

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

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Why commemorate the tercentenary* of the birth of Isaac Watts? It may be sufficient to answer that question by saying that through his hymns he still has an influence over very many of us; “he being dead yet speaketh” His hymns are no doubt a tender rebuke to us in our tendency towards superficiality in worship at the present time; and they are most certainly valuable aids to us in our pursuit of God. But equally as important, Isaac Watts is a fine example of a dedicated, fruitful and persevering Christian and minister.

Childhood

He was born at Southampton on 17th July, 1674. At the time of his birth, his father was in prison for his Nonconformist convictions. At the age of six Isaac was sent to the local grammar school; even by this time he had shown great promise. The list of his mastery of languages is impressive: he began to learn Latin at four, Greek at nine, French at ten and Hebrew at thirteen. His natural poetic gifts also came to light at an early age. Before he was six he wrote an acrostic upon his name which shows a fine grasp of biblical truth:—

I am a vile polluted lump of earth,
So I've continu'd ever since my birth;
Although Jehovah grace does daily give me,
As sure this monster Satan will deceive me,
Come, therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me.

Wash me in thy blood, O Christ,
And grace divine impart,
Then search and try the corners of my heart,
That I in all things may be fit to do
Service to thee, and sing thy praises too.

But Christian faith is more than intellectual grasp of biblical truth, though it is, of course, based on this. Throughout his childhood and early youth, his parents, therefore, prayed for his conversion. He came to the Lord at the age of fifteen. He writes: “Fell under considerable convictions of sin, 1688. And was taught to trust in Christ I hope, 1689.”

Education

Dr John Speed, a Southampton physician, offered to pay Isaac's expenses at Oxford or Cambridge with a view to his entering the ministry of the Church of England. But the offer

was graciously refused; Isaac had chosen to throw in his lot with the Dissenters. So, on leaving the grammar school, Isaac entered the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington to prepare for the ministry.

At the academy, Isaac laid the ground for the contribution he was to make in a wide range of disciplines.

The Rev. Thomas Rowe, principal of the academy, was also pastor of the Independent congregation at Girdler's Hall, of which congregation Isaac became a member in 1693. Shortly afterwards he left Stoke Newington and spent the next two and a half years at home, even though he was qualified to enter the ministry. In fact, this period was far from unproductive. Critical of the standard of psalmody in Nonconformity he was stimulated by his father's challenge to produce something better. Hence, he began his great work as a hymn-writer. It was at this time that the bulk of the Hymns and Spiritual Songs was written.

Ministry

The next six years were spent as tutor to the son of the wealthy Puritan Sir John Hartopp back at Stoke Newington. Over these years, Watts gave himself to incessant study; this issued in theological, philosophical, educational, and scientific works. There is no doubt as well that it is to overwork during this period that we are to trace his subsequent ill-health. He was ill quite frequently and sometimes for lengthy periods. But rumours that at the last his mind was affected appear, on the evidence of Watts' biographer, Dr Thomas Gibbons, to be quite unfounded.

It is therefore against a background of ill-health – with visits to the popular spas and to Southampton for the sake of his health – that we are to see his ministry.

He preached his first sermon on his twenty-fourth birthday. A year later, in 1699, he became assistant to Dr Isaac Chauncey, pastor of a London Independent congregation which at that time met at Mark Lane. The congregation had its quota of distinguished members in Watts' day, including Oliver Cromwell's granddaughter and a number of civic and business leaders in the Capital. Among the latter were Sir John Hartopp and his wife and two other of Watts' patrons, Sir Thomas and Lady Abney. When Sir Thomas became Lord Mayor of London he made Watts his chaplain. On the retirement of Dr Chauncey, Watts was invited to be pastor of the church; he accepted the call on 8th March 1702.

The church, which had declined under Dr Chauncey's ministry, prospered under Watts'. But the work proved too much for his frail constitution and the year after he had undertaken full pastoral duties the congregation appointed an assistant for him. This was Rev. Samuel Price.

Watts' venture into romance was with a Miss Singer; but his hopes were soon dashed for when he proposed, she is supposed to have told him, with reference to his rather unimpressive appearance, "Mr Watts, I only wish I could say that I admire the casket as much as I admire the jewel."

On account of Watts' ill-health, Mr Price was ordained co-pastor in 1713 and a year later Watts visited the country home of Sir Thomas Abney, near Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, for the week-end, and remained as a welcome guest for thirty years. On Sundays, when he was well, he travelled in to his church; when he was ill he sent a pastoral letter to be read to the congregation. All the while he was engaged in writing.

Writings

Watts was intensely interested in the creation and wrote a book on astronomy and geography. He saw that reason, unaided by the Holy Spirit, could not discover divine truth. Unhappily Watts did not follow his own principle sufficiently over the discussion of the Trinity, in which he became entangled. His attempts at explaining the Godhead led him into deep waters; but it is not true, as has sometimes been claimed, that he became a Unitarian.

Watts was decidedly modern in his approach to education, believing that the child's latent abilities should be encouraged; but, unlike many modern educationalists, he also believed that children were fallen creatures and needed the discipline of study; even so, mental exercise, like physical, he said, should be "constant and moderate" – that is, a little and often. He wrote a number of textbooks and acted as an adviser to the academies on matters of textbooks and tutors. But above all he was interested in the education of children. He was a supporter of the Charity School movement and wrote 'An Essay towards the Encouragement of Charity Schools among the Dissenters.'

In the theological field, he wrote 'Questions Proper for Students of Divinity' and 'The Sacrifice of Christ and the Operations of the Spirit.' The latter is a defence of the faith once delivered to the saints. It was written in the light of the fact that many of the Presbyterians had been drawn to Unitarianism and thus had forsaken the great truths of the gospel, abandoning, as David Fountain puts it, "the necessity of a Redeemer to atone, and a Sanctifier to renew."

The Psalms and Hymns

But Watts' most enduring work was his paraphrases of the Psalms and his hymns; these were written in the main during the earlier part of his ministry. In the words of David Fountain, he "was to influence the worship of the nation more than any other single man." One of his paraphrases – "Our God, our help in ages past" – says Dr Rupp, "is more than a hymn, it is an event in English history, and part of our very national existence." To understand something of the contribution Watts made, we need to know a little of the background against which he worked. The singing of the Psalms was an important element in the worship of the Reformed churches; but the rendering of the Psalms had been somewhat unimaginative. Watts set himself, first of all, the task of making the Psalms into Christian hymns suitable for the use of every believer. He explained his intention thus:

"When the Psalmist uses sharp invectives against his personal enemies, I have endeavoured to turn the edge of them against our spiritual adversaries, Sin, Satan, Temptation. When the flights of his faith and love are sublime, I have often sunk the expressions within the reach of an ordinary Christian: where the words imply some peculiar wants or distresses, joys or blessings, I have used words of greater latitude and comprehension, suited to the general circumstances of men.

"Where the original runs in the form of prophecy concerning Christ and His salvation, I have given an historical turn to the sense; there is no necessity that we should always sing in the obscure and doubtful style of prediction, when the things foretold are brought into open light by a full accomplishment. Where the writers of the New Testament have cited or alluded to any part of the Psalms, I have often indulged the liberty of paraphrase, according to the words of Christ, or His apostles."

The result is some paraphrases which have enriched the worship of God's people for generations; there is, for instance, the moving version of Psalm 118 ("This is the day the Lord

hath made”). And what child of God hasn’t felt his spirit lifted in praise as he has sung the paraphrase of Psalm 146 (“I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath”)?

Then there are the hymns – some seven hundred of them in all; each one of them is marked by the understanding and sensitivity of its author; they are thoroughly biblical. There are hymns relating to all the great doctrines of Scripture; hymns which cover almost every conceivable situation. They are all characterised, moreover, by a fine blend of revealed truth and experience; that is, the soul’s experience of God is always related to the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Watts’ hymns are full of praise, but the praise of the hymns never becomes over-familiar with God. Indeed, one of them ends with these words:

God is in heaven, and men below;
Be short our tunes, our words be few;
A sacred reverence checks our songs,
And praise sits silent on our tongues.

Last days

Watts’ final years were spent in great weakness of mind. But he had made his contribution to the spread of the Kingdom. His great desire had been for the preaching of the Gospel – he once said that he would rather have written Richard Baxter’s ‘Call to the Unconverted’ than John Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost.’ He had longed for revival and was privileged to see it towards the end of his days. And, for all his accomplishments, it is as a pastor that he would be remembered: he wrote his own epitaph, which begins: “Isaac Watts, D.D., a Pastor of a church of Christ in London.” He died, on 25th November, 1748, cherishing the Christian hope which is so well expressed in one of his hymns – a hymn which takes on a new meaning when we recall his years of illness:

There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign,
Infinite day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain.

*This article by the late Rev. Alan Tovey first appeared in the Evangelical Magazine of Wales for February-March 1974, and is here abridged and reproduced by kind permission of Mrs Lucy Beale.

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