



ISAAC WATTS 1674-1748

Born in Southampton, England the eldest of nine children in July 1674, Isaac Watts was a very intelligent child who learned Latin at age four, and went on to learn Greek, Hebrew and French. He showed a propensity for rhyme at a very young age, sometimes irritating his father by using it in conversation. His father was a Dissenter from the Anglican Church and Isaac followed his father's strong biblical faith; therefore, he could not attend the Universities of Cambridge or Oxford. Instead he attended an academy sponsored by Independent Christians.

For five years after completing his formal education, Isaac dedicated himself to more diligently studying the Scriptures, while he tutored students. In 1707 he published his first edition of "Hymns and Spiritual Songs." For a few years Watts served as an assistant and then pastor to an Independent congregation in London. However, a violent and continual fever from which he never recovered forced him to leave the pastorate. Sir Thomas Abney received Watts into his home and served as his patron for the next thirty-six years while Isaac was able to follow his passion for music.

Watts published more than 600 hymns, many of which are still found in hymn books today. He also authored books on logic, grammar, ethics, psychology, astronomy, geography and three volumes of sermons. His most published book was his "Psalms of David," first published in 1719. Isaac loved to paraphrase the Psalms by referring to Christ's name, graces and actions, showing the fulfillment of Jewish types in the life of Jesus. We can see such paraphrases in the words of hymns such as "Jesus Shall Reign Wher'er the Sun," written about Psalm 72, and "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," paraphrased from Psalm 90. He wrote, "Joy to the World" as a rewriting of Psalm 98.

Benjamin Franklin first published Watts' psalm paraphrases in America in 1729. During the American revivals of 1735-1739, known as the Great Awakening, George Whitfield used Watts' hymns and songs in his meetings. After his death on November 25, 1748, a monument to Watts was erected in Westminster Abbey. Yet his greatest monuments are the hymns to his God still used in Christ's church today. Isaac Watts has truly earned the title, Father of English hymns.