



Oh, Bless the Lord, My Soul

Text: Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Tune: Aaron Williams (1731-1776)

Hymns of praise are excellent hymns for Christians to learn by heart, to know, and to love. The rightly worded hymn of praise encompasses all that God does for us, from the preservation of His creation, to our salvation and keeping us in the true faith by the working of the Holy Spirit. While it is easy for praise hymns to focus only on God's majesty and power, the careful writer will always look to Christ as the visible image of God, and will praise God for all that He has given us through His Son. This is a strength of the hymns given to the Church by Isaac Watts.



Isaac Watts

Watts was born July 17, 1674, to a “non-denominational” preacher in Southampton, England. The Pastor of All Saints Church in Southampton taught Watts Greek, Latin, and Hebrew at an early age. After his formal education, a Southampton physician offered to fund Watts’ education at the seminary of the Church of England, but he refused and instead attended a non-denominational Seminary at Stoke Newington. At the age of twenty, Watts left the Seminary and returned to live with his parents. In the next two years he wrote the bulk of his greatest hymn collection, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. He wrote these because of the poor quality of Psalm paraphrases available in his day. By 1702 Watts was ordained and became the Pastor of a very large Independent church in Mark Lane. But because of his poor health he was given an assistant. In 1712 Watts became very sick and was taken in by a local family. However, they enjoyed him so much, and his health never greatly improved, so he lived with them until his death. Although he never

married, Watts always loved children and wrote many things especially for the youth. For his vast contributions to the Church’s song Watts was given an honorary Doctor of Divinity by University of Edinburgh in 1728. Watts eventually died in 1748 and is buried in Bunhill Fields, and has a monument erected to his honor in Westminster Abbey.

Though Watts made a great contribution to hymnody, especially in his paraphrases of the Psalms, his thoughts on the Psalms and the Old Testament are a bit unsettling. In his introduction to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* he said that many of the Psalms are “opposite to the spirit of the Gospel,” “foreign to the state of the New Testament,” and “widely different from the present circumstances of Christians.” Because of his views on the Psalms, especially that they are “extremely Jewish and cloudy, that darkens our sight of God the Savior,” his paraphrases really ought not be called paraphrases, but hymns which attempt to interpret the Psalms in light of the New Testament. If anything, Louis Benson, in his *The English Hymn*, says it best: “[Watts’ hymns] are hardly more than a dislodgement of the Calvinistic settlement in favor of a reaffirmation of Luther’s, which was the original evangelical settlement of hymnody.” (Though Watts’ view of the Psalms couldn’t be farther from Luther’s!)

“Oh, Bless the Lord, My Soul” is Watts’ interpretation of Psalm 108:1-7, which speaks of God’s triumph over His enemies. While God is certainly victorious over the devil, His greatest triumph is the one over our sin. In the Person of Jesus Christ He forgives our sins. Because our sins are forgiven, we will inherit heaven where He will relieve our pain and heal our sicknesses when our earthly bodies are restored to us in their perfected state (st. 3). Because He has died to pay the price our sin demanded and rose to life again, He has ransomed us from the grave (st. 4), so we need not fear sin, death, or the devil because we are Baptized into Christ and His victory has become our victory. Though this life will still have troubles of poverty, suffering, pride, and oppression (st. 5), when we have been brought to heaven they will be no more. To the One “whose favors are divine” (st. 1) we give the greatest praise our soul can bring, for He has given us the “truth and grace” (st. 6) that God wants to give to us.