

## Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Isaac Watts was an English minister, writer, and poet and has been called the "father of British hymnody." Part of his claim to that title is the fact that he is credited with writing some 750 hymns, of which 7 are represented in our Hymnal (14, if you count multiple tunes using Watts' words.) Let's start by singing Hymn 213.

Hymn 213 (all verses)

Born in Southampton, England, Watts was the eldest of 9 children of a father who ran a boarding school. An avid learner, Watts was passionate about books almost from infancy and began to learn Latin at the age of 4. He eventually learned Latin, Greek and Hebrew as part of the classical education of the time, and before becoming a pastor at the age of 28, he worked as a private tutor. Throughout his life he wrote hymns and other poetry, and most of the 750 hymns attributed to him were written when he was just 22 years old. Let's sing another of them: Hymn 320.

Hymn 320 (all verses)

Watts was a Nonconformist. There was a special meaning to this term in England of the 17th, 18th and even 19th centuries. Nonconformists were those who refused to conform to the ceremonies and dogma of the Church of England, which were established in law in 1662. What it meant was that those who did not "conform" -- and that included Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, non-Christians, and so on -- were prevented from holding public office, from pursuing civil service careers, and even from obtaining university degrees -- for a century and half. Watts' father had been a Nonconformist before him and had been jailed twice for his convictions. Watts himself was raised as a Nonconformist, and was prevented from attending Cambridge or Oxford, though he received a solid education from one of the country's "Dissenting Academies" and he eventually even earned honorary degrees.

Hymn 272 (1st 2 verses, as a canon)

Apart from being so prolific as a writer of hymns, there was something else that earned him the title of "Father of English Hymnody." Before Watts' time, church congregations sang the Psalms, only roughly set to music. Watts was the first to provide non-Biblical verses for congregational singing. He also introduced a new take on the Psalms. Believing that they didn't adequately reflect the spirit of the New Testament, he wrote Psalm-inspired hymns that reflected the ministry of Christ Jesus. He even wrote a book entitled, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, And Applied to the Christian State and Worship*. It has since been said of him that he made David a Christian. Let's take a look at Watts' take on Psalm 117.

Hymn 62 (both verses)

Aside from his prodigious output of hymns, Watts wrote books on geography, astronomy, grammar and philosophy -- books that were used in education in 18th century. One of his most popular textbooks was, *Logic, or The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth With a Variety of Rules to Guard Against Error in the Affairs of Religion and Human Life*. Believe it or not, this book, first published in 1724, was reprinted in 20 editions. Another of his books had the improbable title, *The Knowledge of the Heavens and the Earth Made Easy*.

Hymn 386 (all verses)

Throughout his life, Watts remained unmarried, and he was typically in poor health. In 1712, in the midst of a severe illness, he went to live with his friend and patron, Sir Thomas Abney and his wife, Lady Mary, and he remained living on their estate — a house guest for 36 years — until his death in 1748. After his passing, Isaac Watts' papers were given to Yale University in the American colony of Connecticut, which had been established by Nonconformists.

Unlike many of the contributors to our Hymnal, there are numerous biographies of Isaac Watts and a wealth of information about his life and accomplishments. There have been many statues and other memorials in his honor. The most interesting is the Isaac Watts Memorial United Reformed Church in Southampton, England, founded in 1932. According to their Facebook page, they consider Watts to have been a member of their church. Let's close with the best-known setting of Isaac Watts' words to music.

Hymn 417 (all verses)