

CFBC Hymns Class 10

Isaac Watts

Galatians 6:14 (KJV) 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.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross is based on Galatians 6:14..this verse inspired Isaac Watts.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross first appeared in 1707 in Watts' Hymns and Spiritual Songs. Charles Wesley, who wrote over 6,000 hymns himself, is reported to have said he would give up all his hymns if he could have written this hymn. Subtitled "Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ", this hymn stirs our souls' affections in contemplation of God's glory and revelation of Christ and in humble gratitude at the outpouring of love in Christ's death on the cross.

<https://faithmusicconnection.com/when-i-survey-the-wondrous-cross-hymn-of-the-week/>

It was a daring move when, in 1707, Isaac Watts published his first book of hymns. At that time it was the practice of almost every congregation of the Church of England to sing only Old Testament psalms in their public worship. However, Watts had grown to dislike this because it restricted the Christian from being able to explicitly celebrate in song all those aspects of the gospel that are fulfilled and illuminated in the New Testament.

In the preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Watts addresses the worship situation of his time and offers a defense for writing and publishing new music.

Many Ministers and many private Christians have long groaned under this Inconvenience, and have wished rather than attempted a Reformation: At their importunate and repeated Requests I have for some Years past devoted many Hours of leisure to this Service. Far be it from my Thoughts to lay aside the Psalms of *David* in public Worship; few can pretend so great a Value for them as my self . . . But it must be acknowledged still, that there are a thousand Lines in it which were not made for a Saint in our Day, to assume as his own;

There are also many deficiencies of Light and Glory which our Lord *Jesus* and his Apostles have supplied in the Writings of the New Testament; and with this Advantage I have composed these spiritual Songs which are now presented to the World.

Within Watts' book, under the section "Prepared for the Holy Ordinance of the Lord's Supper" is the first public printing of "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Concerning the hymn's creation, there is no special story that singles it from among the many others he wrote. But ***what makes the hymn unique is the particular beauty of its language and imagery, and the power with which it highlights the most significant event in human and personal history — the cross of Jesus Christ our God.***

Watts' giftedness for writing hymns, combined with his courage in publishing them, would eventually turn the tide against singing only psalms and set a new standard for Christian worship in the English language. Today Watts is widely recognized as the "Father of English Hymnody." "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" is his greatest hymn.

<https://www.challies.com/articles/hymn-stories-when-i-survey-the-wondrous-cross-free-download/>

Commentary from WordWiseHymns...

This hymn deserves a place in the top ten of anyone's list. In over 300 years since it was written, it has hardly been surpassed. Charles Wesley was himself an outstanding hymn writer, but Wesley is reputed to have said he'd give up all that he'd written to have been the author of this one.

We can no longer "survey the wondrous cross" of Christ in a physical sense. There is even some doubt as to where it was located. Our visit there must consist of an envisioning of the scene in our mind's eye, based on the Word of God, and energized by faith. And when we do that, sincerely, and thoughtfully, we're overwhelmed by what "the Prince of Glory" did for us (cf. I Cor. 2:7-8). How could we exchange the wealth of all the world for the eternal salvation wrought for us there? How could we ever take pride in our own achievements, when compared to Christ's? With the Apostle Paul we say, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

As we see Christ's bleeding form, and are gripped by the reason for His agony, the holy hush is broken only by our own weeping—not so much for His approaching death, because we know how the story ends. But for our own folly and sin that made the cross necessary. How can we cling to all this sinful world has to offer, if it will mean abandoning Him (cf. I Jn. 2:15-17).

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

What can I give Him in return. Salvation is ours by the grace of God. We can do nothing to earn it or pay for it. And yet, love responds to love, and we readily pledge Him our love and loyalty, and our sacred service.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

There are echoes of Romans 12: 1 here. And some worship leaders suggest, as a variation, that the congregation sing the last two lines:

Love so amazing, so divine, *Shall have* my soul, my life, my all.

<https://wordwiseshymns.com/2011/11/25/when-i-survey-the-wondrous-cross/>

The original fourth stanza of this hymn is usually omitted though it inspires quite powerful images:

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er his body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

The last two lines of this stanza form a chiasmus, as hymnologist J. Richard Watson notes, “a crossing over on the manner of the Greek letter chi: It is found . . . in the great fourth verse, which takes the idea from Galatians 6:14.” (Note the “cross” that is formed between the words “dead” and “globe” in those two lines.)

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-when-i-survey-the-wondrous-cross>

Our God Our Help in Ages Past...Psalm 90 (KJV)

- 1** Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
- 2** Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.
- 3** Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.
- 4** For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.
- 5** Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.
- 6** In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.
- 7** For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.
- 8** Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.
- 9** For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.
- 10** The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.
- 11** Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.
- 12** So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.
- 13** Return, O Lord, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.
- 14** O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
- 15** Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.
- 16** Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.
- 17** And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Commentary on Our God, Our Help in Ages Past...Ligon Duncan and Derek Thomas

This hymn is without doubt one of the greatest hymns ever written in the English language. It's a paraphrase of Psalm 90, by one of the most famous hymn writers ever in English. And it's one of the best tunes in all of English hymnody. This is an indigenous English hymn—English author, English composer—written at a significant time in English history...a great rendering of Psalm 90.

Isaac Watts was a phenomenal hymn writer, perhaps next to Wesley the most well-known in the English language and England, and still being sung today. Just open any hymnbook at random and just look for Isaac Watts, and there're probably dozens and dozens of hymns in there by Isaac Watts. Isaac Watts was born in 1674, and this hymn is written in 1714...Watts was perhaps one of the most famous Non-Conformists of that period, and lived in Southampton on the south coast of England. He was given a very classical education, taught Greek and Latin and Hebrew by a Mr. Pinhorn, the rector of All Saints and Headmaster of the grammar school in Southampton. He was gifted and set apart really from his earliest childhood. He was destined for ordination in the Church of England. That's where he was heading, but he refused it and entered a Non-Conformist academy in Stoke Newington in 1690, and came under the influence of a pastor of an independent congregation there. He became a member of that congregation in 1693. He left the academy at the age of about twenty and spent three years at home, and it was then that the bulk of the hymns that we know of were written and sung there in Southampton Chapel. Spending really the vast majority of his life in composing hymns, he wrote some important theological texts.

It was Watts' concern that if we are on the other side of Malachi, on this side of Pentecost, then do we not sing the Psalms with the rest of the Bible in mind? Namely, their fulfillment in mind? Because if all you do is sing the Psalms — and I believe we ought to sing all of the Psalms...150 Psalms — but if all you do is sing the Psalms as they were given in Hebrew, translated into English, then you never sing Christ. You sing about Him, and you sing some Old Testament references to Him, but you can never say the words, "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear." And that to me — I mean, you can preach about Jesus and you can pray to Jesus, and you can read about Jesus in the New Testament, and you can read about Him in the Old Testament, but you can never use His name...not the name that was given to Him. And that to me is important, and I think that's part of the reason Watts decided to Christianize the Psalms.

It's interesting to see how Watts treats the Hebrew text in a hymn like *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*, which again is paraphrased from Psalm 90.

For those who don't remember Psalm 90...some may remember it from either the KingJames or from the beautiful old Miles Coverdale version of Psalm 90 that is inThe Book of Common Prayer:

“Lord, Thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, Thou art God from everlasting.”

Watts takes that language and gives you,

“Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.”

Watts gets that out of “Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.” So it's poetic, but it's reflecting ideas that are pulled out of the Psalm itself.

You can imagine in 1719 perhaps some of the connotations of “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past, our hope for years to come” in a moment of national crisis and importance — at least for some. And just like many of the hymns have this connotation of being delivered from war or pestilence.

There was tumult and disruption on England during these times, and tremendous fear about what this would mean. Would it mean the loss of the liberties that had been gained at the price of much blood...and the return to persecution, and perhaps some martyrdom, even?

This hymn was associated with tremendous national deliverance. And perhaps this is one of the reasons that here, over three hundred years later, it's still used at significant national events. It was used for WinstonChurchill's funeral in 1965. On a number of major events in relatively recent British history it's been a hymn that they have utilized.

There are certain first lines that are so familiar, and Watts was such a prolific hymn writer. If I just give you the first line of some of his famous hymns... “Before Jehovah's awful throne”; “Come, Dearest Lord, descend and dwell”; “Come, let us join our cheerful songs”; “Come, we that love the Lord”; “From all that dwell below the skies”; “Jesus shall reign where'er the sun”; “Join all the glorious names”; “There is a land of pure delight”; “When I survey the wondrous cross”—these are all very, very familiar lines. And *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past* is one of those.

The famous Methodist hymnologist, Albert Edwards Bailey, says of this hymn:

“By universal consent, this hymn is one of the grandest in the whole realm of English hymnody. It is found in practically every hymnal. No other embraces in such moving language the whole scope of history, faith in a God who realizes His purposes through history, and the solidarity of a nation which in times of crisis places its hope in the eternal.”

That’s almost a poetic description of the song itself. And again, if you go and read the hymn, or go and read Psalm 90 in your Bible translation, and then look at how poetically and yet theologically faithfully Watts has rendered the text of this hymn, this Psalm paraphrase, you’ll be struck at how he has been careful to lift every idea in his text out of the Psalm, and yet he puts them together in some interesting combinations.

“Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,” clearly comes out of the first verse of the Psalm. But the idea of “our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home” is actually picked up from elsewhere in the Psalm. But he has to do that for the balance of the text of the poem itself. And there are very, very memorable and picturesque lines in the text of this hymn, like:

A thousand ages in Thy sight
are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the
night before the rising sun.

The busy tribes of flesh and
blood, with all their lives and cares,
Are carried downwards by Your
flood, and lost in following years.

Comments from WordWiseHymns...

This magnificent hymn was published in 1719. It originally had nine stanzas, of which 4, 6, and 8 are now commonly omitted. (Stanza 7 is too, in some hymnals, but that is a great loss.) Based on Psalm 90:1-5, some consider it Watts’s best paraphrase. His original title for the hymn was “Man Frail and God Eternal.” The tune is named for St. Anne’s Church, in Soho, where Croft was the organist.

“Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

You turn man to destruction, and say, 'Return, O children of men.' For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night. You carry them away like a flood; they are like a sleep. In the morning they are like grass which grows up: in the morning it flourishes and grows up; in the evening it is cut down and withers" (Ps. 90:1-6).

The 90th Psalm is identified as a "prayer of Moses" in the heading. He looked back over the years, even back to the origin of his people in God's calling of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). Down through the years, he saw the Lord's hand at work, and saw how He had been a Shelter and a Refuge for them. Many Christians today can look back on years of walking with the Lord...And we can celebrate God's faithfulness through many twists and turns of the way.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!

Almighty God is our "help" in weakness, our "hope," in times of discouragement and despair, our "shelter" in the dangerous storms of life, and our "eternal home," now and forever (Stanza 1). How wonderful! Though over three hundred years old, the hymn still has a message for today. Little wonder that it has become a standard for military services, or that it was used at the funeral of wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill.

"You have been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; for the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall" (Isa. 25:4).

Stanza 2 presents the Lord as the all-sufficient One, who is a sure defense for His people. And He is these things not simply for now, but forever, because He is, in Himself, a changeless God (Stanza 3). What He is, in His nature and character, He is infinitely and forever.

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Still may we dwell secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

Stanza 3...

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

There is a marvelously eloquent contrast made in Stanzas 5 and 7, concerning how the eternal God relates to time, and how we do. The Lord inhabits eternity (Isa. 57:15; cf. Ps. 90:4). Human beings, on the other hand, are finite creatures of time. As far as their present mortality is concerned, they are swept along, and swept away, by the inexorable currents of time. Because of this our prayer is, “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12), help us to use well whatever time You give us.

Stanza 5

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Stanza 7

Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

The hymn ends by reiterating the opening lines, and pleading that the Lord continue to help us all our days, and on into eternity.

Stanza 9

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

<https://wordwisehymns.com/2014/01/22/o-god-our-help-in-ages-past/>

The Historical Setting of Our God, Our Help in Ages Past...

Christianity was facing a dark future in England when Queen Anne forced through Parliament the Schism Act designed to severely limit religious freedom.

Against this black backdrop, Isaac Watts wrote the stately, reassuring hymn “O God Our Help In Ages Past.”

How the words must have brought renewed courage and comfort to Christians in those days of fear and instability.

<https://pcplittlelambs.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/hymn-history-o-god-our-help-in-ages-past.pdf>

The original text in full of Our God, Our Help in Ages Past...

Stanzas 4,6 and 8 are typically omitted in modern hymnals

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home:

Under the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

***Thy word commands our flesh to dust,
“Return, ye sons of men”;
All nations rose from earth at first,
And turn to earth again.***

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

***The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their lives and cares,
Are carried downwards by thy flood,
And lost in following years.***

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

***Like flowery fields the nations stand,
Pleased with the morning light;
The flowers beneath the mower's hand
Lie withering e'er 'tis night.***

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home.

Heidelberg Catechism (1563) Lord's Day 10 on Providence...

Q 27. What dost thou understand by the Providence of God?

The almighty everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures; and so governs them, that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

Q 28. What does it profit us to know that God has created, and by His providence still upholds all things?

That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and for what is future, have good confidence in our faithful God and Father, that no creature shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.

HOPE AND STRENGTH DURING A TIME OF SHAKING

<https://www.reformationscotland.org/2020/12/29/hope-and-strength-during-a-time-of-shaking/>

Any new year is invested with much expectation, even more so for 2021. There are many expressions of hope that this year will witness recovery from our troubled condition in 2020. There are of course positive things that we can take with us from our experience. Yet some things that many people hope in proved especially vulnerable during the past year. There is, however, one source of unshakable strength and hope. It is especially against such times that the Lord reveals Himself as the ultimate solid hope of His people.

As David Dickson points out, the Lord's people strengthen themselves in believing the promises of God's Word concerning the care of His people. They look to past experience of deliverance to guard their heart against the fear of all possible trouble in time to come. So they can say "God is our refuge and strength" (Psalm 46:1). Although the Lord will not exempt His people from trouble, He will be near them in trouble. When they are made conscious of their weakness, He will not delay "a very present help in trouble". This guards their heart against fear as well as making it fixed and settled through faith. When faith is fixed on God, it can look at the greatest dangers and troubles that can be imagined with a resolution to adhere to God and His truth whatever may happen. Although the whole earth is shaken, faith finds footing and ground to stand upon in God Himself (Psalm 46:1-3).

Joel prophesied during troubled times for God's people, days not only of desolation but of confusion and terror. Yet there are rich promises in the midst of this such as the promise of Joel 3:16 "the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel". George Hutcheson helps us apply the truths that can be drawn from this in the following updated extract.

1. GOD MAY SOMETIMES REQUIRE A TIME OF SHAKING

As God is powerfully able to overturn heaven and earth when He pleases; in subduing His enemies He may bring great alterations and overturnings in the world. For, when he shall roar, "the heavens and the earth shall shake", which, together with what is said (v. 15), makes a complete parallel with the condition of the Church (Joel 2:10), and it implies such an alteration of affairs, as if there were a dissolution of the world and overturning of the course of nature.

And it is no wonder if those who are so well rooted in the world and so universally spread through the earth, cause it to shake through general commotions before they are cast out of it.

2. GOD'S PEOPLE MAY HAVE MANY FEARS IN A TIME OF SHAKING

When God is shaking the earth to overturn enemies, God's people may be exercised by many fears and apprehensions that the storm will break upon them; therefore they need a promise to secure them against this.

3. GOD IS THE ONLY SECURITY IN A TIME OF SHAKING

Nothing will be able to secure the hearts of God's people against the terrors of a time of great commotions, except God alone and what they find in Him and from Him. The promise therefore points them to what "the Lord will be" to them. In times of great confusion, the Lord's people may expect that He will be a place of refuge in which they may hide. He will provide those who come to Him, with grounds of hope for the future and with strength and courage to bear it until the accomplishment comes. It is "hope", or "a refuge" and "strength", which is extended here and God undertakes not to disappoint them of these. The "Lord will be the hope of his people", He will take them under His protection, He will let them see grounds for hope in Himself, and furnish them with hope to lay hold on it and with strength to bear it all.

4. GOD PROMISES THIS FOR ALL HIS PEOPLE

What the Lord has been or will be at any time to His people Israel, in performing spiritual promises, He will be to all who are truly His people. The promise is generally both to "his people" whoever they may be, and "to the children of Israel".

George Hutcheson (1615-1674) ministered in Ayrshire and Edinburgh and was a noted bible expositor. Like many other ministers he was removed from his congregation in 1662 for refusing to conform to the rule of bishops.