

Joy to the World

Psalm 98

Christmas carols are some of the richest songs ever written. Some date back potentially to Christ, while *Joy to the World*, written in 1719 by Isaac Watts, is just coming up on 300 years old and is now the most published hymn in North America. Though this song was never intended to be a Christmas carol, all Scripture is about Jesus, and so it found its way home for the holidays. Watts was studying Psalm 98:4ff when he wrote it, and the tune is often attributed to Lowell Mason who introduced it as “arranged from Handel”.

Sing a New Song, Psalm 98

Spurgeon said Psalm 98 is a kind of coronation hymn, crowning Christ as monarch over the nations. The command is for a new song to Yahweh for His marvelous and victorious deeds (v1). He makes His salvation known to the nations, His justice/righteousness fulfilling His promises of mercy and truth to Israel. Salvation was never meant only for Israel but for all ends of earth (vv2-3). A people sing for their king; the whole earth breaks out into song for *the King* (v4). Pick up harps, brass, and horns and make joyful sounds (vv5-6). The waters symbolize the Gentiles, and they roar, but so do the waters themselves (v7). Rivers, hills, everyone clap and be glad because God is coming to judge, and judgment means deliverance, when God stops evil (cf. Lk. 2:52).

A Untraditional Carol

Watt’s father, Isaac Sr., was in jail when Isaac was born because he was a non-conformist in England. Junior inherited his father’s independent streak, stayed independent of the Anglican Church and therefore couldn’t go to Oxford or Cambridge. He left Independent Academy at the age of twenty having learned Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He went on to write around 750 hymns and a popular logic textbook. Watts despised lame, monotonous church music, and he saw the Psalms fulfilled in Christ. This led his him to controversially adapt many Psalms to reflect their Christocentric nature. This is what worship songwriting looks like.

Verse 1

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

As the angel of the Lord told the shepherds, good tidings of great joy will be for all people (Luke 2:10). Watts may have had Christ’s second advent in mind, but it applies wonderfully to His first. Jesus came for the world, which is why every heart must prepare Him room. Once the angel announced this, the heavenly

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host burst out praising, almost certainly in song (Lk. 2:13ff). Christmas is public, sung joy for the world.

Verse 2

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

The joy of Christmas is not just for Christmas. Jesus doesn't make Himself available in case someone wants His perspective; the savior *reigns*, so we sing about that, too. Not only does salvation come to men, all creation rejoices. It was subjected to bondage in hope (Rom. 8:20), and that hope was born in Bethlehem. So Men sing and all creation responds, dual choirs of celebration.

Verse 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.*

The reign of Jesus makes a difference. He comes to bind up our wounds and heal the broken hearted. He comes to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Sin has spread into all the corners of our world. That is the extent of Christ's kingdom. The waters of grace will irrigate every parched inch.

Verse 4

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

God didn't send in goose-stepping soldiers or central planners to fix the world. The Word was made, and behold, a baby, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14). The gospel is the message of truth and grace, and it is received by nations who are "glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity" (Ps.67:4). Jesus has transformed human history but the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love are still at work.