

“When I Survey the Wonderous Cross” ~ Isaac Watts

It is an understatement to say that Isaac Watts was a precocious child. He learned Latin at age five, Greek at nine, French at eleven, and when he was twelve he mastered Hebrew. His habit of spontaneously making rhymes as he spoke drove his father to distraction. Watts grew up to be a Nonconformist cleric and eventually wrote over six hundred hymns. Today he is known as the father of English hymnody.

Watts wrote “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” when he was thirty-four years old. British poet Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) called it the greatest hymn in the English language. This is high praise coming as it does from the preeminent literary critic of the nineteenth century who occupied the chair of poetry at Oxford University.

The hymn’s powerful images and strong emotion combine with its author’s pure devotion to God. The blend is a strengthening tonic for a believer’s faith. Watt wrote the hymn as he was preparing to take of the Lord’s Supper, a practice central to the Christian faith because it memorializes Christ’s work of redemption through his death on the cross--the single most significant act in human history.

The second verse of this moving hymn expresses the centrality of the death of Jesus Christ in a believer’s life:

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

The Lord’s Supper is a reminder of the vast importance of Christ’s death. Isaac Watts said that Christ’s death expresses “Love so amazing, so divine.” It is really beyond words. Yet the words of Watt’s hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” are his superb attempt to express the power of the Cross and Jesus Christ crucified.

The tune for this text is known as the “Hamburg” tune. It was the work of Lowell Mason, who was often called the “Father of American Church and Public School Music.” was born on January 8, 1792, in Medfield, Massachusetts. He spent his early life in Savannah, Georgia. In 1827, he moved to Boston and while residing there founded the Boston Academy of Music, for the purpose of reaching and teaching the masses with music. Mason moved to New York City, where he began publishing hymnals and choral collections. In all, Lowell Mason is credited with composing and arranging approximately 700 hymn tunes.

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

*See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*