

## CFBC Hymns Class 9

Isaac Watts (1674-1749), the “Father of English Hymnody”

***Frustrated with the heartless psalm singing of his time, young Isaac Watts sometimes criticized the singing at his church. Listening to his concerns one day, Watts' father challenged him, "Well then, young man, why don't you give us something better to sing?"***

***"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."***

Isaac Watts- When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, 1749



**Isaac Watts' self-assessment and commitment to his Saviour at age 7...**

**"I"** - I am a vile, polluted lump of earth

**"S"** - So I've continued ever since my birth

**"A"** - Although Jehovah, grace doth daily give me

**"A"** - As sure this monster, Satan, will deceive me

**"C"** - Come therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me.

"W" - Wash me in Thy blood, O Christ  
"A" - And grace divine impart  
"T" - Then search and try the corners of my heart  
"T" - That I in all things may be fit to do  
"S" - Service to Thee, and Thy praise too.

## **A Brief Survey of the Life and Ministry of Isaac Watts**

Born: July 17, 1674, Southampton, England

Died: November 25, 1749 Stoke Newington, England

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Known as the "Father of English hymnody," Isaac Watts wrote approximately 600 hymns. He showed literary genius even as a boy.

He was born to Isaac Watts, Sr. and his wife Sarah, who were "Dissenters." That is, they were not Anglicans, which was a treasonous offense in those days. About the time that Isaac, Jr. arrived, prematurely, on July 17, 1674, the elder Watts was arrested. Sarah reportedly nursed little Isaac while seated on a stone outside the prison.

In time Watts was released and the young couple soon discovered they had a precocious child. Young Isaac took to books almost from infancy. He loved rhyme and verse. ***At age seven, he wrote an acrostic (see above) spelling out the letters of his name. This acrostic not only showed his brilliance, but also the strong Calvinistic theology which was characteristic of his life.***

Once as a child, he reportedly got in trouble for making rhymes out of everyday language. Scolded for this, he replied,

"Oh, Father, do some pity take,  
and I will no more verses make."

***It is recorded that almost as soon as Isaac could lisp a word his oft-repeated request was for "A book! a book! Buy a book!"***

Watts' studies in language went far beyond everyday rhymes, however. He learned Latin at four, Greek at nine, French at ten, and Hebrew at thirteen. Noticing his abilities, a doctor and some friends offered him a university education, figuring that he would be ordained in the Church of England.

Watts turned them down, instead attending the Nonconformist Academy under the care of Thomas Rowe and joining the Independent congregation at Girdlers' Hall in 1693. He left the academy at the age of 20, spending the next two years at home.

***Frustrated with the heartless psalm singing of his time, young Watts sometimes criticized the singing at his church. Listening to his concerns one day, Watts' father challenged him, "Well then, young man, why don't you give us something better to sing?" He rose to the challenge by writing his first hymn. It was well received by the congregation of the Mark Lane Independent Chapel, where he attended, and for the next two years, Watts wrote a new hymn for every Sunday. It was during this time that he wrote the bulk of Hymns and Spiritual Songs. These were sung from manuscripts in the Southampton chapel and were published 1707-1709.***

Watts moved to London to tutor the children of a wealthy family of Dissenters. He joined Mark Lane Independent Chapel, where he was soon asked to be a teacher, then was hired as associate pastor. ***He preached his first sermon at the age of 24. In 1702 he was ordained as senior pastor of the congregation, the position he retained to the end of his life. He was a brilliant Bible student and his sermons brought the church to life.***

### **Isaac Watts, the Pastor**

In an ordination sermon, the preacher warned the aspirant student against the fault which would most easily beset him. **"Do not say within yourself, how much or how elegantly I can talk upon such a text; but what can I say most usefully to those who hear me, for the instruction of their minds, for the correction of their consciences, and for the persuasion of their hearts?"** Be not fond of displaying your learned criticisms in clearing up the terms and phrases of a text, when scholars only can be edified by them; nor spend away the precious moments of the congregation, in making them hear you explain what is clear enough before, and hath no need of explaining; nor in proving that which is so obvious that it needs no proof. This is little better than trifling with God and man. Think not, how can I make a sermon correct and earnest, but how I can make the most profitable sermon for my hearers: — not what fine things I can say, either in a way of criticism or philosophy, or in a way of oratory or harangue; but what powerful words I can speak to impress the consciences of those that hear with a serious and lasting sense of moral, divine and eternal things. Judge wisely what to leave out, as well as what to speak. **Let not your chief design be to work up a sheet, or to hold out an hour, but to save a soul."**

A short and frail man, Watts' health began to fail at a young age. When his friends, the Abneys, invited him to visit their estate in 1712, Watts accepted. He ended up staying with them for thirty-six years, writing many of his hymns on their estate and preaching occasionally as his health permitted.

Though German Lutherans had been singing hymns for over a hundred years by Watts' time, Calvinists had not. Calvin preferred that his people only sing psalms. ***But Watts had become concerned about congregational singing with only (what he considered) grim, ponderous psalms to sing. Wanting to bring New Testament light to the psalms, Watts wrote paraphrases of nearly all of the psalms, publishing them in a hymnal titled Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament.***

***Watts also wrote hymns that departed from the psalms and included more personal expressions. This literary license did not please everyone and some felt his hymns were "too worldly" for the church as they were not based on the Psalms. Yet Watts felt strongly that the Christian church should sing of Christ.*** He explained his approach to writing hymns this way:

***"Where the Psalmist describes religion by the fear of God, I have often joined faith and love to it. Where he speaks of the pardon of sin through the mercies of God, I rather choose to mention the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. Where He promises abundance of wealth, honor, and long life, I have changed some of these typical blessings for grace, glory and life eternal, which are brought to light by the gospel, and promised in the New Testament."***

Watts further explained his philosophy on hymn-writing in his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, a collection of 210 of his hymns:

***"While we sing the praises of God in His church, we are employed in that part of worship which of all others is the nearest akin to heaven, and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon earth. That very action which should elevate us to the most delightful and divine sensations doth not only flat our devotion but too often awakens our regret and touches all the springs of uneasiness within us."***

***Many of Watts' paraphrases are still widely sung today. "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" is a paraphrase of Psalm 90, "Joy to the World" is from Psalm 98, "Jesus Shall Reign," from Psalm 72.***

***In all, nearly 600 hymns are attributed to him. His hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" has been described as the best hymn in the English language.*** Other well-loved hymns written by Isaac Watts include "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," "Jesus Shall Reign," and "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" After his death, this well-loved writer was honored with a statue in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

***The popularity of Isaac Watts' hymns caused a tempest in his day. In his day, English congregations predominately sang Psalms, so singing verses that were of "human composure" (such as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross") caused great controversy. One man complained, "Christian congregations have shut out divinely inspired Psalms and taken in Watts' flights of fancy." The issue split churches, including one in Bedford, England that was once pastored by John Bunyan.***

In America, in May, 1789, Rev. Adam Rankin told the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, meeting 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."

We don't know Watts' reaction to these statements, however Dr. Samuel Johnson said of him "...by his established and habitual practice, he was gentle, modest, and inoffensive."

***Enjoying the children of Sir Thomas and Lady Abney, with whom he stayed, Watts published Divine and Moral Songs for Children in 1715. It sold 80,000 copies in a year and has been selling ever since. In the preface he states, "Children of high and low degree, of the Church of England or Dissenters, baptized in infancy or not, may all join together in these songs. And as I have endeavored to sink the language to the level of a child's understanding . . . to profit all, if possible, and offend none."***

Watts died trusting alone in the merits, righteousness and blood of Christ, of which he had so often written. ***One sentence from his death-bed was: "I remember an aged minister say that the most learned and knowing Christians when they come to die have only the same plain promises of the Gospel for their support as the common and unlearned of the people of God; and so I find it. They are the plain promises which do not require labour or pains to understand them; for I can do nothing now but look into my Bible for some promise to support me, and live upon that."***

***The epitaph he had composed himself, in these humble words:***

ISAAC WATTS, D. D.

Pastor of a Church of Christ in London, successor to THE REV. JOSEPH CARYL, DR. JOHN OWEN, MR. DAVID CLARKSON, AND DR. ISAAC CHAUNCY;

After fifty years of feeble labours in the gospel, interrupted by four years of tiresome sickness, was at last dismissed to his rest. In uno Jesu omnia.

2 Cor. v. 8. Absent from the body and present with the Lord.  
Col. iii. 4. When Christ who is my life shall appear, then shall I also appear with him in glory.

***Isaac Watts' captured the essence of his heavenly hope in these words...***

***There is a land of pure delight,  
Where saints immortal reign;  
Infinite day excludes the night,  
And pleasures banish pain.***

***There everlasting spring abides,  
And never-withering flowers;  
Death, like a narrow sea, divides  
This heavenly land from ours.***

Isaac Watts- There is a Land of Pure Delight

**Isaac Watts and “The Psalms of David” (1719)**

***Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament***

“The 'Psalms of David' is not a metrical psalter of the ordinary pattern. It leaves out all the imprecatory portions, paraphrases freely, infuses into the text the Messianic fulfillment and the evangelical interpretations, and adjusts the whole (...as in the substitution of 'Britain' for 'Israel') to the devotional standpoint of his time...The characteristics of his hymns are tender faith, joyousness, and serene piety.

Robert Southley  
Keswick, August 20, 1834

## **Psalm 72 (KJV)**

- 1** Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king's son.
- 2** He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment.
- 3** The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness.
- 4** He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor.
- 5** They shall fear thee as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations.
- 6** He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth.
- 7** In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth.
- 8** He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.
- 9** They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust.
- 10** The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.
- 11** Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him.
- 12** For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper.
- 13** He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy.
- 14** He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence: and precious shall their blood be in his sight.
- 15** And he shall live, and to him shall be given of the gold of Sheba: prayer also shall be made for him continually; and daily shall he be praised.
- 16** There shall be an handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon: and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth.
- 17** His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed.
- 18** Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous things.
- 19** And blessed be his glorious name for ever: and let the whole earth be filled with his glory; Amen, and Amen.
- 20** The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.

## Jesus Shall Reign (Based on Psalm 72)

Words: Isaac Watts, The Psalms of David, 1719

***Note- Italicized lyrics are not included in Trinity Hymnal but were part of the original hymn.***

Music: Duke Street, attributed to John Hatton, 1793

1 Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journeys run;  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

***Behold the islands with their kings,  
And Europe her best tribute brings;  
From north to south the princes meet,  
To pay their homage at His feet.***

***There Persia, glorious to behold,  
There India shines in eastern gold;  
And barb'rous nations at His word  
Submit, and bow, and own their Lord.***

2 To him shall endless prayer be made,  
And praises throng to crown his head;  
His Name, like sweet perfume, shall rise  
With ev'ry morning sacrifice.

3 People and realms of ev'ry tongue  
Dwell on his love with sweetest song;  
And infant voices shall proclaim  
Their early blessings on his Name.

4 Blessings abound where'er he reigns;  
The pris'ner leaps to lose his chains,  
The weary find eternal rest,  
And all the sons of want are blest.



***Where He displays His healing power,  
Death and the curse are known no more:  
In Him the tribes of Adam boast  
More blessings than their father lost.***

5 Let ev'ry creature rise and bring  
Peculiar honors to our King,  
Angels descend with songs again,  
And earth repeat the loud Amen!

***Great God, whose universal sway  
The known and unknown worlds obey,  
Now give the kingdom to Thy Son,  
Extend His power, exalt His throne.***

***The scepter well becomes His hands;  
All Heav'n submits to His commands;  
His justice shall avenge the poor,  
And pride and rage prevail no more.***

***With power He vindicates the just,  
And treads th'oppressor in the dust:  
His worship and His fear shall last  
Till hours, and years, and time be past.***

***As rain on meadows newly mown,  
So shall He send his influence down:  
His grace on fainting souls distills,  
Like heav'nly dew on thirsty hills.***

***The heathen lands, that lie beneath  
The shades of overspreading death,  
Revive at His first dawning light;  
And deserts blossom at the sight.***

***The saints shall flourish in His days,  
Dressed in the robes of joy and praise;  
Peace, like a river, from His throne  
Shall flow to nations yet unknown.***

G. J. Stevenson's Notes on the Methodist Hymn Book relates:

Perhaps one of the most interesting occasions on which this hymn was used was that on which King George, presiding over the South Sea Islands...gave a new constitution to his people, exchanging a heathen for a Christian form of government. Under the spreading branches of the banyan trees sat some thousand natives from Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa, on Whitsunday, 1862, assembled for Divine worship. Foremost amongst them all sat King George himself. Around him were seated old chiefs and warriors who had shared with him the dangers and fortunes of many a battle—men whose eyes were dim, and whose powerful frames were bowed down with the weight of years. But old and young alike rejoiced together in the joys of that day, their faces most of them radiant with Christian joy, love, and hope. It would be impossible to describe the deep feeling manifested when the solemn service began, by the entire audience singing Dr. Watts' hymn 'Jesus shall reign'.

<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/j/s/jsreign.htm>

### **Commentary on “Jesus Shall Reign” by Robert Cottrill (Edited)...**

Pastor, theologian, and hymn writer, Isaac Watts grew up in a church that believed only the Psalms should be sung in the services, no newer hymns. But he argued that by so doing they were missing a great deal of New Testament truth. With the church's permission, he began writing some hymns for the congregation, eventually producing about six hundred of them.

But when a hymn writer takes an Old Testament text and gives it a New Testament meaning, that involves more than merely explaining the initial passage of Scripture and drawing life principles from it. It requires expressing an understanding of how the New Testament relates to the passage.

Watt's hymn *Jesus Shall Reign* is a case in point. He used the latter part of Psalm 72, and turned it into a hymn about Jesus. The psalm is a prayer of David for his son, Solomon, when He ascended to the throne. Watts felt this could also be a picture of the spread of the gospel today.

It seems best to look beyond both David's time, and even Watts's more recent application, and see there a prophetic picture of Christ's second coming and reign.

“He shall have dominion...to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 72:8) was not literally true of Solomon. Nor was “all kings shall fall down before him; all nations shall

serve him” (vs. 11). But at a future day when Christ returns He is called “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16), and we read, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” (Rev. 11:15). As the prophet Daniel describes it, “Behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven!...To Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14).

Here is Watts’s hymn, picturing the earthly kingdom and reign of Christ.

1 Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journeys run;  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

2 To him shall endless prayer be made,  
And praises throng to crown his head;  
His Name, like sweet perfume, shall rise  
With ev'ry morning sacrifice.

3 People and realms of ev'ry tongue  
Dwell on his love with sweetest song;  
And infant voices shall proclaim  
Their early blessings on his Name.

4 Blessings abound where'er he reigns;  
The pris'ner leaps to lose his chains,  
The weary find eternal rest,  
And all the sons of want are blest.

5 Let ev'ry creature rise and bring  
Peculiar honors to our King,  
Angels descend with songs again,  
And earth repeat the loud Amen!

Psalm 72 presents an idealized portrait of the reign of King Solomon, possibly an aspiration written by Solomon himself, or by his father David. Vs. 20 does not mean this is the last psalm of David’s in the book. Many more are found after this point. Rather, the statement means “the prayers of David...are *fulfilled* in what is described concerning Israel’s ideal king (cf. II Sam. 23:1-5).

Psalm 72 describes five aspects of the reign of the king:

- 1) That it will be a just and righteous reign (vs. 1-4)
- 2) That it will bring in lasting and universal peace (vs. 5-11)
- 3) That it will be a reign of kindness and compassion (vs. 12-14)
- 4) That it will be a time of great prosperity and plenty (vs. 15-16)
- 5) That it will be an endless reign, to the praise and glory of God (vs. 17-20)

The question then is when and how does this psalm find its fulfilment. Certainly not in Solomon, a very imperfect king...in the end, though he may well have aspired to these things.

The Psalm (after which Watts' patterned his hymn) is ultimately about Christ. It seems clear that the literal and final fulfilment of Psalm 72 awaits the return of Christ, and the establishment of His earthly reign (Isa. 9:6; Lk. 1:31-33; cf. Rev. 11:15; 19:11-16; 21:1-3, 23-26). One day, "He shall have dominion from sea to sea" (Ps. 72:8), and "all kings shall fall down before Him" (vs. 11).

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Doth his successive journeys run;  
His kingdom spread from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

Let every creature rise and bring  
Peculiar honours to our King;  
Angels descend with songs again,  
And earth repeat the loud amen!

Note: "Peculiar" here means unique and special.

<https://wordwisehymns.com/2011/08/31/jesus-shall-reign/>