In this Hymn History & Scripture, I want to look at a well known author of a number of hymns—Isaac Watts. In our previous examination of a hymn and its history, we noted Joy To The World—one of Watts’ own hymns. We were unable to bring out a great deal of HISstory on Watts. We now wish to write on the man: Isaac Watts; praying that this will give light to all the hymns written by him.

Isaac Watts has been given the title “the father of the English hymn”, to which it appears that he is well deserving. Until Watts, hymns were not sung in English Churches. Only the psalms of the Scriptures set to metrical beats were used. It is said that the tone of the service was entirely dreary and destroyed all ability to worship the Lord joyfully. It all began when a young Isaac complained to his father (the preacher) about the music. His father replied, “Why don’t you write a hymn suitable for congregational worship?” That afternoon, Isaac, wrote Hymn #1—“Behold the glories of the Lamb”. 696 more hymns followed. A few are still well known today: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”, “Alas, And Did My Savior Bleed” (At The Cross), “Joy To The World”, “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er The Sun”, “I Sing Th’ Almighty Pow’r of God”, “Come, We That Love The Lord (We’re Marching To Zion)”, O (Our) God, Our Help In Ages Past”, “Am I A Soldier Of The Cross”.

Destined From Birth: Isaac (1674-1748) was born into perilous times. His father, a minister, was arrested one year after having been married. His crime—“persistently worshipping God according to his conscience”. The elder Watts was a “Dissenting” from the Anglican church. Isaac was the eldest of 8 children and his mother was often found nursing Isaac on the jail steps while visiting his father. It seems that Isaac was destined to be a “rebel” from his birth worshipping God according to the dictates of his conscience.

A Highly Gifted Youth: Grant it, Isaac Watts did not have all the distractions that young people have now a days, but nevertheless, children have always been at play. Watts learned Latin by age 4, Greek at 9, French at 11, and Hebrew at 13. Watts learned French on his own so he could converse with the refugees from France in his city. A local physician was so impressed that he offered to finance Isaac’s education at Oxford or Cambridge. In order to attend either university, Isaac would have to renounce his Dissenting Views. Watts refused and attended a Dissenting Academy. While there, he wrote a lot of poetry, most of it in Latin.

More Than A Hymn Writer: Isaac Watts was also an able Theologian. Watts penned a book titled Ruin and Recovery of which John Wesley used forty-four pages of in his The Doctrine of Original Sin.

Watts also wrote a book of Logic and one of Reason as he was a Christian philosopher. These books were formerly used in what use to be some of America’s finest Universities and are still available in print today. Isaac was also a gifted astronomer, which is displayed in many of his hymns as he wrote of the vastness of the created universe and the greatness of his God.

---1 “dissenter” were those who desired for purity in the church (both in doctrine and practice) and believed this could only be done by completely breaking away from the established church in England. Dissenters were similar to Puritans, save the Puritans sought to “reform” the established church.
The Watts School of Hymnody: The past four centuries of hymn writing owes much to young Watts. Isaac set the model for the English hymn where others had failed. Our hymnals are full of those who walked in the clear path Isaac cut out with his own pen.

Watts believed that the song service should not be a dreary thing, but full of praise toward our God and Savior. If the song service was to be truly praise worthy, it had to go beyond the mere words of the Scripture and be that which came forth from the human heart full of love and adoration for the Lord. He believed that if the Psalms were to be used, they must be “renovated” by giving them Christian content. Watts’ hymn are comprised of five basic principles:

1) **Grand Topics**: Watts focused on the **awe of God’s omnipotence**, the spaciousness of nature, the vastness of time and the dreadfulness of eternity.

2) **“Calvinistic In Theology”**

   Watts’ hymns sing of the glory and sovereignty of God, the depravity of the human nature, the all-sufficient atonement of Christ and the security of God’s elect.

3) **“Christian in Focus”**: Christ is exalted above all else. He is the center of every hymn of Watts.

4) **Congregational Singing**: Watts wrote his hymns with the idea that they were to be sung in a congregational setting, preparing the heart for worshipping God. Watts stated, “The singing of God’s praise is the part of worship most closely related to heaven.”

5) **Based upon Scripture**: While Watts got away from psalmody, he did not remove Scripture from his hymns. He faithfully paraphrased Scripture and made masterful allusions unto that which is contained in “Thus saith the Lord.”

Although Isaac Watts never married, he loved children and composed what is believed to be the first Children’s hymnal: “Divine Songs For Children” which included the hymn “I Sing The ‘Mighty Pow’r of God”.

Watts wrote in his 24th Children’s hymn:

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\text{Why should I love my sport so well,} \\
\text{So constant at my play,} \\
\text{And lose the thoughts of heaven and hell,} \\
\text{And then forget to pray!}
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Leaving a Lasting Impression: It is ironic to me that at first Watts’ hymns were considered to be blasphemous and outrageous, while today there are many who cry for the “old-time hymns of Watts and others”. What we call “traditional” was one day believed to be “radical and satanic”. One critic fumed, “Christian congregations have shut out divinely inspired psalms and taken in Watts’ flights of fancy!” Watts’ hymns were often referred to as “Watts’ Whims” or “hymns of human composure”. Watts’ hymns outraged many causing pastors to be “fired” and splitting congregations (most

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Calvinistic—I personally do not care for the term “Calvinist”. I am not a Calvinist, I am a Baptist. Baptist believed the so-called “5 points of Calvin” long before Calvin existed. Baptists never have believed in burning those who opposed their beliefs on a stake, as John Calvin did. But we use a term as it is widely accepted in our present day to describe a set of Doctrines more commonly known amongst Baptists as the “Doctrines of Grace”.

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notably was a church that John Bunyan had been the pastor of years prior). Some churches did not split but reached a compromise: The psalms would be sung at the early part of the service and the hymns at the close of the service thus allowing the people to leave before the “hymns” were sung or to not sing at all. Watts, in response to his critics penned with subtle barbs what we commonly refer to as “We’re Marching to Zion”:

“Come We That Love The Lord, and let our joys be known;

Join in a song with sweet accord, and thus surround the throne.

Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God;

but children of the heavenly King may speak their joys abroad.”

Yet, Watts pressed on and today we sing ‘The Mighty Pow’r of God’ as Watts had penned and many are none the wiser. Let me close with a quote from Isaac Watts himself concerning his hymns: “My design was not to exalt myself to the rank and glory of poets, but I was ambitious to be a servant to the churches, and a helper to the joy of the meanest Christian.” AMEN!