

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

A Hymn Story by

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Up to the time of Englishman Isaac Watts, Protestant congregational singing in Europe and the American colonies consisted mainly of singing the psalms arranged in poetic meter. The very first book published in the American colonies was a psalter, known as the "Bay Psalm Book" published in Massachusetts in 1640 and followed by a number of editions.

Credit for moving churches from the exclusive use of psalms to singing hymns belongs to Isaac Watts (1674-1748), known as the "Father of English Hymnody." Watts, a Congregationalist minister, wrote over 600 hymns and psalm versions. A real revolutionary, Watts claimed that some of the psalms were downright unchristian in their teachings and were unsuitable for use in Christian worship. In his versification of the psalms, he sought to incorporate New Testament doctrines, as indicated in the title of his psalter: *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State and Worship* (1719). When a psalm was messianic in its teaching, Watts used Jesus in his version as in his rendering of Psalm 72, "Jesus Shall Reign Wher'er the Sun."

Perhaps the best known psalm versification of Watts is "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." Based on Psalm 90. As described by Albert Edward Bailey in his history, *The Gospel in Hymns* (1950): "By universal consent this hymn is one of the grandest in the whole realm of English hymnody. It is found in practically every hymnal. No other enhances in such moving language the whole scope of history, faith in a God who realizes His purposes through history, and the solidarity of a nation which in times of crisis places its hope in the Eternal" (p.54). Watts originally began this great hymn with the word "Our." John Wesley changed it to "O."

Watts is not forgotten in his hometown of Southampton. In addition to a Watts section in the city park, at noon the tune ST. ANNE that we sing to this great hymn rings out from the city hall, a continuing tribute to this great hymn writer.

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears mortals all away;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

O God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

1991 The Baptist Hymnal

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O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations — Psalm 90:1 KJV

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system includes a vocal line in treble clef and a bass line in bass clef. The lyrics for the first system are: 1. O God, our help in a - ges past, Our hope for years to come, 2. Un - der the shad - ow of Thy throne Thy saints have dwelt se - cure; 3. Be - fore the hills in or - der stood, Or earth re - ceived her frame, 4. A thou - sand a - ges in Thy sight Are like an eve - ning gone; 5. Time, like an ev - er - roll - ing stream, Bears all its sons a - way; 6. O God, our help in a - ges past, Our hope for years to come. The second system also includes a vocal line and a bass line. The lyrics for the second system are: Our shel - ter from the storm - y blast, And our e - ter - nal home! Suf - fi - cient is Thine arm a - lone, And our de - fense is sure. From ev - er - last - ing Thou art God, To end - less years the same. Short as the watch that ends the night Be - fore the ris - ing sun. They fly, for - got - ten, as a dream Dies at the op - 'ning day. Be Thou our guard while life shall last, And our e - ter - nal home.

WORDS: Isaac Watts, 1674-1748
MUSIC: William Croft, 1678-1727

ST. ANNE
8.6.8.6.(C.M.)

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