

HISTORY: JOY TO THE WORLD

Monday, December 29

Reading: Psalm 98

Psalm 98:4 *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; 5 make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing*

When is a Christmas song NOT a Christmas song? When it is not about the birth of Jesus! It is unfortunate that we only sing ‘Joy to the World’ during the Christmas season because the message of the song is to shout for joy because Jesus is returning to “judge the world in righteousness” (Psalm 98:9).

Isaac Watts (1675-1748) has become known as “the father of English hymnody.” For over a thousand years, music in the church had been limited to singing the Old Testament psalms. These songs were described by Samuel Wesley, father of Charles and John Wesley, as “scandalous doggerel.” They did nothing to aid people in worship. Isaac Watts wanted to change all that. He wrote hymns that people could enjoy singing and also teach them what they believed. Along with writing 600-700 hymns during his lifetime, he also compiled them into hymn books. The first book titled ‘Hymns and Spiritual Songs’ was published in 1707 and contained hymns like “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

In 1719, Watts published ‘The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament.’ This collection took Old Testament psalms and reinterpreted them with themes from the New Testament. One of the songs in this collection was ‘Joy to the World,’ which was Watt’s paraphrase of Psalm 98. This psalm begins with singing a new song because of God’s salvation and concludes with all of creation singing for joy because “He comes to judge the earth.” Watts took these thoughts and applied them to the Second Coming of Jesus.

The tune used for ‘Joy to the World’ varied for almost 130 years. The tune we use today was published in 1848 by Lowell Mason, who was a popular composer of music for church hymns at the time. The tune was called “Antioch” and had been around for some time. Lowell modified it to fit the lyrics. The tune is also often accredited to George Fredric Handel. While parts of the melody resemble some lines from Handel’s ‘Messiah,’ it is likely that they are simply borrowed from Handel’s great work or were merely written in the “style” of Handel. ‘Joy to the World’ now had a definitive, majestic melody that would make it one of the best-loved Christmas songs in history --- even though the message of the song is Jesus’ Second Coming, not His first!

As we move past the Christmas season and head into the new year, it is appropriate for us to stop and think about what we are celebrating. Jesus came to earth as a Man to bring us salvation through His death and resurrection. And Jesus will one day return as King to “rule the world with truth and grace.”

For the remainder of this week, we will look at the words and meaning of this wonderful hymn.