

The Life of Isaac Watts

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[0 : 00] If you're visiting us, you're more than welcome. We're doing something slightly different tonight. Normally we would have a service, we'd sing some songs, we'd crack open a portion of scripture and look at it together.

But because this is our last evening service before the summer, we thought we'd do something a little different. I thought it would be a treat. Well, I think it's a treat, but you'll have to tell me afterwards whether it was a treat.

We're going to look at the life of Isaac Watts. Paul exhorts the Colossians and he says this.

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

That's what Paul writes and there's a really enlightening assertion in that exhortation. Singing, according to Paul, and we know this from experience, has a peculiar ability to penetrate the heart and resonate in the soul.

[1 : 18] Looking back over your life, I dare say you can remember the choruses you sung at Sunday school much better than the memory verses that you learnt. I bet you can remember the top 40 songs growing up much better than you can the paragraphs of the books that you read.

Therefore, what we sing isn't just a filler of time. It's not just an option for the enthusiastic. It's not just an opportunity to showcase our musical abilities.

Singing is a God-ordained means to grow hearts that are overflowing with the message of Christ. We sing to help us learn of, focus on and respond to God in corporate worship.

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So if this is the case, then Isaac Watts is a man worthy of our study. The man aptly described as the father of hymnody, the pastor hymnologist, the scribe of experiential doctrine.

[2 : 39] And his whole point was this, that theology must lead to doxology. As we learn truths about God, it must lead us into authentic worship of God.

If you just have theology with no doxology, you've just got cold, dry orthodoxy. That you know all the right stuff, but it hasn't penetrated your heart. If you just have doxology without theology, then you're just singing for the sake of singing and it's an idol.

Because it's not informed about knowledge of God. This was the big thing in Isaac Watts' life. He wanted to teach truth, apply truth, and show people the right response to that truth.

And so that's who we're going to look at tonight. So let's pray, and then we'll have a look at the life of Isaac Watts together. I want to pray one of Isaac's hymns. Let's pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove, with all thy quickening powers, kindle a flame of sacred love in these cold hearts of ours.

[3 : 51] Look how we grovel here below, fond of these trifling toys. Our souls can neither fly nor go to reach eternal joys.

In vain we tune our formal songs, in vain we strive to rise. Hosannas languish on our tongues, and our devotion dies. Dear Lord, and shall we ever live at this poor dying rate?

Our love so faint, so cold to thee, and thine to us so great. So come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove, with all thy quickening powers.

Come shed abroad the Saviour's love, and that shall kindle us. Amen. The year is 1674.

The year of Isaac Watts' birth, and Britain is deeply troubled. Eleven years before Isaac Watts was born, the bubonic plague had swept through the country, killing more than 100,000 people in London alone, which was about a quarter of the total population of the capital city.

[5 : 05] The city of Southampton, where Isaac Watts was born, had almost been completely depopulated. The town records talk about streets being overgrown with weeds, because there was no one going along the thoroughfares.

1666 saw the great fire of London, that had largely levelled the nation's capital. So these big events add to the trouble that Britain was in, but it was also in a tumultuous state, when it looked at the religious and the political.

These affected Isaac Watts' life more than anything else. The first half of the 18th century, the 17th century saw the Roman Catholic Stuart monarchs tried to assert their divine right to rule as absolutists over both the church and the state.

Parliament became increasingly tokenistic, and the two were inevitably to come to blows. In 1642, Charles I engaged in a civil war with Parliament, and he lost.

And he didn't just lose the battle, but he also lost his head, because they beheaded him. Oliver Cromwell assumed the role of Lord Protector, and commenced efforts to unite the country in what was called the Commonwealth.

[6 : 40] But he quickly found, as so many people in the past have, real trouble with Scotland, and with the Presbyterian Church in particular, and so another civil war ensued.

Finally, in 1660, Parliament invited Charles I's son, Charles II, to assume the throne again, thus reinstating the monarchy.

Think of all the monarchs in history, Charles II definitely has the best hair. Charles II, again, sought to assert his divine right to rule over both church and state.

This meant that he passed a law that the Anglican Church was the only legitimate church, and that everyone in the realm must attend only an Anglican service.

The state of the Anglican Church is depicted in this painting by William Hogarth. Hogarth depicts the minister preaching, and his head is deeply buried in the books.

[7 : 51] He's been going on a long time, because the hourglass is almost completely empty of sand. Not only has he been going on a long time, and you can see it from the hourglass, but all the congregation have fallen asleep.

Some of them have their mouths open, and they're obviously snoring quite profusely. The only person awake is the church clerk, who's using the opportunity of a slumbering woman to admire her ample bosom, and to top it all.

You probably can't read it, but the minister's text, come to me, all who are weary, and I will give you rest. Thus, the act of uniformity, saying you can only go to the Anglican Church, was passed in 1662.

On the passing of the law, 2,000 Anglican ministers left the Church of England, and became what are known as dissenters, or non-conformists.

These Anglican ministers thought that the liturgy of the Church of England was still far too Roman Catholic, and organised more by the traditions of men than the content of the Bible.

[9 : 09] These non-conformists were considered a threat to the government, and a potential cause of civil unrest. There were a series of laws inflicting heavy penalties on those not conforming.

These included huge fines that could be up to five years' wages for a normal person. They could be hefty prison sentences, and people were even hanged for not conforming.

If you didn't go to an Anglican service, you were putting yourself in real danger. It's at this time that we get the character John Bunyan, who was put in prison in Bedford for 12 years, during which time he penned *Pilgrim's Progress*.

There was another non-conforming minister called Nathaniel Robertson in Southampton. He was the minister of All Saints Church, but at the passing of the Act of Uniformity, he left and started a new church called Above Bar Church, which continues to this day.

In fact, Roger Carswell was preaching there this morning, and he will be preaching. Well, probably not yet, in about eight minutes tonight. My parents went to Above Bar Church when they lived in Southampton.

[10 : 32] One of the church leaders of Above Bar Church was a deacon, whose name really helpfully was also called Isaac Senior Watts. He was a cloth maker.

He ran a boarding school. And so on the 17th of July, 1674, the day of Isaac Watts Jr.'s birth, his father, Isaac Watts Sr., was serving a second prison sentence for being a non-conformist.

His mother, Sarah Taunton Watts, was a descendant from a French Protestant family who had fled France in 1572 after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

She would nurse Isaac on the steps outside the prison, conversing and encouraging her husband, who was paying the highest price for his convictions about the way church was supposed to happen.

Isaac Watts Sr. would be in and out of prison for all young Isaac's childhood, and when not locked up, he'd be in forced exile in London.

[11 : 45] However, even in absence, Isaac Watts Sr. took great responsibility for bringing his children up in the things of God. In total, Isaac Sr. and Sarah would have eight children, of which Isaac Watts Jr. was the oldest, but their two youngest daughters wouldn't live beyond a year of life.

We have a lovely letter preserved from Isaac Watts Sr. to the family during one of these exiles in London. And I think it gives us an insight into what a spiritual man he was and what an influence he was in the life of this man that we're here to study, Isaac.

He starts the letter like this. My dear children, though it has pleased God to suffer the malice of ungodly men, the enemies of Jesus Christ and my enemies for his sake, to break out so far against me is to remove me from you in my personal habitation, thereby at once bereaving me of that comfort which I might have hoped for in the enjoyment of my family in peace, and you of that education which my love as a father and duty as a parent requires me to give.

Yet such are the longings of my soul for your good and prosperity, especially in spiritual concerns, that I remember you always with myself in my daily prayers addressed to the throne of grace.

Then he writes some further instructions. He writes this about their Bible study. I charge you frequently to read the Holy Scriptures and not as a task or burden laid on you, but get your hearts to delight in them daily.

[13 : 32] He then writes about their sinful nature and God's salvation. He says to his six remaining children, consider seriously and often the sinful and miserable estate you are in by nature and that you are liable to eternal wrath thereupon.

Also think upon the way of fallen man's recovery by grace according to the foundational principles of the Christian religion which you have learnt in your catechism and beg of God by prayer to give you understanding in them and faith to believe in Jesus Christ and a heart willing to yield obedience to his gospel commands in all things.

He says, learn to know God according to the discoveries he has made of himself in and by his word, in all his glorious attributes and infinite perfections.

Especially learn to know him in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and to be acquainted with this blessed redeemer of God's people. He finishes the letter with these words, do not entertain any hard thoughts of God or of his ways because his people are persecuted for them.

For Jesus Christ himself was persecuted to death by wicked men for preaching the gospel and doing good and the holy apostles and prophets were cruelly treated for serving God in his own way.

[14 : 58] Then he writes this, consider your mother. She is left alone to bear all the burdens of bringing you up and is, as it were, a widow. Her time is filled up with many cares and therefore do not grieve her by any rebellious or disobedient ways but be willing to learn from her and be ruled by her that she may have some comfort in seeing your obedient courage and that it will rejoice me to hear these things.

These things I charge and command you with the authority and love of a father. Now commending you to God and what I have written to his blessing upon your hearts through Jesus Christ with my dear love to your mother.

It's quite a letter, isn't it, to send to small children but it shows the gravity with which he took the responsibility as a parent and particularly his earnestness that they knew God.

Isaac was a precocious child. He was literally a genius and that word is so overused. He started to learn Latin from his father at the age of four.

He started learning Greek at nine, French at ten and Hebrew at thirteen. When he was six, he started the free school in Southampton, now called King Edward VI Grammar School that has as its alumni none other than Dr. Robert Gemmell.

[16 : 33] When once was seven, his mother found some handwritten poems in his room and asked whether Isaac had written them. Isaac said he had, but his mother doubted that a child so young could write such verse.

So she got Isaac to sit at the kitchen table with a quill and paper and said, write something. Instantly, he wrote this, I am a vile polluted lump of earth, so I've continued since my birth.

Although Jehovah grace does daily give me, as sure as this monster will deceive me, come therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me. Wash me in thy blood, O Christ, and grace divine impart, and search and try the corners of my heart, that I in all things may be fit to do service to thee and sing thy praises too.

What if he did that at six, at seven? Which is amazing in itself, but when you look at the first letters of each line, it spells Isaac Watts. It's pretty handy.

It was also while at the free school in Southampton that he writes this in his journal. 1698, fell under considerable conviction of sin.

[17 : 51] 1689, was taught to trust in Christ. On leaving the free school in 1690, Watts had a massive decision to make.

He was a real celebrity by now, this child genius in Southampton, and a really wealthy local called Dr. Speed took a keen interest in Isaac.

And he said to the parents, I want to pay for you to go to university. There were only two university options. One was Oxford. The other was Cambridge.

It obviously wasn't that special to go to Oxford or Cambridge back then because you couldn't go anywhere else. There was only one problem though. You couldn't go to, you could only go to Oxford or Cambridge if you were an Anglican.

And so if you were a non-conformist, it wasn't open. So he had a real choice to make education or conviction. He declined the offer from Dr. Speed and set out as a committed non-conformist.

[19 : 01] He enrolled in a dissenting academy which is where non-conformists went in Stoke Ewington just outside London under the tutelage of Mr. Rowe.

He writes in his journal, 1690, left grammar school and came to London to Mr. Rowe's to study philosophy, et cetera. That word et cetera is shorthand for Latin, Greek, Hebrew, maths, history, geography, natural sciences, logic, rhetoric, ethics, metaphysics, anatomy, law, and theology, philosophy, et cetera.

This was in the midst of the Enlightenment where a revolution of thought was taking place. Traditional education of maxims and givens was being undercut by investigation evidence and reason.

And so this is a real interesting time to be educated. And we'll see Watts has a lot to say about this in a little while. One Sunday in 1690, Watts was home during a holiday from the dissenting academy.

The family were on a walk after the church service. When Isaac shouted, the singing of God's praise is the part of worship closest to heaven, but its performance among us is the worst on earth.

[20 : 26] Church singing at the time was almost exclusively psalm singing with the occasional singing of the Lord's Prayer or the Ten Commandments.

I mean, the Ten Commandments has got to be a tough worship song. Watts described them as ugly hymns and that he was offended by the gawkiness, dullness and crudity of expression.

He's not there saying that he didn't like the psalms that they were ugly, but he really hated the way they'd been translated and tried to put into some kind of hymn form. Isaac Watts Sr. replied to young Isaac's outburst.

If you do not like the hymns, young man, then give us something better. That afternoon, Watts inked his quill and wrote a hymn of eight stanzas based on Revelation chapter 5 verses 6 to 12.

This is the hymn. Behold the glories of the Lamb amidst his Father's throne. Prepare new honours for his name and sing songs before unknown.

[21 : 38] Let elders worship at his feet, the church adore around, with vials full of odour sweet and harps of sweeter sound. Those are the prayers of the saints, and these the hymns they raise.

Jesus is kind to our complaints, he loves to hear our praise. Eternal Father, who shall look into thy secret will, who but the Son should take the book and open every seal.

He shall fulfill thy great decrees, the Son deserves it well. Low in his hand the sovereign keys of heaven and death and hell. Now to the Lamb that once was slain be endless blessings paid, salvation, glory, joy remain forever on thy head.

Thou hast redeemed our souls with blood, has set the prisoner free, has made us kings and priests to God, and we shall reign with thee. The worlds of nature and of grace are put beneath thy power, then shorten these delaying days, and bring the promised hour.

It's not bad for your first go at a hymn, I don't think. I think you might have a real future when it comes to hymn writing. And the most amazing thing is it's not just a new hymn, but it's a new hymn about new hymns.

[22 : 55] So he's really a clever, clever boy. That night it was sung for the first time at Above Bar Church. It was met with great enthusiasm and joy and they proceeded to sing it nine times.

So if you have a problem with repeating choruses, it's really nothing near. What's left the dissenting academy in 1694 and returned home? He simply writes in his diary, dwelt at my father's house two years and a quarter.

No one really knows what he was doing for two and a quarter years. And then in 1696, Isaac Watts was asked by Sir John Hartop, a wealthy, influential, and devoted nonconformist, to become the tutor of his children.

He had six daughters and one son. Watts accepted a move into the family's estate, which was back in Stoke Newington, where he'd studied. He performed this role for three years.

During this time, he wrote lots and lots of textbooks for children on all sorts of things, on biology and astronomy, on anatomy, for use primarily by the children, but they were so good that they were replicated and everyone was using them across the country.

[24 : 14] Watts also took the responsibility of teaching the Hartop children about the Christian faith and became very skilled at communicating the gospel to John Hart, something that he's going to become famous for in a little while.

While he was there, he also wrote this book, which if you can't quite read, it says, Logic, the right use of reason in the inquiry after the truth, with a variety of rules to guard against error in the affairs of religion and human life, as well as in the sciences.

It was a book that kicked back against the Enlightenment, that said, actually, everything we know, we can find out ourselves. And yet, Isaac Watts wanted to say, no, there are some things that need to be revealed to us.

It was such a good book that it became the core textbook on logic at Oxford, Cambridge, and Yale, the very institutions institutions that said, we don't want you as a non-conformist.

One of the great threads of Isaac Watts' theology is to try and say that the Christian faith is reasonable. He was, if you like, an 18th century apologist.

[25 : 30] He writes a lot of theological textbooks. He writes about 28 in all. Some of them are absolutely brilliant, and some of them are awful. especially his stuff on the Trinity, where he tries to make the Trinity sound reasonable, which is really impossible.

And in his attempt to make it sound reasonable using all sorts of systems and illustrations, he actually makes it far more complicated and much further advanced than we could ever imagine to the point of being utterly irrational and unbelievable.

In 1698, on his 24th birthday, he writes in his diary, preached my first, oh, let the game away a little early.

He preached his first sermon at Mark Lane Church in London. Mark Lane Church is a very famous non-conformist church. One of the two pastors ago, the pastor was John Owen, who's a very big theologian, particularly of non-conformism and the state of the church.

The current pastor was a guy called Dr. Chauncey. This was the church that the Hartop family attended. And in his sermon, Isaac preached a very straightforward message, full of exhortation and illustration.

[26 : 51] And it was met with great warmth by the congregation. In 1699, he writes in his diary, preached first sermon as Dr. Chauncey's assistant at Mark Lane Church.

And suffered after with fever and weakness. This will be another thread that runs right through Isaac Watts' life. He is always ill. He's always plagued with fever and illness.

Dr. Chauncey, the guy he was the assistant to, was a learned and able pastor, but the Mark Lane Church was not doing well under his leadership. It had shrunk to about 60 members.

And from the church records, it seems to have been in large part due to Dr. Chauncey. He's described as one who was stubborn in controversy, tedious in preaching, and rigid in matters of church discipline.

So it seems that his congregation were voting with their feet. Two years after Watts became assistant, Dr. Chauncey resigned.

[28 : 03] The congregation decided to look for a replacement whilst keeping Watts on as the assistant. However, Watts was not well. In June 1701, just after Dr. Chauncey's resignation, his notebook says, went to Bath by advice of physicians.

Bath that place with good water by the sea that you went to get well if you were wealthy. A few months later, the church was still vacant and the church record says, assistant pastor Watts under continued indispositions of body and weakness in the country, he has given us little encouragement to expect his return amongst us.

After that, the church held a day of prayer and fasting specifically for the restoration of Mr. Watts' health and for the provision of a pastor for this church.

The two ended up to be intrinsically linked. After five months away, Watts returned to London and the church called him to be the senior pastor of Mark Lane Church.

Watts hesitated in accepting the call, claiming that his illness would prevent him from preaching twice on a Sunday. The congregation persisted and Watts wrote to them this letter.

[29 : 22] Your perseverance in your choice and love, your constant profession of edification by my ministry, the great probability you show in building up this famous and decayed church of Christ if I accept the call, and your prevailing fears of its dissolution if I refuse, have given me ground to believe that your corporate voice is the voice of Christ.

I accept your call, promising the presence of God and his saints my utmost diligence in all the duties of a pastor, so far as God shall enlighten and strengthen me.

And I leave this promise in the hands of Christ, our mediator, to see it performed by me unto you through the assistance of his grace and spirit.

He was ordained as the pastor of Mark Lane Church on 18th of March, 1702, and Thomas Rowe, his tutor from the Dissenting Academy, preached the sermon. He preached on Jeremiah 3, verse 15, and I will give you pastors according to mine own heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.

Under Watts' ministry, the church started to grow. Within two years, they had to move out of Mark Lane Church and go to Pinner's Hall. Two years after that, they went to a purpose-built hall, and the membership was up to 428 from the 60 that he'd inherited.

[30 : 50] However, once his health continued to plague him, he regularly writes in his notebook things like, seized with violent jaundice and colic, had very slow recovery from most recent bout of fever, eight or nine weeks ill, at this time, Watts employed a personal assistant to write for him and read for him, and he says the reason he did that was because of my great indispositions of body and weakness of head.

However, after the church moved to the new premises, Watts enjoyed a sustained period of reasonably good health over the next decade and was able to minister without significant interruptions.

Watts also started to become known as an author. He'd not only written all these textbooks and this book of logic, but now he started to author things for general use that were becoming really famous.

In 1706, he had a book of poems called *Horai Lyrike*, published. It spread like wildfire and was a bestseller. In 1707, he received great acclaim for an essay entitled *Against Uncharitableness*.

And later that year, in 1707, he published his first book of hymns called *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. This first book of hymns was revolutionary.

[32 : 16] By the time he died, 41 years later, it was in its 16th edition. It was used by Whitfield in his outdoor preaching and it was translated for an American audience by Benjamin Franklin.

Watts writes this in the preface about why he wrote the hymns. These songs are suited for the expression of the general state of the gospel and the most common affairs of Christians.

I have aimed at making these songs recitable by large numbers with smoothness of sound and endeavoured to make the sense plain and obvious to all. Watts was not the first person to write hymns for the church.

Some had endeavoured to do so before. Watts, therefore, is not called the father of hymnody because he was the first, but because he wrote better and more than all those before him.

Before him was a trickle of new hymns. He broke the dam. In this first volume, he writes this hymn, which I think is my favourite. Alas, and did my saviour bleed, and did my sovereign die, would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I.

[33 : 32] The body slain, sweet Jesus thine, and bathed in its own blood, while all exposed to wrath divine, the glorious sufferer stood. Was it for crimes that I had done, he groaned upon the tree.

Amazing pity, grace unknown, and loved beyond degree. What might the sun in darkness hide and shut his glories in when God the mighty maker died for man, the creature's sin?

Thus might I hide my blushing face while his dear cross appears, dissolve my heart in thankfulness and melt my eyes to tears. But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe.

Here, Lord, I give myself away. 'Tis all that I can do. It's also in this volume that we get what's his most famous hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.

Charles Wesley, who wrote 6,000 hymns, said I would give all 6,000 up if I could have written this one. He also wrote in this volume *Joy to the World*, but it's about six months too early to crack that one out.

[34 : 40] It was during this period when he started to become known as an author that Isaac Watts had his only romantic encounter.

A lady called Elizabeth Singer had read Watts' poetry and loved it. She loved it so much that she wanted to meet the author. However, Isaac, though brilliant, was not an attractive man.

He's described as short, sallow face, deathly pale, and had a crooked, hooked nose. Miss Singer, by contrast, was very beautiful.

They, after lengthy letter correspondence, did eventually meet, and Watts was smitten and proposed to her. And Miss Singer's response has to be the best put down ever.

Ever. She said this, Mr Watts, I only wish I could say that I admire the casket as much as I admire the jewel. I only wish that the beauty that flowed from your pen seeped into your person.

[35 : 49] In other words, I love your poetry, but you're far too ugly for me to spend the rest of my life with. In 1712, the old tiresome sickness returned and what's effectively left pastoral ministry for the next four years.

One biographer speaks of his ailment being a violent fever which introduced a state of nervous agitation of the most painful and distressing kind. His assistant at the church, Samuel Price, was appointed as co-pastor during this time, something Isaac was greatly in favor of because of his incapacitation.

The state of illness became known by Sir Thomas Abney. Sir Thomas Abney was the Lord Mayor of London. He was the first director of the Bank of England, one of the first directors of the Bank of England and also for a period became like a royal advisor.

Sir Thomas was a genuine, generous benefactor and zealous Christian. The Abneys invited Isaac to stay with them in their Hertfordshire estate, Herefordshire estate, Abney Park, to regain his health.

Watts intended to stay for two weeks so as not to be a burden. He ended up staying for 36 years. It was at Abney Park where Watts died, aged 75.

[37 : 15] This time at the Abney estate was very productive in the life of Isaac. In 1715, he wrote a book called Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children.

Much of his skill in teaching children had been honed during his time with the Hartop children as their tutor and in fact this book was dedicated to Sir John Hartop himself.

The words in the preface again are worthy of note. He writes, To all that are concerned with the education of children, you have been given an immense and important charge.

The seeds of misery or happiness in this world and that to come are often times sown very early and therefore whatever may conduce to give the minds of children a relish for virtue and religion must be your primary concern.

He also defends verses and effectual means of teaching children saying that the truths they sing will resonate with them far longer than any other lessons they learn. Just to give you an example, he writes this chorus about the excellence of the Bible.

[38 : 23] Great God with wonders and with praise on all thy works I lurk, but still thy wisdom, power and grace shine brighter in your book. The stars that in their courses roll have much instruction given, but thy word informs my soul how I may climb to heaven.

The fields provide me food and show the goodness of the Lord, but fruits of life and glory grow in thy most holy word. Here are my choices, treasures hid, here my best comfort lies, here my desires are satisfied and hence my joys arise.

Lord, make me understand thy law, show what my faults have been, and from thy gospel let me draw pardon for all my sin. Here would I learn how Christ has died to save my soul from hell, not all the books on earth besides such heavenly wonders tell.

Then let me love my Bible more and take a fresh delight by day to read these wonders over and meditate by night. He also writes a book called Prayers for Use and Imitation of Children.

No one had paid much attention to children and he writes them a song book and a book about prayer. And the third thing he does is he writes them a catechism, a way that they can learn the foundations of the Christian faith.

[39 : 46] These catechisms were so useful and so successful in teaching children the gospel that Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a century after Watts' death, would make the following comment about their use in his upbringing.

Dr. Watts' catechism, which I learned myself, is so simple, so interesting, so suggestive, that a better conversation of scriptural knowledge will never be written.

And the marvel is that such a tool of instruction should have been laid aside by so many Sunday school teachers. It was also at Abney Park staying with Lord Abney that Watts produced his greatest work, a re-rendering of psalms, the psalms Christologically.

As Watts described them, the previous translation is offensive and gawky. Watts asked himself, why may we not sing of Christ as God?

When God makes all things new, why must our praises remain in the old covenant? It was from this question that Watts hit upon a new way of interpreting the psalms, the so-called redemptive historical hermeneutic employed by all the best preachers.

[41 : 03] This is described by J.I. Packer as, Christ is the subject matter of scripture, always written to bear witness to him. He is the sum of the whole Bible, prophesied, typified, prefigured, exhibited, demonstrated.

He is to be found in every leaf, almost in every line, the scriptures being, but as it were, the swaddling bands of the child Jesus.

So Watts said about rewriting the psalms, but making them about Jesus. He writes this in the preface. Where the psalmist speaks of the pardon of sin through the mercies of God, I have added the merits of a saviour.

Where he talks of sacrificing goats or bullocks, I rather choose to mention the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. Where he promises abundance of wealth, honour 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.

And I am fully satisfied that more honour is done to our blessed saviour by speaking his name, his graces, his actions explicitly in our own language, according to the brighter discoveries he hath now made, than by going back again to the Old Testament forms of worship and the language of types and figures.

[42 : 29] So for example, he takes Psalm 72. The English version begins, give the king your justice, O God. And clearly in context, it is a psalm about King Solomon and his reign extending throughout all the world.

But through the redemptive historical theology employed by Watts and his poetic skill, it becomes a Jesus-centred declaration of the gospel foreshadowed in the psalm and fulfilled in Christ.

So we get, Jesus shall reign where'er the sun, doth his successive journey run, his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moon shall wax and wane no more.

There was a lot of opposition from some camps to this re-rendering of the psalms. They accused him of tampering with scripture. However, there were a vast majority who were incredibly appreciative of what Isaac Watts had done.

Isaac's younger brother called Enoch, a notable poet himself, wrote this to celebrate his brother's work. Yours is the old truth, stripped of its rags, ragged ornaments and upper else.

[43 : 43] If we may say so, as younger by ages in a new fashionable dress, these psalms have been clothed. There is in the old psalms we used to sing a mighty deficiency of that life and soul which are necessary to raise our fancies and kindle our passions.

Not so with yours. They are incendiary to the soul, magnifying of Christ and glorious to recite. I have been persuaded for some time now that with King David to speak English, he would choose to make use of your style.

We'll sing another great Watts psalm in a few moments to close our time. That one, O God, our help in ages past. Watts continued writing and reforming for the next 20 years.

He became not just a renowned preacher of the gospel, but also became very active in social reform. The outworking of the gospel. He wrote about uncharitableness.

He challenged giving. He spoke on social ills like drunkenness, particularly gin. He was a keen advocate for free and accessible education for the poor.

[44 : 55] He was also someone who was very caring and loving to his congregation. You've got countless letters tenderly penned that express not just a sincere love for them, but a desire that they would go through the various struggles of their life in a Christ-like, God-glorifying way.

In 1746, just two years before he died, Watts wrote a hymn to introduce a new book called *The World to Come*. It's a book about death and it's really worth a read.

It's very, very brilliant in dealing with the topic. This hymn that he writes to introduce and is in the front cover says this. There is a land of pure delight where saints immortal reign.

Infinite day excludes the night and pleasures banish pain. Their everlasting spring abides and never withering flowers. Death like a narrow sea divides this heavenly land from us.

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood stand dressed in living green. So too the Jews old Canaan stood while Jordan rolled between. But timorous mortals start and shrink to cross the narrow sea and linger shivering on the brink and fear to launch away.

[46 : 09] Oh could we make our doubts remove those gloomy doubts that rise and see the Canaan that we love with unclouded eyes.

It's amazing isn't it just how real he is when he says timorous mortals start and shrink to cross the narrow sea. But even the most fervent Christian can still be scared of death.

It's a very pastoral book *The World to Come*. There's a lot of great exhortation in it about how to use life well. Watts at the end of his life met some slightly later contemporaries.

He met Whitfield who asked if he could use his hymns in the open air campaigns. The Wesley brothers spoke really nicely of him. He lives to see the great awakening through the preaching of Jonathan Edwards.

Which when you consider the church world that he grew up in to then see this incredible revival break out towards the end of his life must have been a real thrill.

[47 : 21] The church had seen a seismic and glorious shift in the course of his life from a dry emotionless formal gathering in the 1670s to a revival of enthusiasm and life by his death in 1748.

All of these gatherings would have been belted out many of the hymns that he penned as we are today. On the 25th of November 1748 at the Abney Estate Watts commented to his personal secretary Joseph Parker It is a great mercy to me that I have no matter of fear or dread in death.

I could if God please lay back my head and die without terror this afternoon or night. My chief supports are from my view of eternal things and the interest through Christ I have in them.

I trust all my sins are pardoned through the blood of Christ. I have no fear of dying. It would be the greatest comfort to lie down and sleep and wake no more.

Watts in one of his meditations on death wrote in heaven new and unknown powers and glories brighter flames of imagination richer scenes of wit and fancy and diviner talents.

[48 : 41] He talks about the new creation having even diviner talents. So if these what's him sound good down here just imagine what a glorious heaven what's him would sound like. The last thing he wrote before his death was these four lines.

There we shall see his face and never never sin. They're from the fountain of his grace. Drink endless pleasures in. And so that is Isaac Watts.

But what can we learn about him today? I think just a few things. Light and then heat. Light and then heat. In all his hymn writing Isaac Watts was very careful in stating the truth and then responding to it.

It was always theology becoming doxology. It wasn't emotionalism. He wasn't hyping up the crowd. But he said these truths are true. And then he told people how to feel about them.

Secondly, in an age of enlightened thinking and rationalism, Isaac Watts is reasonable but remarkable about emotion. When everyone was going to empirical evidence, when everyone was saying that we can actually find out everything, it became very sterile.

[50 : 03] And Isaac Watts said, no, you can feel about these things. These are things that you can be overjoyed about. There are situations in life where you can cry. And isn't that interesting for us in the 21st century?

That we don't need to just have a dry, cold orthodoxy on a level. But actually it's good to be overjoyed at the gospel. We can be fearful of what's to come.

There is the ability to feel built into the Christian experience. I think thirdly, gospel faithfulness in weakness. That Isaac Watts, as we've seen, was ill all the time.

He was never well and sometimes he was close to death. And yet Watts was dependent on the Lord amidst his weakness. He knew he couldn't do it by himself.

His prayer journal is remarkable. Just endlessly says, I can't do it, so God you'll have to. He didn't use it as an excuse for anything. If he literally could stand, he would preach and then suffer the consequences afterwards.

[51 : 12] Fourthly, a massive investment in children. Despite often being ridiculed for the time he took writing and seek to educate children, he persisted. He knew that God loved children and bringing them up and teaching them the things of God was by far the best investment and use of his time.

We see that that was built on the upbringing that he had. Fifthly, Christ-centered praise. In an age of moralism in the church and academia and skepticism, Watts absolutely kept the main thing the main thing.

And all of his hymns focus and center and find their crescendo in the gospel in the person of the Lord Jesus. Wesley said of him, he opened his Bible and made a beeline for Jesus as quickly as possible.

Sixthly, he used his gifts and talents for the highest purposes. As you can see, he was an absolute genius. The age of seven to pen that is pretty good. He could have been an actor.

He could have written books. He could have been a playwright. And yet he knew that the one thing that would last forever is what he did for the Lord Jesus. And seventhly, something that we didn't really cover is that he hated division in the church.

[52 : 30] He always sought harmony. And he was in a time of great tumult. And he very much stood on the truth. He engaged with philosophers and academics. He has a brilliant discourse with John Locke, a leading philosopher at the time.

And this is what John Locke said. After our conversation, I have to say, I disagree with Mr. Watts profoundly. But I find myself loving him more dearly as a result of our conversation.

That he always acted graciously with integrity towards people. And this just endeared him to his fellows and colleagues even more.

At his funeral service, David Jennings prophetically said these words. While Isaac Watts is now celebrating the new songs of heaven, how many thousands of pious worshippers are this day lifting up their hearts to God in the sacred songs he taught them on earth?

Though his voice is not any longer heard by us, yet his words, like those of the day and night, are gone to the ends of the world.