley even altered Isaac Watts' hymns when they were published in his collections. The first line of our next hymn contains one of John Wesley's most significant alterations: "*O God, our help in ages past...*" rather than "*Our God, our help in ages past...*" in the original.

From John Wesley's perspective, the use of "our" as an adjective to God implied a narrower Calvinistic God who was the province only of the "elect." For the Wesley's the grace of God was open to all, not just the elect.

*O God, our help in ages past* is based on Psalm 90, one of three versions of this psalm he wrote hymns from. J.R. Watson, wrote, "This is one of Watts's greatest hymns on the human condition, setting the shortness of life and the littleness of human beings against the timeless greatness of God.... who has been our help [in the past] and hope [in the future]."

[Hymn - O God, our help in ages past](#)

## **A Reflection by Anglican Priest J. John:**

Isaac Watts was born into a Christian family in 1674 in Southampton. His father was a nonconformist; one of many believers who had refused to join Charles II's single national church. Given that his father was imprisoned for his beliefs, Watts grew up aware of the cost of a principled Christian faith.

Gifted at languages, the young Watts learnt Latin, Greek, Hebrew and French. He made a commitment to Christ in his teens, and although he could have gone to Oxford or Cambridge, refused because they would have demanded he become an Anglican.

After studying at a nonconformist academy, Watts returned home where he spent two years reading and writing books and hymns. After becoming tutor to a family, he began to preach. Recognising his ability, an independent chapel in London called him to the ministry. Watts was often ill but despite his frequent absences, his church flourished. A collection of his writings was published in 1705, and a book of hymns and spiritual songs shortly afterwards. In 1712, with his health failing, Watts stepped back from the ministry. He was welcomed into the homes of many generous friends where, for the rest of his life, he worked as a tutor and writer and, when health permitted, preacher.

Watts had a wide range of interests. He wrote dozens of theological works, penned essays on the sciences, published volumes of sermons and produced Christian material for children. His textbook on logic was so well received that it was used at Oxford University for a hundred years.

In the final decades of his life, his illnesses became intense. One encouragement was that after years of praying earnestly for revival in the church, he saw the great revivals of the 1730s under Whitfield and Wesley. Watts died in 1748, by now greatly loved and respected, and was given a memorial plaque in Westminster Abbey.

So what of Watts' hymn writing? Some background first. The two great reformers, Luther and Calvin, differed over singing. Those churches that followed Luther sang hymns and spiritual songs, while those that followed Calvin – including the English Protestants – sang only psalms. Watts struggled with singing the psalms: theologically, they had only an Old Testament perspective; musically their singable English versions were rarely satisfactory. Watts decided to take the psalms and reworked them into hymns, bringing in such New Testament emphases as Christ, the cross, the resurrection and the work of the Spirit.

Watts also went further and wrote new hymns. He had a natural ability for poetry, with a gift for rhyme and the apt phrase. He used words and phrases that were often memorable, always singable and readily adaptable to different tunes. In order to be understood by all, he kept his language plain and simple. Ultimately, Watts sought to communicate Christian truth in the most effective and appealing way to the maximum number of people. Many of his 600+ hymns remain well loved today. Watts' hymns were of such quality and so rich in spiritual insight that objections to hymn singing in churches faded away for good.

Let me point out three other qualities in his hymns.

First, his hymns reveal Watts as a powerful preacher. He was a man with a message; he had personally known the riches of the gospel and he wanted others to experience it. Taken

from the pulpit by illness, he used his hymns to preach sermons in song. Most of his best hymns speak to both the head and the heart: he wanted people to know the facts of the Christian faith but also to have their hearts moved to a deeper love of Christ. There are many people who have come to faith by contemplating the words of 'When I survey the wondrous cross'.

Second, his hymns reveal Watts as a caring pastor. He not only knew his Bible and God, but also human beings and their troubles. He didn't simply want people to acknowledge the truth; he wanted them to apply it. Many of his hymns, such as 'O God, our help in ages past', are invitations for the singer to be encouraged in the faith, to press on amid difficulties and to praise God in spite of everything. Watts' hymns lifted voices, but they also lifted hearts.

Third, his hymns reveal Watts' servant personality. In the areas of both theology and poetry Watts chose to restrain himself. Theologically, although he held firm views himself, he refused to grind any theological axe and instead produced hymns that were welcomed across every Christian denomination. And as a poet, he deliberately avoided writing that drew attention to itself. Nothing in his hymns says, 'Look at me!'; everything says, 'Look at Christ!'

I encourage you to read Isaac Watts' hymns. They will inspire us to worship God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And so we come to our final hymn, perhaps Isaac Watts' greatest hymn, *When I survey the wondrous cross*.

Isaac Watts was a contemporary of the great hymnwriters Philip Doddridge, the Wesley Brothers, John Newton and William Cowper and this hymn has often been called the greatest hymn in the English language. Another contemporary of Isaac Watts said of it, "There may be a few others equally great, but there is none greater." All one needs to do to realize the truth of this statement is to sing this majestic hymn.

Isaac Watts based this hymn on the Scriptural reference of Galatians 6:14. *"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."* The original title was *"Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ."* Later the title was changed to *"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."*

The majestic phrases of this deeply solemn hymn are as moving today as when Watts penned them in 1707. They rise to a great crescendo as the hymn ends with the words: *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

[Hymn - When I survey the wondrous cross](#)

## The Grace