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Music and the Church

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O God, Our Help in Ages Past

God holds the only music patent. It was His idea to combine the visible and the invisible in the form of singing and then present it to man as a pleasurable gift. Since the beginning of time music has played an important role in man's daily life and worship; it is the attempt to express intense, but intangible thoughts and truths in physical ways. Man himself is God's crowning created union of the physical and spiritual, thus, both deep sorrow and great joy compel humans to sing. For many decades multitudes of people, weary and frightened by life's stormy seas, have found comfort in the hymn *Oh, God, Our Help in Ages Past; s*inging of our Almighty God, Who since the beginning of time, continues to care for His creation calms our troubled hearts.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), often called father of English Hymnody, was born in Southampton, England, during a time of religious turmoil. His devout parents unapologetically aligned themselves with the Dissenters—those that stood in opposition to the established Church of England. The bold religious stance of his father, Isaac Watts Sr., which led to two imprisonments, undoubtedly influenced young Isaac's willingness to later tenaciously hold up a new music standard that challenged the accepted musical beliefs of his day.

Bailey points out that although Isaac had no natural physical beauty, God gifted Isaac with a very sharp intellect. Recognizing the unusual brilliance of his first-born child, Isaac Sr. began tutoring him early in life. By the age of thirteen young Isaac had learned Latin, Greek, French, and Hebrew. He reveled in voracious reading and filled even everyday conversations with constant versifying. “His conversation was so annoyingly metrical,” that his father prohibited it. Yet, this gift could not be silenced. When his father applied the whip, Isaac, through tears, plead saying, “O father, do some pity take, and I will no more verses make” (45-46).

During this era, both the Anglican Church and the Dissenters, based all their liturgy on the Psalms. Osbeck reports, “The singing consisted of ponderous hymn-psalms only” (184).This tradition was rooted in the strong Calvinistic teaching that said “the inspired words of the Bible, particularly of the Psalms, were the only fit offering of praise man could make” (Bailey 48).

As a youth Watts deeply lamented the poor quality singing of the day, and declared that since they were humans, Christians ought to sing words composed by men rather than use the strict Psalms. One evening after voicing his bitter complaint, Isaac Watt Sr. challenged his son to come up with words of his own. By evening, fifteen year old Isaac had penned his first hymn: *Behold the Glories of the Lamb* (Bailey 48). Thus, at a young age he put into action his belief that since “our songs [are] a human offering of praise to God, . . . the words ought to be our own.” This conviction regulated his writing and set the stage for making him the most famous English religious poet of his era.. He was known for his “hymns of 'human composure'” and “hymns based on the Psalms but shot through Watts' own imagination” (Bailey 48).

In revising the Psalms, Watts transcribed the words to have “David speak like King William III [and] England and Scotland take the place of Israel and Judah. Thus the Psalmist became 'an orthodox and patriotic English Christian of the early eighteenth century'” (Bailey 49).

In order to accommodate congregational singing and the typical practice of one reading one line at a time with the congregation then singing that line, Watts wrote his easily accessible poetry with a natural stop at the end of nearly every line. Although he would have preferred to eliminate that tradition, he chose to work instead in harmony with it. His deep familiarity with Scripture comes out clearly in his hymns. “His mind was saturated with the words of the Bible . . . so that most of his hymns are disguised translations of Biblical phrases” (Bailey 49, 51).

Isaac Watts' hymn *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*, based on Psalm 90, is commonly held to be the “grandest in the whole realm of English Hymnody” (Bailey 54). Psalm 90 is generally thought of as written after the death of a godly king at time when Judah found itself in national calamity. Young King Josiah had initiated a major reform in Judah, and according to Deuteronomic Theology, both the king and the nation ought now to experience prosperity under God's divine blessing and protection. Instead, King Josiah was killed in battle and the nation came under Egyptian rule. Thus, in Psalm 90, the writer reminds his readers that “God [who is] the changeless and the eternal will still be man's refuge and defense” (Bailey 55).

In 1714, Protestant England also faced a major crisis. Remembering the severe persecution under a former Catholic queen, Bloody Mary, they now watched with growing alarm as Queen Anne, though herself a Protestant, surrounded herself with ministers who favored her Catholic brother as successor. They feared not only severe persecution, but the reestablishment of Catholicism and loss of all that Protestants stood for. At the height of this crisis, Isaac Watts penned the words to the hymn, *O God, our Help in Ages Past* (Bailey 55-56). Like the Psalmist of old, Watts attempted to still the desperate anxiety of his Protestant brothers by pointing to God as the eternal One who as their help in ages past would continue to be their hope and help in the future (Johnson 215). “His dramatic fusion of old imagery with new phrases preserved the majesty of the Psalm and added a fervor of faith by which all Englishmen felt that indeed they were God's chosen people.” Even today England holds to this hymn as a “second national anthem” (Bailey 55-56).

William Croft (1678-1727), an accomplished organist at St. Anne's Church in London, composed the tune to which we sing this hymn today. The hymn was first sung at St Anne's Church, and both the tune and the church are named after Queen Anne who reigned in England 1702-1714. Both Bach and Handel borrowed of this tune for their own compositions (Osbeck 184-185).

This hymn has both universal and timeless appeal. People everywhere, throughout the ages, regardless of religious belief, have experienced the fear and uncertainty that accompanies living in a sin-cursed world. Our frightened and hungry hearts reach out again and again for the assurance that a Divine and Loving Being watches over us. In the midst of unsettling changes we desperately reach for the quiet rest that comes from knowing that “From everlasting Thou art God, To endless years the same.” He alone is our Hope.

Works Cited

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