

Joy To The World

Psalm 98:1-9

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Ames, Iowa

December 20, 2020

This morning we are going to consider the Christmas Carol *Joy to the World*. It was written by the father of hymn writing, Isaac Watts. Many people consider Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley to be the two greatest hymn writers in Christian history, but Isaac Watts would be regarded as the father of hymn writing because it was his hymn writing that inspired Charles Wesley's hymn writing.

Watts was born on July 17, 1674, in Southampton, England, and named after his father. The elder Watts was a stubborn, strong-willed figure in England's Protestant church and his son was much like him. The younger Watts was never content with the status quo. He once complained to his father that the church's music was uninspired, boring, and lacked joy. The elder Watts challenged his son to write something better. The younger Watts met his father's challenge with a burst of hymn writing that would not end until he had written more than six hundred hymns and many other poems.¹

Isaac Watts wrote *Joy to the World* in 1719. He had been studying Psalm 98, and after spending many hours meditating on the phrase, "*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise,*" he wrote the four-stanza poem.

Watts never intended the hymn to be a Christmas Carol. He wrote it to be sung in the normal course of church worship. *Joy to the World* was originally published in a musical volume that included such well-known hymns as "*We're Marching to Zion,*" "*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,*" "*At the Cross,*" and "*This Is the Day the Lord Has Made.*"²

The version of the song that we sing today did not take on its current arrangement until a little over 100 years later. Composer Lowell Mason, who, like Watts, wanted to improve church music, took two melodies from Handel's *Messiah* and put them together to develop the tune called "*Antioch.*" In 1839, Mason set the words of "*Joy to the World*" to his tune "*Antioch,*" and the classic we know and love was born.³

Let's consider this Christmas favorite by taking our own journey through Psalm 98 guided by Watt's hymn, *Joy to the World*.

Remember, one of Isaac Watts's main concerns was that there was not much joy in the church's hymns in his day. For us, I think we would all agree that we are in a season of struggling to find joy in life. If you are like me, you find frustration much quicker than you find joy. I don't know about you, but I have to fight harder for joy these days than I have at other times.

Regardless of our circumstances, the world has always been a dark, broken place. Often the wind and the waves of the circumstances of our lives cause us to take our eyes off of Jesus. When this happens, joy is hard to find, and we begin to sink in a sea of sorrow. Psalm 98 and the hymn *Joy to the World* point us to four reasons for joy in the Christian life no matter how bad our circumstances may become in life.

¹ Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*, 110-112.

² Ibid, 114.

³ Ibid, 115-116; Frank, Cameron; Norman, Preston, *The Soul Felt Its Worth: A 25-Day Devotional Journey Through the Music of Christmas*, 117, Kindle Edition.

I. Joy to the World! The Savior Is Come (vv. 1-2)

*Joy to the World;
the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King!
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing.*

Watts opens in a song of joy in the same way Psalm 98:1-2 begins in a joyful song. Listen to vv. 1-2:

¹ *Oh 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.*
² *The Lord has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.*

The new song in Psalm 98 is the song of the gospel. Psalm 98 is a redemptive Psalm. By faith, the psalmist is able to see the first coming of the Messiah and, by faith, he is also able to the second coming of the Messiah. By faith, the psalmist is able to see King Jesus as the conquering King who conquered sin and death by His own righteous life and death. By faith, He is able to see the marvelous life of the Savior and the glorious resurrection of King Jesus. Although he did not see it with his physical eyes at the moment, with the eyes of faith, the psalmist sees that God has worked marvelous salvation for His people in Christ.

Isaac Watts may not have intended *Joy to the World* to reflect the birth of Christ; it seems that his meditation on Psalm 98 could not help but see the coming of Jesus. The irony is Psalm 98:1-3 follows very closely *Mary's* song called *The Magnificat* in Luke 1:46-55.

The parallels between Psalm 98:1-3 and *Mary's Magnificat* are striking. Mary may have had Psalm 98 in mind as the Holy Spirit inspired her song. Mary, by faith, rightly saw that the promises of Psalm 98 were to be fulfilled by her giving birth to Jesus. Listen to the parallels between these two texts.⁴

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, [*Psalms 42–106: An Expositional Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 799–800.

Psalm 98:1-3

“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 LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.”

“He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel.”

The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

“My soul glorifies the Lord.”

“The Mighty One has done great things for me.”

“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm.”

“His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

“He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful.”

By faith, Mary sang the new song of salvation given in the gospel. Do you have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you sing His song of redemption by faith alone, in Christ alone, through grace alone, according to God’s word alone, and for God’s glory alone?

Think about it this way. There are only two songs we can sing in this world. We can sing the old song of Adam that loves self and sin, or we can sing the new song of salvation provided through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The questions you need to ask yourself are: What song am I singing in my life? Has the right arm of the Lord worked salvation in my heart?

So, what needs to happen in order for you to stop sing Adam’s old song and begin singing joy to the world? Psalm 98:2 answers that question for us.

God must make known to you His salvation. Listen to v. 2 again:

*² The Lord has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.*

Scripture teaches us that no one seeks God, but each has gone His own sinful way. If God had not made this great salvation known, we would have no hope to be saved. No one would find the way of salvation. No one would seek out the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. No one would sing a song of joy in life.

In Christ, God has made His salvation known. In Christ, God offers you the true song of joy. Dear friend, God is making known to you this morning the sweet song of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let me encourage you to turn from Adam’s song and begin singing the gospel song.

II. Joy to the World! The Savior Reigns (vv. 4-9a)

*Joy to the earth,
the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields & floods, rocks, hills & plains
Repeat the sounding joy.*

Now the gospel song of salvation is declared by those whom God has saved because the Savior reigns in the hearts of those whom He has saved.

Look at vv. 4-9a in Psalm 98:

*⁴ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!*

*⁵ Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!*

*⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!*

*⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!*

*⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together*

*⁹ before the Lord, for he comes
to judge the earth.*

Now the people who have been saved joyfully flourish under the reign of King Jesus. God's people do not grudgingly submit. They willingly and with great joy, submit to the Lordship of Christ in their lives.

Then in their great joy, they lead the whole earth to sing the new song of salvation. Watts rightly notes that God's people lead all creation to worship Jesus. The second stanza says as God's people sing joy to the world, all creation joins in the celebration: *fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat their sounding joy.*

Jesus told the Pharisees when He rode the donkey's foal into Jerusalem, and the people cried out *Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord* that if the people did not sing this song, then the rocks would cry out. Let's make sure that fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains do not sing louder than the redeemed of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, let's be the ones who lead all creation to sing the song of joy in Christ because we have been saved. When we gather together on Sundays, let's lead the world in the joy of singing the truth of the gospel. Let's be the ones who point the world to God's work in Christ.

Only in Christ can true joy be found. Even in all of the hard, rocky, thorny, bizarre, and painful events of 2020, only Christians have reason to hope.

Brothers and sister, if we cannot sing the joyful song of the gospel in hard circumstances, who will? Brothers and sisters, let's fight for our joy in Christ by singing the beautiful song of the work of Christ on our behalf. You may be like me, and you do not sing very well, but you can make a joyful noise. Let's make a joyful together.

The third stanza of Watts hymn is my favorite, for it is the nail in the coffin of sin, death, and sadness. Listen to the third verse is the heart of the gospel, for it is the promise fulfilled.

III. Joy to the World! The Savior Has Reversed the Curse (v. 3)

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.*

We can sing *joy to the world* no matter how dark, and hard our circumstances are because Jesus came to reverse the curse of sin.

The first two lines of the third stanza say, “*No more let sin and sorrow grow and thorns infest the ground.*” This reminds us that sin’s curse is upon sinners. This line reminds us of what God said to Adam in Genesis 3:17-18 after he had sinned and eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil:

*And to Adam [God] said,
Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.*

Watt’s song reminds us of the devastating effects of the curse of sin on people. The curse of sin has ravaged the lives of people, and everything in the world is broken. Work is cursed, marriage relationships suffer, family relationships suffer, and there is much sorrow in the world—people suffering under corrupt governments and evil rulers. There are wars, famines, illnesses, starvation, and death everywhere. Everywhere we look, it seems thorns infest the ground of our lives. Sin and sorrow are everywhere.

However, this is not the ultimate curse. Death is the ultimate curse that was placed upon people. The Apostle Paul reminded us in Romans that by one man’s sin, death entered the world.

Yet, the reign of the King means that Jesus has come to reverse the effects and effects of the curse of sin. The arrival of Jesus means hope has been born in a world suffering in the throes of death’s grip. Psalm 98:3 says,

³ *He [God] has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.*

God remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness. The birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary in the manger is God remembering his steadfast love and displaying the glory of His faithfulness to His people.

During His life, Jesus never sinned. Jesus kept God’s law in our place and for us. Then died on the cross as the substitute for our sin. Jesus fulfilled the promise God made in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:15:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.*

On the cross and by His resurrection from the dead, the Lord Jesus Christ crushed the head of the serpent. *Joy to the world* because death no longer reigns in the lives of God’s people. *Joy to the world* for Jesus is alive, and He reigns as King, and the King begins the reversal of sin’s curse.

In the first coming of Jesus, we have a foretaste of the reversal of the curse. But the fullness of the song *Joy to the World* will be realized in the second coming of Christ. When Jesus returns to take His people to their home in heaven, the full effects and effects of the curse of sin will be completely removed.

Truly at that point, sin and sorrow will no longer exist. Thorns will never infest the ground again because God will have created a new heaven and a new earth. His blessings will flow from His throne freely and graciously on His people. At every point that the curse of sin had touched will be washed clean by the blessing of God's grace.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, are you looking forward to that day? When life seems to overwhelm you with the effects and affects of the curse of sin, do you take an eternal perspective on the brokenness of this world? When God's people live out the joy of the marvelous salvation, Christ has provided for us. When we live with the joy that Jesus reigns, we display that the curse is being reversed. A good question to ask yourself is: Am I living my life as if the curse of sin rules this world or as if the Savior reigns?

IV. Joy to the World! The Savior Rules in Truth and Grace (v. 9b)

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love.*

The last stanza of *Joy to the World* shows us one more cause for joy because Christ not only rules the world, but He rules the world in *truth and grace*.

This is good news! In God's Kingdom, God will rule as Psalm 98:9b says:

^{9b} *He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.*

Under the righteous rule of Jesus, the nations will be a display of God's glory and righteousness. In the coming Kingdom, we will no longer groan under the sinful governments of mankind but flourish under the rule of the grace and truth of King Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I long for the righteous rule of our Savior. I long for the day when His truth and grace cover the face of the earth. That will be a glorious day.

Friends, in this season of darkness and struggling with the world's brokenness, we have to fight for our joy. One of the joys we can take comfort in is that this world is not our home. When we remember this, we are able to recalibrate our lives according to God's word and live with an eternal perspective. Living from an eternal perspective reminds me that one day the King will return and when He does, He will set all things according to His righteousness. Living from an eternal perspective will give us joy on difficult days, with difficult people, in difficult circumstances, and with difficult issues. Living life knowing Jesus will return and set all things right produces kindness in us when we are mistreated. It gives us peace when we are anxious. It helps us to treat others as we want to be treated. It causes us to be humble instead of angry and arrogant. It produces in us joy when the circumstances seem to suck all of the joy out of life.

Here is one of the practical ways I fight for joy in my life. It is exactly what Isaac Watts spent his life doing, writing songs that produce joy. No, I do not write music, but I listen to music that produces joy in my heart.

Now I love reading God's word and preaching God's word, but one of the best ways I have found that God uses to bypass my sorrow, anxiety, sadness, or frustration is to take in God's word through song and singing.

One of my favorite artists is Shane and Shane, and my favorite album by Shane and Shane is *Psalms Vol. 2*. They simply sing the Psalms. They simply sing God's word, and when I hear those Psalms sung and I sing along with them, my joy returns. It is amazing how God's word pushes back the darkness in my heart and mind and reminds me that Jesus reigns in truth and grace.

The second thing I do as I listen to the Psalms being sung is reflect on the details of the gospel. As I listen to the gospel unfolded in the Psalms I remember the depth of my depravity and the height, depth, length, and width of the love for Christ for me while I was still a sinner, and I find joy. I am humbled and changed as I remember his obedience for me when I was disobedient, and in this, I am filled with joy.