

Christmas Hymns

INTRO: We come to our fourth and final week in the Advent season. This year we have been blending the traditional theme that Advent gives us of waiting, with other themes of the Christmas season and the stories associated with Christmas in the Bible. To do this, we have been taking a look at the Christmas hymns that we sing each year.

We have discovered one hymn that could and probably should be sung all year 'round - *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. We looked at two hymns that are classics at Christmas time that invite us to come to the manger and worship with the angels - *O Come All Ye Faithful* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. In each of those two songs we saw the deep, rich theology, and the incredible understanding of scripture that the authors possessed.

TRAN: Today we go back to our Advent theme with a song that was never intended to be a Christmas hymn. This hymn has more to say about Advent than Christmas - in fact, outside of one brief phrase that is four words long, there is no reference to the birth of Christ at all.

We start our conversation on this hymn by talking about the author and the time in which he wrote the lyrics of our song.

I. Isaac Watts is our hymn writer

A. He was born in 1674 - that is 33 years before Charles Wesley was born

B. Isaac Watts father, also named Isaac, was a revolutionary protestant figure

1. His father was strong-willed and stubborn

2. His father made a living as a cobbler and tailor

3. Isaac Watts senior was in prison when Isaac Jr. was born

a) He was found guilty of teaching radical ideas that were not approved by the Church of England

C. All of this free-thinking was passed on to his son - Isaac Jr.

D. Isaac Jr. - from now on we will call him Isaac - grew up worshipping at Southampton's Above Bar Congregational Church

1. Just because of the name I had to do a little digging - who names their church "Above Bar"

a) At first I thought it might have been simply because the church literally met above a bar

(1) However, I found no evidence of that

b) As much as I dug, I could not find exactly why they called themselves "Above Bar"

(1) Perhaps it was to convey where they stood about their character, ethics, or certain issues of the day

(2) Maybe they just thought really highly of themselves

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2. In this church, Isaac Watts grew up, eventually becoming a deacon
- E. Isaac was very intelligent
 1. Usually, such a gifted youngster would have gone to Oxford or Cambridge
 2. However, Watts was not a member in the Church of England, so he was sent to an Independent Academy
- F. Being a free thinker, and following in his father's footsteps, Isaac was quite a rebel
 1. He questioned everything
 2. He wanted to know why anyone would be satisfied with the way things were when they could be so much better.
- G. He left the academy at age 20 after learning Greek, Hebrew and Latin
 1. He returned home to his father
- H. Watts found the church music of the time to be uninspired and monotonous
 1. We have seen this before of a discontent with the music of the age
 2. We see it even today with many new, modern songs, or even new arrangements of some wonderful old hymns being introduced in the church of modern times
 3. Watts saw no joy or emotion to the church music sung by choirs in his day
 - a) Which I think speaks more to the heart of the individual singing the music than the music itself in many cases
 - b) You can take a song with some of the most inspired lyrics, greatest melodies and have it sung by someone that fails to see the beauty of the song, or being moved by the lyrics, and you have effectively killed the song
 - c) It should teach us to engage our whole selves into worship
 - (1) Worship should be a joyous expression to God
 - (2) It is not a chore, or one more thing to add to an overloaded list of todos
 - (3) It is something that should move our hearts, make us sing out, and serve out
- I. While many of Watts age remained silent, Isaac complained bitterly to his father about the archaic language used in the songs of his day
 1. Does that last statement sound like anything you have heard before?
 - a) Archaic language?
 - b) I know there are many of us that were raised with a King James Bible - myself included
 - c) People of modern times do not want to have to learn Elizabethan English just to understand the Bible
 - (1) Nor should they have to

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- (2)The King's English is not what is inspired - it is the words God gave in the various languages that the Bible was written in that are inspired
- (3)As long as they are faithfully and accurately translated into modern language, we should be thrilled to get a copy of God's Word into modern people's hands
- 2. Isaac Watts father responded to his son with a challenge - come up with something better
 - a) This challenge lit a fire in Isaac
 - b) In total he authored 600 hymns and hundreds of other poems
- J. As Isaac began to re-engineer songs with modern lyrics, his work was met with contempt
 - 1. No one wanted new translations of scriptures in the current vernacular
 - 2. Some went so far as to think Watts a heretic or tool of the devil
- K. Watts was not deterred by this, always challenging those around him with new songs and new ideas on faith
- L. Isaac Watts became the assistant to Dr. Chauncey at Mark Lane Independent Chapel in London
 - 1. Within three years he became the minister at age 26
 - 2. Due to his work ethic and his new ideas, the church grew rapidly
 - 3. With this new respect as minister, he was able to get his songs published
- M. It was in studying Psalm 98 that Isaac wrote the Christmas hymn we consider today
 - 1. Read Psalm 98
 - 2. It was particularly verses 4 to the end that caught his attention
 - 3. Upon deeper reflection, Isaac Watts penned the poem we now all sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come"
- N. The poem was originally sung to the tune, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing"
 - 1. Which I played with that in my office to try to figure it out
 - 2. Scary!
- O. Through his life, Watts tried to make church music more meaningful to the common man
 - 1. He published, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State and Worship*
 - a) Yes, that is the title of the hymnbook
 - b) They were rather verbose
 - 2. In the hymnal Watts included some of the songs we still sing to this day
 - a) *We're Marching To Zion*
 - b) *At the Cross*

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c) *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*

(1) Which, by the way, since Isaac Watts was such an innovator, I would imagine that he would applaud Chris Tomlin's re-working of the song into a song for the common man

3. It was his tenacious spirit in making church music more accessible to the common man that kept Joy To the World in the public eye

II. Enter Lowell Mason

A. He was born 44 years after Isaac Watts died in Orange, NJ

B. He loved to sing, and directed his church choir as a teen

1. He didn't think he could make a living at it so he moved to Georgia to become a banker

2. He continued to write songs on the side, and eventually tried to get his works published by a Boston publisher

a) He was flatly rejected

b) The publishers felt that America wanted more new folk style music, not classical standards

C. At this point he relegated himself to just using his musical talent on the weekends for SS and church

D. In 1827 his music found a publisher, and the Handel and Hayden Society ordered 50,000 copies of his songbook

1. First of all, I'm betting you didn't realize there was a Handel and Hayden Society

2. Secondly, I bet you didn't know it is still in existence in Boston

a) I found it on the internet

b) Kind of weird to find groups from the 1800's mentioned in history that now have their own website

E. Mason quickly moved to Boston where he became quite the mover in the music world

F. Mason viewed himself much like Watts did - a revolutionary

1. He battled the establishment with fresh ideas

2. In fact, schools of the time ignored music, so he spent his own money to initiate the first public school music program in Boston

G. Mason also became one of Boston's premier music publishers

1. He went on to write 600 hymns of his own

2. Including "Nearer My God to Thee"

a) Which if you know your history was given a new layer of meaning the night the Titanic sank

b) That was the final song heard playing from the band

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H. In 1836 Mason wrote a new composition inspired by Handel's *Messiah* which he called Antioch - after the city that launched Paul's missionary journeys

1. Antioch was begging for lyrics, but it took Mason some time to find the right lyrics
2. Three years later in a songbook, *Modern Psalmist* Mason came across Watts lyrics inspired by Psalm 98
3. And to this day we know the song as "Joy To The World"

III. The Song, "Joy To The World"

A. Here is the funny thing about the song, no one knows how it became associated with Christmas

1. The closest idea we have is that in 1911, Elise Stevenson and the Trinity Choir released the song on a Christmas album - which climbed to number five on the charts
2. As we said before, the only allusion to the birth of Christ is the phrase "The Lord is come"

B. It seems as if the music and the lyrics almost beg for the Christmas season as they are light-hearted and joyful in nature - sentiments universally shared around the Christmas season

C. The reality is the song has more to do with Advent than Christmas

1. While the author wrote the song based out of Psalm 98, and the idea of making a joyful noise to the Lord
2. Because of the inclusion of the phrase, "The Lord is come" and the progressive nature of time in the song, it seems to mark both the first and second comings of Christ, and our response to each

D. The first verse is a mix of either Advent of Christ (first or second)

1. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king"
 - a) That is an emotional response that should take place when the Lord comes
 - b) My question for all of you is which coming of Christ brings you more joy?
 - (1) I know so many people that love the Christmas season
 - (a) They decorate like crazy
 - (b) They bake their hearts out
 - (c) They sing the songs with all the happiness a person can have
 - (d) They love to give gifts
 - (e) They love being with family
 - (f) In short, because Christ came, they love this season
 - (2) Trust me, I know there are some of you out there that we should possibly classify as "Scrooges"

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- (3) But how many of us can say we get that excited over Christ's return to earth?
 - (a) How many of us long for Christ to come back the way we long for the Christmas party to arrive?
 - (b) How many of us walk around with joy in our heart for Christ's second coming the way we do when the Christmas bug hits us
 - c) Our response should be the very same when we look ahead to Christ second coming as when we look back at His first coming
 - (1) In fact, it should really be greater!
 - (2) When He comes back this next time, all of this junk ends
 - (a) The kingdom comes
 - (b) We will be with Him for eternity, as well as those we love that know Christ as their Savior
 - (c) That is cause for GREAT JOY!
 - (3) Let me give you a second cause for great joy
 - (a) 2 Timothy 4:8 "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."
 - (b) When we get our eyes off of this world, and on to the world that God promises us, we will start to long for Him to come back
 - (c) When that happens, the Word tells us that there is a crown in store for us, simply because we have trusted Christ that He is coming back, and focused on that day rather than this life
 - i) Many Christian's find this hard
 - ii) I don't get this right all the time - however the older I get, the more I say, "Anytime now God - You can come back anytime."
 - (1) Which I am sure that God is comforted by the fact that I am okay with His return
2. The line that to me seems to put the first verse squarely in line with Christ's first coming is the third - "Let every heart prepare Him room"
 - a) At Christ's second coming, we do not have to prepare Him room, He is either in our hearts or not
 - b) NOW is the time that we need to allow Christ access to our heart's to transform us, to remove our sin, and make us into "little Christs"
- E. The rest of the verses seem to be pointing directly at the second coming
1. "Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!"
 - a) Did Christ reign in His first coming - no

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- b) Is Christ reigning at this moment
 - (1) This is a trick question
 - (2) The answer is yes and no
 - (3) Yes, Christ has been glorified by God the Father and sits at His right hand, reigning over the affairs of man
 - (4) But no, not in the sense that we usually think, nor in the sense that the Bible uses to describe the reign of the Lamb in the book of Revelation
- 2. All the rest of verse two is equally applicable to the first coming or the second, but because of the opening lines, I would say we are looking at the second coming
- 3. "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground"
 - a) Does sin, and sorrow have a stronghold in this life?
 - b) Did it when Christ was here on earth?
 - c) This is the second coming
- 4. "He comes to make His blessings known, far as the curse is found"
 - a) Christ will make all of these blessings known when He returns
 - b) And these blessings will be so extensive that they will reach as far as the curse
 - (1) How much did the curse affect when Adam and Eve messed up in the garden? - Everything!
 - (2) So how far are Christ's blessings going out? - to everything
 - (a) Romans 8:19-22 "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."
 - (b) God will not only set us free from this world of sin, but He will set the world free from the curse it is under
 - i) All the things wrong with the world: the greed, the injustice, the pollution - all of it set right
- 5. "He rules the world with truth and grace"
 - a) We went over this a minute ago
 - b) He is ruling, but not in the full and complete sense He was meant to
- 6. "[He] makes the nations prove, the glories of His righteousness, and wonders of His love"
 - a) The word "makes" carries the idea of "causes"

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- b) So God is not forcing the nations to prove - He is causing them to prove
- c) They prove His glory and wonder - How?
 - (1) The nations are in awe of God's love
 - (2) They are made right because of God
 - (3) They are standing as a testament to the glory of God in His righteousness and love that a holy God could bring unholy man to heaven forever without violating His holiness
- d) And none of this is complete until the second coming of Christ

IV. Conclusions

- A. Now I could draw conclusions about both Isaac Watts and Lowell Mason both being revolutionaries in church music and how that relates so well to our day and age - But I won't
- B. I could talk about people thinking Watts was a heretic or a tool of Satan because of his work to make church music accessible to the common man, and how judgmental that is, and how we should be very careful to not follow in those footsteps - but I won't
- C. What I will focus your attention on as we close this message is the glorious fact of the second coming of Christ
 - 1. When we sing this song, it should bring joy to our hearts
 - 2. When we think of Christ's return we should be elated
 - 3. If we are not, we need to take some time in reflection and ask ourselves what is so attractive here that we would not long for Christ's return
 - a) When we see what Christ did when He was here
 - b) When we see what God has promised as a result of Christ being here
 - c) When we know that our faith is in Christ
 - d) When we love this world less and love Christ more
 - e) Then we will long for His return
 - f) Then we can sing this song with all the joy that Isaac Watts originally envisioned over 250 years ago