

Joy to the World

Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Psalm 98:4 (NKJV)

Until Isaac Watts came along, most of the singing in British churches was from the Psalms of David. The church – especially the Church of Scotland – had labored over the Psalms with great effort and scholarship, translating them into poems with rhyme and rhythm suitable for singing. A young man in Southampton, Isaac had become dissatisfied with the quality of singing, and he keenly felt the limitations of being able to only sing these Psalms. So he “invented” the English hymn.

He did not, however, neglect the Psalms. In 1719, he published a unique hymnal – one in which he had translated, interpreted, and paraphrased the Old Testament Psalms through the eyes of the New Testament faith. He called it simply, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. Taking various Psalms, he studied them from the perspective of Jesus and the New Testament, and then formed them into verses for singing.

“I have rather expressed myself as I may suppose David would have done if he lived in the days of Christianity,” Watts explained, “and by this means, perhaps, I have sometimes hit upon the true intent of the Spirit of God in those verses farther and clearer than David himself could ever discover.”

Watt's archenemy, Thomas Bradbury, was greatly critical of Watts' songs, which he called *whims* instead of hymns. He accused Watts of thinking he was King David. Watts' replied in a letter, “You tell me that I rival it with David, whether he or I be the sweet psalmist of Israel. I abhor the thought; while yet, at the same time, I am fully persuaded that the Jewish psalm book was never designed to be the only Psalter for the Christian church.”

“Joy to the World!” is Isaac Watts' interpretation of Psalm 98, which says: “Shout to the Lord, all the earth” (verse 4). As he read Psalm 98, Isaac pondered reason for shouting joyfully to the Lord – the Messiah has come to redeem us. The result, despite the now-forgotten criticisms of men like Bradbury, has been a timeless carol that has brightened our Christmases for nearly three hundred years.