

December 14, 2014 by Steve Brandon



Joy to the World (Various)

As most all of you know, this Christmas we are in a series during the four weeks of Advent entitled, "The Hymns of Christmas." We are taking familiar and theologically rich hymns, and looking at them through the lens of Scripture. Two weeks ago, we looked at "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Last week, we looked at "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." And this Sunday we come to "Joy to the World," which is Hymn #270 in our hymnals. So, I invite you to take up your hymnals and turn there.

I want to share with you a little book that my daughter shared with me this week. It's a "Joy to the World" story book about Christmas. And when you open the book, you hear an instrumental rendition of "Joy to the World." The idea is that you would sing the words in the book to this familiar tune. The book contains a message of joy at Christmastime. a message of giving thanks. A message of seeking peace and goodwill to all men. A message of sharing love and giving gifts because the Lord has come to earth with Jesus in a manger.

The reason why this book works is because "Joy to the World" is one of the more famous of all Christmas hymns. Christmas is often associated with being a time of joy. This hymn speaks of the joy that all the world should have as the Lord has come to earth. Just look at the first stanza, ...

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

We see here the Lord coming to earth! We see here the call to all the earth to receive her coming king! Every heart is to be open and ready for the Lord to come, as all heaven and nature sing for joy! How appropriate this is for us to study this third Sunday in Advent, with the third candle we lit at the beginning of the service representing "joy."

Joy is the natural and proper response that we ought to have during the Christmas season. We haven't been left to our own devices. God hasn't forgotten us. But rather, God has come to us. This is found in the Bible. In fact, let's turn in our Bibles to Luke 2. When the angels appeared to the shepherds in the field, their first message was one of joy.

Luke 2:8-11

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Do you see the message? Don't be afraid! I am bringing good news to you! This news brings great joy! A Savior has been born for you!

And of course, this is what we celebrate at Christmastime. We celebrate the coming of our Savior! Jesus Christ has come in the flesh to save us from our sins. In fact, that's exactly what Joseph was told of this child before he was born. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21).

And of course, Jesus saved us by dying upon the cross for our sins. Because of our sin, we deserved to die. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Not just physical death, but eternal death away from the presence of our God, suffering eternally in hell. "But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). We simply need to believe. And to those who believe, God gives us this gift of eternal life. Not just merely living forever, but living with God forever; enjoying His presence, enjoying His pleasures. For the Psalmist says, "In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11).

Such is the good news. God has come to give us joy! God has come to secure our eternal happiness. And so, we rightly sing at Christmas time, "Joy to the world! the Lord is come!" In fact, let's sing the first stanza together, ...

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

But, do you know what? This song isn't about Christmas. It's about the second coming of our Lord. Just look down at the other stanzas.

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

Now, does Jesus Christ reign upon the earth? Yes, in some measure. But, does He reign as fully as He might? No, not right now. According to Psalm 110, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, awaiting the day when His enemies are placed as a footstool underneath His feet. That's where Jesus is right now. He is awaiting the time when He returns to fully establish His reign.

And when He reigns, all will be put in order! None will be in rebellion against Him. That's what, I believe, is being talked about in the second stanza. The second coming, when Jesus will rule over all! This is shown in the third stanza, ...

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,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

This goes way back into the garden of Eden. When Adam took of the fruit and ate, he plunged the entire human race into sin. Romans 5:12 says, "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" And today, each one of us is a sinner by nature and by choice. And, of course, sin brings sorrow and heartache and pain and tears.

But, there will be a day when sin will be no more -- and the results of sin will be no more -- at the second coming of Christ. You remember the words near the end of Revelation, when the reign and rule of Jesus has been established. What did John see? What did John hear?

Revelation 21:3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

When Jesus comes back and finally sets up His rule and reign, there will be no more sorrow or pain or tears.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;

Do you remember the curse that the Lord inflicted upon the ground as a result of Adam's sin?

Genesis 3:17-18a

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
In toil you will eat of it
All the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;

This hymn is talking about the day when thorns and thistles will no longer exist! That will only come about at the second coming of Christ when He exerts His rule over all. Indeed, at that time, His blessings will flow, ...

Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

The fourth stanza simply continues the theme, ...

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

This isn't a song about Christmas. It's a song about the second coming of Christ. When He fully rules the world! When the nations are basking in His righteousness and love.

How many times have you sung this hymn, and never realized that it's not talking about Christmas? That doesn't mean that we can't sing it at Christmas time. I believe that we can. I believe that we should. Because, the first coming of Jesus set the groundwork for the second coming of Jesus. Without the first coming, the second coming couldn't happen. Because Jesus dealt with our sin at His first coming. And He will establish His sovereignty at His second coming.

Furthermore, joy is a Christmas message. In fact, in our hymnal, this hymn is surrounded by two others Christmas hymns of joy. "How Great Our Joy!" (#269) and "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You" (#271). But, pressing on, consider some other Christmas hymns of joy that are found in our hymnal: "Good Christian Men, Rejoice" (#273) and "As with Gladness Men of Old" (#290). Next week we look at "O Come, All Ye Faithful," (#249), which includes the line, "... joyful and triumphant."

Beyond the word, "joy," however, there are many Christmas songs of hope and happiness and triumph. And the ultimate triumph and ultimate joy comes when the baby of the manger returns as the king of the earth. "Joy to the World" is joy in the coming of Christ. It's not some sentimental joy detached from everything surrounding Christmas. So, I think that "Joy to the World" is worthy of being sung during the Christmas season, even though it's not a song about Christmas.

The song is actually a paraphrase of Psalm 98. Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 98. As you are turning there, I want to tell you a bit about Isaac Watts, who wrote, "Joy to the World." When you understand him, you will understand this hymn

Watts was born in 1674 into a strong Christian family. In fact, on two occasions during his childhood years, his father was in prison for preaching the gospel; he was a faithful man. He was a gifted boy, who showed proficiency in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew at a young age. At age seven, Isaac wrote an acrostic poem for his name, which not only showed his poetic talent, but also showed forth his heart for God.

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

W - Wash me in Thy blood, O Christ,
A - And grace divine impart.
T - Then search and try the corners of my heart,
T - That I in all things may be fit to do
S - Service to Thee, and sing Thy praises too.

Seven years old! Incredible!

Well, as Isaac Watts grew up, he came to dislike the way that songs were sung in church. He said that they were sung without heart. He attributed it to the content of what was sung. See, in his day, the songs that were sung in church were the Psalms put to meter. Very little singing about Jesus.

Finally after enough complaining, his father challenged him, "Well then, young man, why don't you give us something better to sing?" ^[1] So, Isaac rose to the challenge and wrote his first hymn. "It was well received by the congregation of the Mark Lane Independent Chapel, where he attended, and for the next two years, Watts wrote a new hymn for every Sunday." ^[2] And as one writer said, "[These hymns] slid off his pen like butter." ^[3]

He compiled these early hymns in a work entitled, "Hymns and Spiritual Songs" in 1707. Eight years later (in 1715), he published another poetical work entitled, "Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children." And in 1719, he published, "The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament."

I have a book in my library written by Isaac Watts entitled, "Songs from the Psalms: In the light of the New Testament," which includes many of the Psalms that appeared in his "Psalms of David," but not all of them. It's not a hymnal, as it contains no music. But, it has a portion of most of the Psalms in rhyme and meter, which can be sung to a few simple melodies.

Though they gained acceptance in his father's church, gaining acceptance other places proved to be a bit more difficult. Because, the thought of the day followed along the lines of the regulative principle of John Calvin: Worship should be confined to the actual language of the Bible. Thus, it was only the Psalms that were sung in public worship services, which means that songs of Jesus and the redemption and the cross were few and far between.

And the Psalms of Isaac Watts were working to change this. You think that our generation is the only generation that has arguments over the worship in the church? Think again. When these Psalms began to press their way into churches, some were up in arms. Not because the musical style was changing. Not because any of the theology was changing. But, rather, because the source of that theology was changing. They weren't singing the exact words of the Psalms any more.

Using "exact words" wasn't Watts' goal. Isaac Watts was very clear in what he was attempting to do. His purpose was "to accommodate the Book of Psalms to Christian worship." In other words, we who live after the cross have a different perspective of the Psalms than those who lived before the cross. Isaac Watts brought Jesus and our Christian experience into view. He wrote in his preface to Isaac Watt's book of Psalms paraphrases, ...

I come therefore to explain my own design, which is this, To accommodate the book of Psalms to Christian worship. And in order to do this, it is necessary to divest David and Asaph, &c. of every other character but that of a psalmist and a saint, and to make them always speak the common sense, and language of a Christian.

Attempting the work with this view, I have entirely omitted several whole psalms, and large pieces of many others; and have chosen out of all of them, such parts only as might easily and naturally be accommodated to the various occasions of the Christian life, or at least might afford us some beautiful allusion to Christian affairs. ...

Where the Psalmist uses sharp invectives against his personal enemies, I have endeavoured to turn the edge of them against our spiritual adversaries, sin, Satan, and temptation. Where 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. ... Where the writers of the New Testament have cited or alluded to any part the Psalms, I have often indulged the liberty of paraphrase, according to the words of Christ, or his Apostles. ... Where the Psalmist describes religion by the fear of God, I have often joined faith and love to it. Where he speaks of the pardon of sin, through the mercies of God, I have added the merits of a Saviour. Where he talks of sacrificing goats or bullocks, I rather chose to mention the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. When he attends the ark with shouting into Zion, I sing the ascension of my Saviour into heaven, or his presence in his church on earth. Where he promises abundance of wealth, honour, and long life, I have changed some of these typical blessings for grace, glory, and life eternal, which are brought to light by the gospel, and promised in the New Testament.

And I am fully satisfied, that more honor is done to our blessed Saviour, by speaking his name, his graces, and actions, in his own language, according to the brighter discoveries he hath now made, than by going back again to the Jewish forms of worship, and the language of types and figures. [\[4\]](#)

In other words, Watts was trying to take the old Psalms and re-write them as David would write them today, as a believer looking back upon the cross. Isaac Watts was trying to reach the heart with his words.

And this was highly controversial in the church. Jonathan Edwards (in the 1750's in America) battled this issue. His daughter wrote of a man that Edwards dealt with. She writes, ...

... he tells me that he dined at Loyer Smiths yesterday and he never saw a man in such a Rage as he is about the Psalms. He is quite beyond reason or anything but passion, and declares that if my father or any other Minister in the Country should offer to set the Scotch Psalms he will get up immediately and go out of the house, and order all his family out, and will never again set his foot into that Meeting. My Father said he indevoured [sic.] to reason calmly with him and would have him consider if that method would be the most prudent that could be taken, but he would not hear him talk, and told him that it did not signify for him or any body elce [sic.] to talk with him, for he was resolutely fixed, and would not be moved. [\[5\]](#)

In terms of Edwards' position in his day, he wrote, "I am far from thinking that the book of Psalms should be thrown by in our public worship, but that it should always be used in the Christian church to the end of the world: but I know of no obligation we are under to confine ourselves to it."

Now, the best that I can tell, that's exactly what happened. The old Psalms continued to be sung, but Isaac Watts' paraphrases were also introduced. And soon, they began to gain more and more acceptance in the church of God. And today, of course, we have swung completely to Isaac Watts' side. Rare is the church today that continues to sing the metrical Psalms in their worship.

In fact, I would argue that we have swung far beyond Isaac Watts today in our hymnody. Few of the songs we sing today even attempt to paraphrase the Scripture. Rather, most of the songs we sing today come from our own poetical expression of praise to God. Many of our songs originate in circumstances in the lives of song-writers, which are then expressed in poetical worship. Which, by the way, is how many of the Psalms were written. Many of the Psalms are written out David's theology as it mixed with his experience. And Isaac Watts was simply seeking to "Christianize" the Psalms.

Anyway, when Isaac Watts paraphrased Psalm 98, he came up with, "Joy to the World!" Let's read Psalm 98, and you can see how loose he was with the text. Because, he was, in fact, very loose.

Psalm 98

O sing to the Lord a new song,
For He has done wonderful things,
His right hand and His holy arm have gained the victory for Him.
The Lord has made known His salvation;
He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered His lovingkindness and His faithfulness to the house of Israel;
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth;

Break forth and sing for joy and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
With the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
Shout joyfully before the King, the Lord.

Let the sea roar and all it contains,
The world and those who dwell in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
Let the mountains sing together for joy
Before the Lord, for He is coming to judge the earth;
He will judge the world with righteousness
And the peoples with equity.

At first blush, "Joy to the World," seems nowhere to be found in this Psalm. In some regard, perhaps now you can get a flavor to see how loose Isaac Watts was with the texts of the Psalms. And you can see how those who grew up singing a more literal rhyme and meter of these words, were upset that the church was drifting from them. It's understandable how upset they were, that they were losing the Scripture in their worship.

In many ways, it's like the battle for Bible translations that rages today. In recent years, the number of English translations of the Bible has skyrocketed. A hundred and fifty years ago, there was essentially one translation that the church used, the old King James Version. Now, it's not that that was the only English version of the Bible around. But, it was the only popular version of the Bible around. It was practically the only one that was used.

But, along came some scholars. And, along came some resources. And, along came dozens of translations. And now, you go to biblegateway.com, and you can reference 50 English translations of the Bible. And making the change from the Old King James has been very difficult for many. Now, there were some who have objected from a textual standpoint, arguing that the text of the King James is superior to the text of other translations. But, there have been many (perhaps most), who have resisted the change, purely upon preference. They like the sound. They have memorized the words of in the Old version. They don't want to depart.

But, there's another reason as well. Many of the new translations play fast and loose with the Bible. There are many translations of the Bible that aren't word-for-word translations of the Bible. Rather, they are thought-for-thought translations. In other words, it's not the words of the sentence that matters. Rather, it's the thought that counts.

Now, when it comes to Bible translations that we are studying, I will resist such things with all my heart. But, the difference with the hymns of Isaac Watts is that his songs are trying to capture the heart of the Psalm, not the exact words. He does this in order that we might sing from our heart to the Lord.

Remember, what is it that stirred Isaac Watts to begin writing these hymns? It was the fact that the people of the church were singing with so little heart. And so, Isaac Watts was aiming for our hearts in his songs; that we might sing not cold words, but warm lyrics that touch the heart. And I believe that "Joy to the World," does a good job at capturing the heart of Psalm 98. Let me show you what I mean.

First of all, we have to deal with the fact that "Joy to the World," actually begins in verse 4 of the Psalm. Isaac Watts wrote another hymn to the first three verses. As I read the hymn, I want you to follow along in verses 1-3. That hymn goes like this:

To our almighty Maker, God,
New honours be address'd;
his great salvation shines abroad,
And makes the nations blest.

He spake the word to Abraham first,
His truth fulfils the grace:
The Gentiles make his Name their trust,
And learn his righteousness.

Let the whole earth his love proclaim
With all her different tongues;
And spread the honours of his Name
In melody and songs.

The message of verses 1-3 is this: let us sing to the LORD (verse 1). Because God has made known His salvation (verse 2). All the nations have seen the salvation of God (verse 3). Such words set the tone for all of Psalm 98. God has granted salvation, let all the nations join in joyful praise to Him!

And these themes come screaming out of "Joy to the World." Stanza 1: Joy to the world! Stanza 2: Joy to the earth! Stanza 4: He rules the world with truth and grace, So, "Let every heart prepare him room, And heaven and nature sing, (Stanza 1); Let men their songs employ (Stanza 2); And makes the nations prove The glories of His righteousness, And wonders of His love (Stanza 4).

Let's continue on in verse 4 (of Psalm 98).

Psalm 98:4-6

Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth;
Break forth and sing for joy and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
With the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
Shout joyfully before the King, the Lord.

The whole flavor of these words are joy and worship and praise to our God! The call is to "all the earth" (verse 4). The call is to "break forth and sing for joy" (verse 4). Instruments (like the lyre and trumpets and horns) are to be employed in such praise! (verses 5-6). Without a doubt this is the flavor of "Joy to the World." It's, "Joy to the world!" (stanza 1). "Joy to the earth ... repeat the sounding joy!" (stanza 2). Isaac Watts nicely captures all of these verses in one short line, "Let men their songs employ" (stanza 2).

You can't sing "Joy to the World," without feeling the sense of joy that we ought to have. Notice also how universal the Psalm is. It's a call to the entire earth to sing. "O sing to the Lord a new song," (Psalm 98:1). "... All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth;" (Psalm 98:3-4). In fact, so inclusive is Psalm 98, that nature is called to sing praise to God.

Psalm 98:7-8

Let the sea roar and all it contains,
Let the rivers clap their hands,
Let the mountains sing together for joy

See, Psalm 98 isn't merely a call for people to praise the LORD. It's a call for all creation to praise the LORD as well. This comes through clearly in the hymn. In stanza 1, "And heaven and nature sing." We see something similar in stanza 2, "While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy."

And the reason for the creation to sing His praise is because the curse will be lifted when He returns. Romans 8 speaks of the "anxious longing" of the creation for the day when it is "set free from its slavery to corruption" (Rom. 8:21, 23). This comes forth in stanza 3. The blessing of the LORD comes to the ground, which no longer yields thorns, "No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground."

One glaring omission from the Isaac Watts' version of the Psalm is the mention of judgment. Verse 9 of the Psalm says that the creation should sing for joy, ...

Psalm 98:9

Before the Lord, for He is coming to judge the earth;
He will judge the world with righteousness
And the peoples with equity.

Yet, I would contend that the idea is there in Isaac Watts' hymn. The whole idea of the Song is that the earth should rejoice when the Lord comes, because He is coming as king to make all things right!

"Joy to the world! the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King;" and further, "Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns." In stanza three, we see that there is no more curse, because the judge has returned to right all wrongs. "He comes to make His blessings flow Far as the curse is found." And finally, in stanza four, "He rules the world with truth and grace." The idea of the hymn is that God will return to make everything right. And that's the idea of Psalm 98:9. When Christ returns, all rights will be made wrong.

We live in a world of tension and unrest. In our nation, the racial divide is large right now. There is a big cry for justice. We have most recently seen this with the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Even this past week, there was a racial protest in Rockford. And I say this: As long as we are in this sin-cursed world, there will always be this problem. We won't escape it.

But, here's the good news. When Christ returns, He will return as judge of the earth. And when he pours out his judgment, nobody will ever be able to cry again, "Injustice!" God will deal with all of us justly. Every sin will be punished.

Here's the better news. Christ came to save His people from their sins. Christ took the punishment for those who believe.

What began at Christmas culminated at the cross. And that is why, at Christmas, we can sing, "Joy to the World!"

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 14, 2014 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] <https://songsandhymns.org/people/detail/isaac-watts>

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] <http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bwatts6.html>

[4] You can read the whole thing here: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/wattspre.htm>

[5] Iain Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography, pp. 413-414.