

***Subjectively Speaking***  
A Sermon on “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”  
Mark 15:22-28; Galatians 6:14  
Sunday, March 29, 2009  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Mark 15:22-28

“Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, ‘The King of the Jews.’ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘And he was counted among the lawless.’”

Galatians 6:14

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

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One critic of the history of church music has noted that “until the beginning of the eighteenth century, few hymns existed until one man and two brothers came on the scene: Isaac Watts, and John and Charles Wesley.”<sup>1</sup> With the significant exception of Martin Luther, the German “protestor” who wrote “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” this critic is perhaps more correct than not in his analysis.

Today’s Lenten sermon on favorite hymns is based upon the life of Isaac Watts who was born in Southampton, England in 1674. He was the son of Isaac Watts, Sr. and his wife, Sarah, who were very religious but belonged to a small group of Christians known as “Dissenters”, a Protestant tradition independent of the Church of England. Because the Anglican Church was sanctioned and protected by the Crown, being a Dissenter was a treasonous offense in those days; many Dissenters lost their lives because of their non-conforming faith. During Isaac’s first days of life, in fact, his father was in prison serving time for practicing a dissenting religious path. Sarah Watts reportedly nursed her newborn son as she sat on a

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<sup>1</sup> “Early English Hymnody”; the full text of the article is quoted at [http://www.wbu.edu/academics/academic\\_resources/writing\\_center/resources/documents/MusicSampleUndergraduatePaper-EarlyEnglishHymnody.pdf](http://www.wbu.edu/academics/academic_resources/writing_center/resources/documents/MusicSampleUndergraduatePaper-EarlyEnglishHymnody.pdf).

stone outside the walls where her husband was imprisoned. Only when the British Parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689 were the Dissenters free of persecution and the threat of death.

As a young boy, Isaac Watts was a precocious child. He was drawn to a love of poetry and often answered his parents in verse to their consternation. When his father once punished him for his persistent rhyming, young Isaac replied: “Oh, father, do some pity take, and I will no more verses make.”<sup>2</sup> History does not tell us what Isaac’s stern father said to his son, but we know that the young boy was unable to keep his promise and continued to rhyme throughout his life.

In addition to poetry and rhyme, Isaac was good at all of his studies. “He learned Latin at four, Greek at nine, French at ten, and Hebrew at thirteen.”<sup>3</sup> When family friends noticed his high intelligence, they offered to provide him with a university education. To take this offer would have required Isaac to accept the tutelage of the Church of England and that was something neither he nor his parents could do. Instead, he attended the Nonconformist Academy where he flourished despite the fact that his choice was considered to be foolish and academically inadequate.

During these years, the only form of congregational singing practiced in English churches (whether they were Anglican or Dissenting) was the singing of the Psalter, or the Old Testament Psalms. Isaac came to believe that the singing at Mark Lane Independent Church where he and his family worshipped was less than adequate. He once wrote: “The singing of God’s praise is the part of worship most closely related to heaven; but its performance among us is the worst on earth.”<sup>4</sup>

When he was in his late teens, he came home from church one Sunday and complained to his father about the singing at church – which he felt was lifeless and uninspiring. As many parents have said to obstreperous children over the centuries, his father challenged him by saying, “Well then, why don’t you give us something better, young man?”<sup>5</sup> To his father’s surprise, Isaac accepted his challenge and composed his first hymn within a few days. When he submitted it to the choirmaster, he was greatly surprised when it was well received. For the next two years, the young man wrote a new hymn for each Sunday service. Thus was established a habit of writing hymns that would last throughout his life.

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<sup>2</sup> “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” [www.PopularHymns.com](http://www.PopularHymns.com),

[http://www.popularhymns.com/when\\_i\\_survey\\_the\\_wondrous\\_cross.php](http://www.popularhymns.com/when_i_survey_the_wondrous_cross.php)

<sup>3</sup> “Isaac Watts”, Center for Church Music, <http://songsandhymns.org/people/detail/isaac-watts>.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1982), 279.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

When he was 33 in 1707, he published his first collection of religious lyrics to be set to music, entitled *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. Incidentally, John Wesley was 4 years old and his younger brother, Charles, was born in that same year of 1707. Across his lifetime, Isaac Watts wrote approximately 700 hymns – 15 of which are in our *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989). Among the great hymns for which he wrote the lyrics are “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” which we sang as our opening hymn, and is sometimes known as “England’s second national hymn.” He also wrote the words to “I Sing the Almighty Power of God,” “Jesus Shall Reign,” “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed,” “Am I a Soldier of the Cross,” “Come, We That Love the Lord,” “Marching to Zion,” and perhaps his most famous hymn, the Christmas carol “Joy to the World.”

Included in that first volume of hymns published in 1707 were the words for the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” The words are based, of course, on the passage from Galatians 6:14 where St. Paul says, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

1. 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.
2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God;  
all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.
3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down.  
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?
4. Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

While the words remain as beautiful and powerful today as when they were written, you may not know how radically ground-breaking they were in 1707. When Watts wrote the opening words, “When I survey the wondrous cross,” he instantly broke new ground in the history of church music. Until this moment, not a single one of the Psalters nor any of the German hymns that Martin Luther had written one hundred and fifty years earlier used the pronoun “I” from a subjective point of view. It was also a moment when psychology merged with religious music – how the *individual* singer of the hymn (as opposed to the congregation) considers the weight and value of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Music historian William Studwell says, “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.’”<sup>6</sup>

One hundred and fifty years after this great hymn was written, 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian Matthew Arnold, one of the most eminent critics of the Victorian era, described it as “the greatest hymn ever written.”<sup>7</sup> While Isaac Watts has been called the “father of English hymnody,” English critic Eric Routley gives him another title: “the liberator of the English hymn”<sup>8</sup> – suggesting that Watt’s innovations on the congregational Psalter or song were ground-breaking and helped set the stage for the brothers John and Charles Wesley who followed in his footsteps thirty years later. Indeed, Robert Morgan, author of several books of hymn stories, notes that “Charles Wesley reportedly said he would rather have written it than all his own.”<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt that the “popularity of Isaac Watts’ hymns caused a tempest in his day... 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.”<sup>10</sup> Over 80 years after the hymn was written, Rev. Adam Rankin told the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, meeting in Philadelphia in 1789: “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.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William Studwell, *The Christmas Carol Reader* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995); [http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/joy\\_to\\_the\\_world-1.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/joy_to_the_world-1.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Sumner Nutter and Wilbur F. Tillett, *The Hymns and Hymn Writers of the Church: An Annotated Edition of the Methodist Hymnal* (New York: Eaton & Mains Publishers, 1911), 78; the full text of the book is online at [http://books.google.com/books?id=M9YHlaRQTsIC&pg=PA78&lpg=PA78&dq=Matthew+Arnold+%2B+%22the+greatest+hymn+in+the+English+language%22&source=bl&ots=rbro0ocLuu&sig=ErYJVtBt4jopWkMYR\\_mDO7feITg&hl=en&ei=ZIHPSYaXloTEtAO1pM2hAw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=2&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=M9YHlaRQTsIC&pg=PA78&lpg=PA78&dq=Matthew+Arnold+%2B+%22the+greatest+hymn+in+the+English+language%22&source=bl&ots=rbro0ocLuu&sig=ErYJVtBt4jopWkMYR_mDO7feITg&hl=en&ei=ZIHPSYaXloTEtAO1pM2hAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=2&ct=result).

<sup>8</sup> “Early English Hymnody,” [http://www.wbu.edu/academics/academic\\_resources/writing\\_center/resources/documents/MusicSampleUndergraduatePaper-EarlyEnglishHymnody.pdf](http://www.wbu.edu/academics/academic_resources/writing_center/resources/documents/MusicSampleUndergraduatePaper-EarlyEnglishHymnody.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul, Book 2* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004), 21.

<sup>10</sup> “Isaac Watts,” Center for Church Music, <http://songsandhymns.org/people/detail/isaac-watts>.

<sup>11</sup> “Isaac Watts,” <http://songsandhymns.org/people/detail/isaac-watts>.

John Hull, in his abstract for his doctoral work on Isaac Watts, says, “To survey also means to carry out an inspection of an area from a vantage point, or to offer a comprehensive description of something or other. The important feature which all these meanings have in common is that the one who conducts the survey is superior to that which is surveyed. The one who surveys is the owner, or master of that which is measured, inspected or laid out. So in the first line of the famous hymn Watts is about to carry out a survey upon the wondrous cross. It is as if one’s attention has been attracted by a jewelled cross, displayed in the window of an antique shop. The cross is glowing with gems and golden filigree. As you draw closer to estimate its value, the truth of what happened there dawns upon you. This is the wondrous cross ‘On which the prince of glory died’. We notice the shimmering radiance of the words ‘wonder’, ‘prince’, and ‘glory’. It is these words which suggest the enormous value to be placed upon the object, and this is why we propose to survey it... As the contrast between the radiant treasure before us and the stark reality of its history dawns upon us, we suddenly find our values reversed. That which we set out to survey now surveys us.”<sup>12</sup>

[Play the hymn using the “Hamburg” tune – No. 298 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989.]

Over the years of my ministry I have collected crosses of many different shapes, from various countries, and even a few – like the one displayed on the altar this morning that is attributed to a particular artist. The work is entitled “Christ of St. John of the Cross” (original limited edition bronze) and was adapted by Dali from his well-known work by the same name and painted in 1951 which now hangs in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow, Scotland.

Dali gave the work its name because its design is based on a drawing by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish friar, Saint John of the Cross. In the painting, Dali depicts the corpus (the body of Christ) floating out in front of the cross and not nailed to it. In the sculptural version, Dali did not portray the cross at all – only the corpus floating in air. In some ways, Dali’s sculpture and Isaac Newton’s lyrics do the same thing – they invite the one who views to add the cross subjectively with his or her imagination according to one’s individual spiritual journey.

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<sup>12</sup> John M. Hull, “From Experiential Educator to Nationalist Theologian: the Hymns of Isaac Watts  
Panorama: International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values,” Vol. 14, No. 1, Summer 2002,  
pp. 91-106 <http://www.johnmhull.biz/Articles2/Isaac%20Watts.htm>.

When John Wesley had his conversion experience in 1736 on Aldersgate Street in London, he famously said, “My heart was strangely warmed.” His words of witness owe no small debt of gratitude to Isaac Watts who had discovered that it is the subjective, personal experience of the cross of Jesus Christ that grounds our faith and connects us personally and everlastingly to what God has done.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.