

# ***“A New Song for Christmas”***

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***“Beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep.” (John Wesley)***

***Psalm 98***

***December 15, 2019***

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons).)

## ***The father of new English songs***

Isaac Watts was born in 1674 in Southampton, England, the same port from which the Pilgrims had departed in 1620 to seek religious freedom in the New World. The Church of England, itself a separation from the Catholic church, was intolerant of Christians who separated from them – as were early Lutheran and Reformed people. Religious tolerance did not immediately follow the Reformation.

The Anglicans were still oppressing religious dissenters a half-century later when Isaac was born. His father, also named Isaac Watts, was in jail for sympathizing with and assembling non-conformists. Isaac’s mother nursed him on the steps of the jailhouse.

As he grew up, he didn’t grow up much. Isaac was short and homely with an abnormally large head. Later in life a woman named Elizabeth Singer (ironically!) declined his marriage proposal even though she loved him because he was physically unattractive. Inside that large head, however, were some rather impressive brain cells. Isaac was learning Latin at age 4, Greek at age 9, French at 11, and Hebrew at 13.

At age 14, Isaac complained about the singing at church – words and music. In those days, churches sang only from the book of Psalms, but Isaac wanted to sing about New Testament truths and Christian experience. Weary of these complaints, Isaac’s father told him to write new hymns. He did! The first one was a hymn of eight verses<sup>1</sup> based on Revelation 4-5 and packed with rich theology and Scripture references.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/b/e/h/ beholdgl.htm>

*Behold the glories of the Lamb  
Amidst His Father's throne.  
Prepare new honors for His name,  
And songs before unknown.*

“And songs before unknown.” Isaac would write a new hymn every week for that congregation for two years until, at age 16, it was time to go to college. Wealthy Sotonians<sup>2</sup> offered to pay for this child prodigy to study at Cambridge or Oxford, but that would require embracing the Anglican Church, which he was unwilling to do. He enrolled instead at a non-conformist college called the Dissenting Academy in London. Decades later he wrote a textbook on logic that would become a standard work not only at Cambridge and Oxford, but across the sea at Harvard and Yale. He also wrote books about grammar, philosophy, geography, and astronomy.

During college he began tutoring for an aristocratic family, which led to chances to preach in their private chapel. The next step was assistant pastor at one of London's leading Congregational churches, and at age 28 he became their senior pastor. Soon thereafter he began showing signs of psychiatric illness, which limited his career in the church. He continued writing “songs before unknown,” and in retrospect his 750 hymns earned him the title, “Father of English Hymnody.” Among his best-known hymns are “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past.” Not everyone loved his songs. One critic said they weren't hymns; they were “whims.”

So...some of your favorite hymns were written by an unattractive, non-conforming, controversial prodigy with mental health issues. We call them “old hymns” and for us they are spiritual comfort food. At first they were “songs before unknown.”

According to hymnary.org, one of Watts' hymns is the most published Christmas hymn in North America. I suspect Watts would be surprised and maybe disappointed that we call it a “Christmas carol” and sing it almost exclusively at this season.

### ***A new song for Christmas***

I asked Caroline Laughter Pope to sing for us a “new song” for Christmas, a contemporary song in the traditional service. I want you to feel a little of what the members of Isaac Watts' adolescent church may have felt. One unplanned connection is that Caroline's the mother of a 2-year-old named Isaac.

*It came to pass, a child was conceived  
A virgin girl betrothed in Galilee  
The angel came, revealed the ancient plan  
A baby boy, Christ the Son of Man*

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<sup>2</sup> What residents of Southampton are called.

*Though she could not comprehend such a mystery  
Just a glimpse of You revealed was compelling her to sing.*

*Holy, holy is the Lord, God Almighty  
Worthy, worthy is Your name  
All of heaven joins the universe ever crying  
Worthy, worthy is Your name*

*And so they went, no place to lay their heads  
The Son of God, a stable for a bed  
A helpless child wrapped in ragged cloth  
His parents praised, a simple gift of awe*

*A brilliant star was lit to show the way  
The shepherds bow and kings knelt in the hay  
This is our God, a great and humble king  
All glory to the Lord, the firstborn majesty (Vertical Worship, 2018)*

### **A new song**

Psalm 98 begins, “Sing to the LORD a new song.”

What inspires a “new song”? It could be a new insight or a big event. It might just be what Dave Walker, probably the only member of Corinth with a platinum album to his credit, called this week “a happening,” which can be good or bad. Something great happens or something terrible happens, and somebody with a mind far more creative than mine turns emotion into poetry and notes.

Psalm 98 answers three questions about a new song: Why? How? Who?

*Why do you sing a new song? (1-3) Because you’re flourishing.*

You may have noticed some posters around the church with the word “flourish” as a teaser for something new in women’s ministry starting in January. What does the word “flourish” mean to you? Merriam-Webster says to flourish is “to grow luxuriantly; thrive.” Think of a freshly cut Frasier fir or a gorgeous poinsettia.

Psalm 98 begins, “Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.” The word “salvation” is repeated in verses 2 and 3. God has worked salvation for Israel, but in a way that “the nations” (2) and, indeed, “all the ends of the earth” (3) can witness it.

It’s a shame that in many Christian circles, “salvation” means only “going to heaven when you die.” The word in the Bible is so much broader. This week Kevin

Watkins shared an excerpt from a book he's reading in seminary<sup>3</sup>, which uses the word "flourishing" to explain "salvation." J. Richard Middleton says "salvation" in the Old Testament is tied to the Exodus story. But God didn't just want the Israelites to leave Egypt. He wanted them to flourish in a land of milk and honey, to live in thriving communities of justice and prosperity with focused worship toward the one true God.

Isaac Watts, of course, wanted to sing about this flourishing with a New Testament twist. Salvation in an even richer, deeper, more holistic sense is what the believer in Jesus experiences. This salvation doesn't require "milk and honey" – material blessings and goodness. It's rather about intimacy and freedom and wholeness and a flourishing the world can't take away. Only Jesus makes that happen.

Not all of life feels flourishing, and some of our families are deeply struggling this Christmas season. But there are some moments and seasons that can't be described any other way than flourishing. Pastor Amy, who lit the Advent wreath with her fiancé and his twins, is flourishing in anticipation of her new family and home. Linda and I are flourishing this weekend because Arlo showed up with his parents. Our 2-year-old grandson is the smartest, funniest, most joyful kid on the planet. When you're flourishing, Psalm 98 says to sing a new song to the One who does marvelous things.

Two qualities of the Lord prompt this "new song" – his "love" (*hesed*) and "faithfulness" to Israel (3). As he works for his own people, "all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" (3).

*How do you sing a new song (4-6)? With every noisemaker you can employ.*

There's a place for quiet worship and reflective meditation – in the Psalms and in church. Psalm 98 is not that place.

In these verses, one might as well borrow the line from Clement Clark Moore: "Out on the lawn there arose such a clatter." Twice the psalmist says, "*Shout* for joy" (4-6). This eruption of joy is "to the LORD" (4) and "before the LORD, the King" (6)! The sovereign one, powerful and personal, he causes us to flourish. So shout!

"Burst into jubilant song with music." We see the combination of human voices and varied instruments – harp, trumpet (probably long, straight, metal), and shofar (the ram's horn). Sing, ring, bang, blow, pound, shout. Make it big. Psalm 98 is not even organized music. This is not a symphony. It's a cacophony – a stadium crowd or a parade. Jewish tradition connects Psalm 98 to the return of the Ark of the Covenant after the Philistines had it for seven months. There's jubilation in the streets.

Isaac Watts hated lackluster singing in church. He said in his later years, "To see the dull indifference, the negligent and thoughtless air that sits upon the faces of a

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<sup>3</sup> *A New Heaven and A New Earth*, J. Richard Middleton.

whole assembly, while the psalm is upon their lips, might even tempt a charitable observer to suspect the fervency of their inward religion."

His contemporary, John Wesley, added, "Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan."

*Who should sing this new song (7-9)? All the world.*

The focus of the final stanza seems at first glance to be on the created order. But notice the end of verse 7: "the world, *and all who live in it*" (emphasis added). When you are flourishing, people are happier, the sun is brighter, the rain feels renewing; the mountains, the beach, wherever you are, it's all more enjoyable.

The sea resounds (literally "thunders") in verse 7, while rivers clap and mountains sing in verse 8. Two observations: (1) those same nature sounds happen whether you're feeling joy or not, and (2) those same noises are usually terrifying, not comforting. But when you're flourishing, the pounding of ocean waves, the splashing of white water in a river, wind surging through mountains – they are all sounds of joy. Context determines whether loud noises are happy or terrifying.

So it is with God's judgment. It may seem odd to close a Psalm about joy with joy for God judging the world.... unless you're an oppressed person or people. The fact that God's intervention to make the world right – to bring about righteousness and equity (9) – that's really good news! Whatever happening has prompted this new psalm, it is a reversal of injustice.

### ***A new song for Christmas***

You may say, "Still, all of that sounds so Old Testament-ish. What would a psalm with these same themes – new song, salvation, joy, kingship, justice, all creation joining human voices and instruments praising the Lord – what would those same themes sound like through a New Testament lens?" Now you're thinking like Isaac Watts!

In 1719, several years after he gave up public ministry due to mental health issues, Isaac published a volume called *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. He looked for portions of the Psalms that, in his words, "might easily and naturally be accommodated to the various occasions of Christian life, or at least might afford us some beautiful allusions to Christian affairs."

Which carol was inspired by Psalm 98 among the partly insane, obsessively logical, creatively wired brain cells of Isaac Watts? "Joy to the World!" of course.

I only have one application point today in the sermon, and it's two words borrowed from John Newton: "Sing lustily!" Specifically, sing "Joy to the World" lustily!

Maybe you're flourishing right now – thriving and living a luxuriant life. But maybe on a visible, material level you're not flourishing. The reason Watts wanted to change the lens of the Psalms is that they were looking forward to what we look back on.

Jesus has come and he has changed everything. Even when we're not flourishing, we are. We have been loved with an everlasting love. He has reframed our miserable existence with salvation. That's the reason for joy. Whatever else is true of us, we were dead in our trespasses and sins, but we have been made alive in Christ. By grace you are saved through faith, Paul says in Ephesians 2. Joy to the world indeed!

We don't know exactly what tune Watts originally used. The tune we sing is called 'ANTIOCH,' and it's attributed in our hymnal to George Frederick Handel. That's hardly the whole story. More than a century after Watts, a Boston choir director named Lowell Mason, borrowed some musical notes from Handel's *Messiah*, most obviously the first four notes in the chorus "Lift Up Your Heads." Mason believed that the "new songs" connected to the revivals of the Second Great Awakening were inferior musically and lyrically. He wrote 1800 new hymn tunes in a more classical style, most memorably the tune to "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

I have often heard – no, I have often said, including this week, multiple times – that "Joy to the World" is about the Second Coming of Jesus not the Christmas story. Who started that and why? It's so wrong! "Joy to the World" is a perfect song for Advent – both the memory of the Jesus' First Advent and the anticipation of his second.

In verse 1, "is come" is "has come" in eighteenth century grammar. Watts exhorts us to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus precisely because there was no room in the Bethlehem inn.

Verse 2 borrows directly from Psalm 98, urging both human voices ("Let men their songs employ") and nature ("fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains) to "repeat the sounding joy."

Verse 3 doesn't appear in many hymnals, including our own. Apparently some editors didn't like the three-fold repetition of "far as the curse is found." But if we eliminate that verse, we remove Watts' own purpose for writing "Joy to the World." It's the gospel in a few lines – displacing the curse of sin with the blessing of salvation.

The final verse points most directly to Christ's second coming, when "he rules the world with truth and grace." This is "faith," what the writer of Hebrews calls "the evidence of things not seen." We believe, we declare, we sing lustily the truth that the King has come, that he's still in charge of his world, and that he will come again so that every person and nature will know his righteousness and his love. Amen.