

Isaac Watts: Father of English Hymnody

Hymn Story by Harry Eskew

How is your church's congregational singing? Here's what the young Isaac Watts (1674-1748) had to say about the singing in his church: "While we sing the Praises of our God in his Church, we are employ'd in that part of Worship which of all others is the nearest a-kin to Heaven; and 'tis pity that this of all others should be perform'd the worst upon earth." Watts was not content to merely complain. He did something to make a big difference in congregational song: he wrote about 600 hymns and metrical psalms. He was the first one to produce a large body of hymns to be sung widely in England and America. Watts has often been hailed as the Father of English Hymnody.

Before Watts, Christians of England and America sang the psalms in meter. The very first book to be published in the American colonies was a psalter, known as "The Bay Psalm Book" (1640). Watts believed that psalms should be Christianized, mentioning Jesus when appropriate, as in his version of Psalm 72, "Jesus Shall Reign." Watts wrote original hymns, including such broadly sung hymns as "I Sing the Almighty Power of God" and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Some idea of the widespread acceptance of Watts in early America can be gained by examining the popular singing school tunebook compiled by Georgia Baptists B. F. White and E. J. King in 1844, *The Sacred Harp*. White and King included more hymn texts by Isaac Watts than those by all other hymn writers combined.

"Come We That Love the Lord" is the first line of Watts' "Heavenly Joy on Earth," one of Watts' most popular hymns. Originally published in 1707 in ten stanzas in his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, four stanzas of "Heavenly Joy on Earth" are included in our hymnal. In 1868, the American Baptist pastor Robert Lowry set Watts' text to a lilting tune in the style of a gospel hymn and added a refrain. Watts' hymn is familiar to us in the words of Lowry's refrain, "We're marching to Zion." Lowry, a gifted writer of popular hymn texts and tunes, transformed Watts' hymn into a march in 6/8 time with a catchy melody that congregations still enjoy singing.

Come, we that love the Lord,
And let our joys be known;
Join in a song with sweet accord,
And thus surround the throne.

Let those refuse to sing
Who never knew our God;
But children of the heavenly King
May speak their joys abroad.

The hill of Zion yields
A thousand sacred sweets,
Before we reach the heavenly fields,
Or walk the golden streets.

Then let our songs abound,
 And every tear be dry;
 We're marching through Immanuel's ground,
 To fairer worlds on high.

Refrain:
 We're marching to Zion,
 Beautiful, beautiful Zion;
 We're marching upward to Zion,
 The beautiful city of God.

We're Marching to Zion

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ISAAC WATTS

ROBERT LOWRY

Spirited.

1. Come, we that love the Lord, And let our joys be known, Join
 2. Let those re - fuse to sing Who nev - er knew our God; But
 3. The hill of Zi - on yields A thou - sand sa - cred sweets Be -
 4. Then let our songs a - bound, And ev - 'ry tear be dry; We're

in a song with sweet ac - cord, Join in a song with sweet ac - cord, And
 chil-dren of the heav'n-ly King, But chil-dren of the heav'n-ly King, May
 fore we reach the heav'n-ly fields, Be - fore we reach the heav'n-ly fields, Or
 marching thro' Immanuel's ground, We're marching thro' Immanuel's ground, To

thus sur - - round the throne, And thus sur-round the throne.
 speak their joys a - broad, May speak their joys a - broad.
 walk the gold - en streets, Or walk the gold - en streets.
 fair - - er worlds on high, To fair - er worlds on high.

thus sur-round the throne, And thus sur - round the throne.

CHORUS

We're march - ing to Zi - on, Beau-ti - ful, beau-ti - ful Zi - on; We're
 We're march-ing on to Zi - on,
 march-ing up-ward to Zi - on, The beau-ti - ful cit - y of God.
 Zi - on, Zi - on,