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## ISAAC WATTS.

BY THE REV. C. SYDNEY CARTER, M.A.

THERE are few, if any, hymns more universally popular than "O God, our help in ages past," and none, it may surely be safely asserted, which has been in such frequent use in all our churches during the past four and a half years, and yet its celebrated author is probably little more than a name to most modern Church people. He was, however, not only an influential and prominent figure in the religious and literary world of his day, but his life (1674-1748) also forms an interesting connecting link between the Puritan Fathers of the seventeenth century and the great Methodist Revival of the eighteenth, which was in full bloom at his death.

Isaac Watts, the eldest of nine children, came of a sturdy and staunch Puritan ancestry. His grandfather, a gallant Naval Commander, was killed in the Dutch Wars in 1656, and his father suffered severely for his Nonconformist principles under the iniquitous penal laws of Charles II, being more than once imprisoned, and in 1684 compelled to leave his family and live secretly in London for two years owing to the virulence of the persecution against the Dissenters. He kept a large and flourishing boarding school at Southampton, having pupils entrusted to his care from places as distant as America and the West Indies.

As we read the letters the father wrote to his youthful family during his enforced exile from home, we can have little doubt that young Isaac owed much of his future usefulness in the Church of Christ to the pious and exemplary home training he received from the godly deacon of the Independent congregation at Southampton. From the same source he must also have inherited his remarkable poetic gifts, as we find the old father composing a beautiful hymn at the advanced age of eighty-five! Isaac very soon developed a talent for versification and was also of a peculiarly studious disposition from his early years, all his spare pocket money being expended in the purchase of books.

When we learn that his father commenced teaching him Latin at the age of four, Greek at nine, and Hebrew at thirteen, we are not surprised that Watts should attribute the cause of the chronic

invalidity of his later years to overstudy in his youthful days ! At the age of six he was sent to a Grammar School in Southampton.

Although he was nurtured in a home of piety and godliness and familiar from his earliest days with the truth and precepts of the Gospel, it was not until Watts was fifteen that he dates his own definite spiritual awakening from a personal realization of peace and joy in believing. It was about this time that he received a generous and attractive offer from a local physician to defray the expenses of his education at the University with a view to his entering the Ministry of the Church. With the intimate knowledge of the persecution which his father had endured for conscience' sake, young Watts respectfully declined this tempting offer and decided to throw in his lot with his father's people. In 1690 he went to a Dissenting Academy in London presided over by Thomas Rowe and had here for his chief friend and fellow student Josiah Hort, the future Archbishop of Tuam. He left Mr. Rowe's College in 1694 with a considerable reputation for piety and learning, and for the next two years retired to his father's house to prepare himself by further study and quiet meditation for the work of the Christian Ministry. In 1696 Watts accepted the post of tutor in the family of Sir John Hartopp, Bart., a prominent Dissenter residing at Stoke Newington, where he remained for the next five years.

In 1698 Watts was chosen as Assistant Minister and morning preacher to a Congregational Church meeting in Mark Lane, where his patron worshipped, and his accomplished and attractive preaching soon won for him the esteem and affection of a congregation which had been somewhat languishing under the unpopular ministrations of its pastor, Dr. I. Chauncey. His ministry was interrupted in 1699 and 1701 by prolonged periods of ill-health, but on the resignation of Dr. Chauncey in 1701 he was somewhat reluctantly persuaded, owing to his ill-health, to succeed him. He was solemnly ordained to the pastorate in 1702.

It is interesting and instructive to read the Articles of Faith which the zealous young Congregational pastor furnished for the approval of his people, since they probably represented the generally received views of the Independents of that time. While admitting that "every Society of saints" walking according to the principles of the Gospel "is a Church of Christ," and "may pray

together and exhort one another," Watts considers this Society an "incomplete Church" and "not to possess power to administer all ordinances" until "they have chosen a proper officer to be over them in the Lord"—one who must be ordained "by their public call and solemn separation of him by fasting and prayer," and then "unto this officer is this power committed." It would be interesting to know how many Congregationalists to-day retain this sharply defined rule of discipline! It is interesting also to notice, in view of the existing Reunion movement, that a similar Christlike aim and spirit was not altogether wanting amongst those early Nonconformists who had been nurtured in an environment of the harshest intolerance and persecution. At the very time of the fanatical High Church outbreaks against Dissenters occasioned by the Sacheverell trial and the Occasional Conformity Bill struggle, Watts published in 1707 a treatise on *Orthodoxy and Charity United*, in which he strongly reprobated the prevailing spirit of sectarian bitterness and earnestly pleaded for a reunion of Churchmen and Dissenters, or at least for a greater spirit of love and brotherhood amongst Christians differing only over such minor matters as the use of ceremonies, liturgical prayers and vestures. This timely appeal fell on deaf ears, but throughout his life Watts was on most cordial terms of friendship with men of all parties and was specially intimate with such eminent Church dignitaries as Archbishops Secker, Blackburne, Hort and Bishop Gibson, all of whom habitually received, and greatly appreciated, presents of his theological writings. The celebrated evangelist, Whitefield, also visited him, and Watts took a deep and sympathetic interest in the progress of the Methodist Revival, although he seriously warned Whitefield against his early claims to special revelations of the Holy Spirit, which Bishop Butler had also denounced as "A horrid thing, a very horrid thing!"

In 1707 the Mark Lane congregation removed to Bury Street, St. Mary Axe; but as early as 1703, owing to his uncertain health, an assistant pastor had to be chosen to help Watts, and in 1711 a serious illness, which would be described to-day as neurasthenia, quite unfitted him for any public work for the next four years and was often so severe as to endanger his mind. Watts displayed a remarkable patience and faith throughout the distressing symptoms of this illness, affirming his opinion that St. Paul's "thorn

in the flesh" "was the debilitated state of his nerves occasioned by the overpowering glories of heaven, whence he concluded the Apostle was in the body when he was caught up into Paradise."

After this severe attack Watts never enjoyed any very prolonged period of health and was frequently unable to preach, or often the great pain and weakness following on any such attempt confined him to his bed for some time. A happy outcome of this extreme weakness occurred in 1713, when he was invited as a guest to the house of Sir Thomas Abney, a former Lord Mayor of London, and this generous and affectionate hospitality was continued until his death! The Countess of Huntingdon related to Toplady a conversation with Watts which well illustrates the great respect which his hosts entertained for their invalid minister. Dr. Watts informed her that she was visiting him on "an auspicious day," since exactly thirty years before he had come to Sir Thomas Abney's intending to spend but one single week, and he had extended his visit to the length of thirty years! Lady Abney interposed, "Sir, what you term a long thirty years' visit I consider the *shortest* my family ever received."

Watts first gained fame and reputation as a poet on the publication of his *Horæ Lyricæ* in 1705, a second edition of which was required in 1709 and which had passed through eight editions at his death. Although they were rather hurriedly and lightly written, they earned the praise of Dr. Johnson as well as the highest approbation of the religious public in England and America. Encouraged by this success Watts published the first edition of his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1707 containing 220 hymns. In 1709, 150 new ones were added, and by 1720 a seventh edition appeared, which also included his widely circulated and highly valued "Psalms of David imitated in the language of the New Testament," which soon supplanted the older versions of Sternhold and Hopkins and Tate and Brady.

Although his *Psalms and Hymns* partake of the sterner theology of his day in being at times harsh and severe in expression and can easily be criticized on the score of their faulty versification and inelegant expression, they are always catholic in their outlook, and the whole Christian Church owes him a deep and abiding debt of gratitude for such beautiful and standard hymns as "Before Jehovah's awful throne," "When I survey the wondrous Cross,"

“There is a land of pure delight,” as well as “O God, our help in ages past.” His biographer in comparing Watts’ merits with those of the “Poet of Methodism” aptly declares that Watts possessed the greatest skill “in design and originality,” Charles Wesley “in execution and polish.” It was in 1720 that Watts published his *Divine and Moral Songs for the use of Children*, which were highly eulogized by Dr. Johnson and enjoyed a long and well-deserved popularity. Many million copies were circulated throughout the world, and over a hundred years after their publication they had an annual sale in England alone of 80,000.

In 1728 the Universities of Edinburgh and Aberdeen bestowed the well-merited diploma of D.D. on the great Nonconformist poet-divine.

When we remember the almost continual bodily suffering which Watts endured we are amazed at his prodigious literary labours. In a little over forty years he produced fifty-two distinct publications, many of them scientific and erudite works on deep philosophical or theological subjects. He wrote numerous treatises in support of the Christian Faith against Arianism, Deism and infidelity, many of which, although forgotten now, were exceedingly popular at the time.

It was unfortunate that his horror of religious dissension led him to intervene in the unprofitable Trinitarian Controversy started by Dr. Samuel Clarke and the eccentric William Whiston. Watts, in his sincere and earnest endeavour to reconcile the Arian and Trinitarian protagonists amongst the Dissenters was betrayed into publishing a definition and explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity which certainly overstepped the bounds of orthodoxy, and as is usual with mediators, he was rewarded by the condemnation of both parties, although attempts to fasten on him a denial of the essential deity of Christ were entirely devoid of foundation.

His great mental exertions had completely undermined his enfeebled constitution and shattered nervous system several years before his death, and the closing period of his life was also clouded by the malicious and slanderous attacks made on his character by a near relative which greatly distressed and depressed his highly sensitive nature. His trust in his Saviour remained, however, bright and serene through all. Renowned as he was as philosopher, poet and theologian, he yet retained the simplicity of his early

faith to the end. It is inspiring to read the dying testimony of so profound a thinker and scholar. "I should be glad to read more," Dr. Watts told Lady Abney, "yet not in order to be confirmed more in the truth of the Christian religion, or in the truth of its promises, for I believe them enough to venture an eternity on them." When almost worn out and broken down with his infirmities he remarked that "an aged minister used to say that the most learned and knowing Christians, when they come to die, have only the same plain promises of the Gospel for their support as the common and unlearned, and so," said Watts, "I find it." "They are the plain promises of the Gospel which are my support, and I bless God they are plain promises, which do not require much labour or pain to understand them; for I can do nothing now but look into my Bible for some promise to support me and live upon that." Truly "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom" for us all!

C. SYDNEY CARTER.

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#### THE PRAYER BOOK.

The paramount claim which the Prayer Book has upon the affections and reverent regards of the English-speaking world is doubtless based upon *its fitness for its purpose*. We love and reverence it because experience has proved, and is daily proving, that in it the Church of God finds a most apt vehicle of worship; because in it our spiritual desires and aspirations, our penitence, our gratitude, our joy, find adequate utterance; because through it God speaks to our hearts, even as He graciously permits us through it to speak to Him. Here, beyond all question, lies the permanent, paramount and inexhaustible source of its power. The simple, unlettered Churchman who joins in the Church's public worship, or who uses the Prayer Book as his manual of private devotion, finds in it satisfaction, comfort, delight. And the best instructed, it may be said, need scarcely ask for more.—BISHOP DOWDEN in *Workmanship of the Prayer Book*.

