

# Joy to the World!

by James D. Nickel

One of the most loved Christmas carols of all time is *Joy to the World*, written in 1719 by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the father of English hymnody.<sup>1</sup> Watts wrote it as an Advent commentary of Psalm 98, a Messianic prophecy of the coming kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

If you study all four stanzas of this hymn, you will soon discover that it reflects Watts' mediation on verses 4-9 of Psalm 98. There is also a connection between this hymn, Psalm 98, and Mary's *Magnificat*, or "song of praise" recorded in Luke 1:46-55.



Isaac Watts (Public Domain)

## 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,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

## Verse 2

Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;  
Let men their songs employ;  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

## 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,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

## 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,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

## Psalm 98

- v. 1 O sing unto the LORD a new song; for he hath done marvelous things: his right hand, and his holy arm hath gotten him the victory.
- v. 2 The LORD hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly showed in the sight of the heathen.
- v. 3 He hath remembered his mercy and his truth toward the house of Israel: all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.
- v. 4 Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.
- v. 5 Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm.
- v. 6 With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King.
- v. 7 Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.
- v. 8 Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together
- v. 9 Before the LORD; for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity.

We can divide Psalm 98 into three parts:

1. The character and deeds of the LORD (v. 1-3).
2. The call to a joyful response (v. 4-6).

<sup>1</sup> Watts wrote over 700 hymns during his lifetime.

<sup>2</sup> This coming kingdom had not yet been actualized when this Psalm was composed. As a prophecy, this Psalm looks forward to the reality of the coming kingdom in the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and mediatorial reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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3. The universality of the righteous reign of the Messiah (v. 7-9).

## The Character and Deeds of the LORD (v. 1-3)

The Psalm begins with a resounding, “O sing!” “O” is an interjection, a class of words expressing *emotion*. The Psalmist enjoins the reader, not to a funeral dirge, but to a joyful celebration of the LORD<sup>3</sup>; in fact, a *new* song! Elsewhere in Scripture, we read of a *new* heart, *new* wine and wineskins, *new* covenant, *new* tongues, *new* commandment, *new* lump (of leaven), *new* creation, *new* man, *new* and living way, *new* name, *new* Jerusalem, and *new* heaven and *new* earth.

The *new* song is connected to the totality of vitality and refreshment, a newness grounded in the redemption of hell-bent sinners, the *great* and *marvelous* action of God in Christ centered in the Cross (Revelation 5:9; 14:3).<sup>4</sup> As a babe in Bethlehem’s manger, Christ was born to die, a death not of defeat, *but of triumph*. On the hill called the skull (Golgotha), the LORD displayed His right hand and holy arm. The image of the dying Savior hanging on a stake of wood implanted into a skull echoes the promise of Genesis 3:15 (ESV), “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” In the words of Matthew Henry, on the Cross, God in Christ “subdued all the enemies that opposed it [redemption–JN], has gotten the victory over Satan, disarmed him, and cast him out of his strong-holds, has *spoiled principalities and powers* (Colossians 2:15), has *taken the prey from the mighty* (Isaiah 49:24), and given death his death’s wound. He has gotten a clear and complete victory, not only for himself, but for us also, for we through him are more than conquerors.”<sup>5</sup>

Next, the Psalmist proclaims that the LORD’s marvelous salvation, His righteousness,<sup>6</sup> *has been revealed* in the sight of the nations and that all the ends of the earth *have seen* the salvation of God. What does this mean?

First, it means that God’s election of Israel had a goal in mind: to bless the nations or the non-Jews; i.e., the Gentiles (see Genesis 12:1-3;

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.

For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaid-  
en: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall  
call me blessed.

For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;  
and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on them that fear him from genera-  
tion to generation.

He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scat-  
tered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and  
exalted them of low degree.

He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the  
rich he hath sent empty away.

He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of  
his mercy;

As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his  
seed forever.

<sup>3</sup> LORD is the covenant name of God, YHWH (meaning “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be”). Some Bibles translate LORD as Jehovah. See Exodus 3:14.

<sup>4</sup> This redemption affects not just individuals but also the created order and institutional structures/procedures; it is effectual and, according to Watts, “He makes His blessings flow far as the curse is found.”

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, nd), 3:609-610.

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word for righteousness literally means “to be straight” (to conform to and demonstrate the line or rule of God’s law). The Biblical synonym for righteousness is justice, a connection that is not usually recognized. See R. B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), pp. 118-119.

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Psalm 67). God chose Israel to bear the Messiah so that God's redemption would reach all the nations of the earth. God remembered<sup>7</sup> His covenant promises to Israel for that purpose and that purpose alone.

Second, in the Old Testament, principalities and powers, sometimes called princes, governed the nations (see Daniel 10:12; Ezekiel 28:11-16).<sup>8</sup> As we have already noted, Christ triumphed over these powers, in fact, spoiled them, through the Cross. *It was through this triumph over principalities and powers that God's salvation was revealed to all the nations!* And, on the basis of this triumph, Christ commands His followers to proclaim His deeds, His finished work, His mediatorial and princely rule, to all nations (Psalm 96:3; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 3:11-16).<sup>9</sup>

Based upon the character and deeds of the LORD, we can energetically magnify Him (O!) by singing the new song of redemption!

## The Call to a Joyful Response (v. 4-6)

These verses continue the injunction of verse 1 with an addendum: joy resounds in *shouts* to the King! These shouts of the joy of eternity echo the response of the redeemed revealed by prophet Isaiah:

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isaiah 35:10; 51:11, ESV).

Verses 1, 2, and 3 of Watts' hymn capture this elation, a rejoicing with joy unspeakable and full of glory (I Peter 1:8).<sup>10</sup>

## The Universality of the Righteous Reign of the Messiah (v. 7-9)

In these verses, the Psalmist sees the whole of creation, including inanimate objects (the sea, the rivers, and the hills)<sup>11</sup>, worshipping the King. Watts picks this up in verse 2 of his hymn. In the first phrase of verse 1, Watts interprets verse 9 of the Psalm ("For He is coming to judge the earth") as "Joy to the world! The Lord is come!" What was he thinking?

First, we must recognize that many of the hymn writers of Watts' era, including Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759), had a profound understanding of the nature of Christ's work and of His kingdom.<sup>12</sup> In general, the eschatology (doctrine of last things<sup>13</sup>) of modern evangelicalism pales into impotence when compared to the dynamic embraced by these hymn writers.



Georg Friedrich Handel  
(Public Domain)

<sup>7</sup> For God to remember something does not mean that He forgets! The Biblical meaning of remember means "perform an action based upon a promise previously made."

<sup>8</sup> These principalities and powers were also denoted as gods (Psalm 86:8-9; 96:4). While under God's sovereign control, these gods were connected to a nation's destiny; they were, in some form, *mediatorial*.

<sup>9</sup> At the root of the Gospel is the proclamation that "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9-10). Although principalities and powers have been spoiled on the Cross, *they are not inactive*. Assuming false authority, they still seek to deceive the nations and keep them trapped in the Lie. Christ's followers, by Gospel proclamation and application, render these powers impotent by a greater power—the absolute and universal (over heaven *and* earth) authority given by God the Father to the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18; Daniel 7:13-14; Romans 16:20).

<sup>10</sup> One of the Hebrew words for rejoice literally means "to spin around in violent motion." Note that you will need instruments (harp, trumpets, and horns) to express this response to redemption. Stoics are not invited to this party!

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 96:11-12 includes the field and the trees of the woods in this worship.

<sup>12</sup> For example, study the content and placement of the songs in Handel's *Messiah*.

<sup>13</sup> Note that a one's eschatology (last things) is grounded upon one's Christology (first things).

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Second, let us study some of the verb tenses employed in this Psalm. In verses 1-3, the translators are using the English past tense. In verse 9, there is an implication of future tense (“He is coming” meaning “He is *going* to come”). Without delving into the details of Hebrew grammar, there is a mix between past and future tenses.<sup>14</sup> Hence, you can read verses 1-3 either as a record of God’s great and mighty deeds in the *past*, which the psalmist recalls, or these verses can be read as *predictive* of God’s mighty acts in the future.

What, in the past tense, did the Psalmist have in mind? It can be no other event than the great Exodus, the deliverance of God’s people from the bondage of slavery into the land of promise. What was the foundation of this deliverance? The blood of a slain lamb painted upon the doorposts. What did the LORD’s right hand and holy arm do? The LORD spoiled the principalities and powers of Egypt. *Every plague rendered a specific Egyptian god powerless.* What impact did these great judgments have upon the world at that time?



Courtesy of Alan Furst

The confession of Rahab, the harlot:

I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction (Joshua 2:9-10, ESV).

The testimony of the LORD:

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Romans 9:17, ESV—cf. Exodus 9:16).

Psalm 98:1-3 refers to this great act of God in history, but that is not all. God’s redemption of Israel of old prefigured a greater act of redemption to come. At the transfiguration, Jesus Christ spoke with *Moses* (what a connection!) and Elijah of His “decease” that He was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. He was speaking of His upcoming death. The Greek word translated into English as “decease” or “departure” is, transliterated into English, *exodus* (Luke 9:31). Jesus Christ is the *lamb* of God, slain for the sins of the world (John 1:29; I John 2:2).

Psalm 98:7-9, as a prophecy, looks forward to the day when the King shall come and, as we look at this prophecy through the eyeglasses of the Incarnation (as Watts did), we joyfully announce, “The Lord *is* come!”<sup>15</sup> What was future to the psalmist is now past to us. Scripture enjoins all of creation—the fullness and roar of the sea, all who dwell in the world, the hand clap of the rivers, and the hills—to dance with joy before the manifest presence of the LORD.

Why? The Psalmist explains that the reason for this unspeakable joy is God’s equitable judgment *and* righteousness.<sup>16</sup> God the LORD by Christ is setting things right. He set things right on the Cross bringing judgment to sin, death, bondage, Satan, principalities and powers, the wisdom and rulers of this age, and the

<sup>14</sup> See R. K. Harrison, *Biblical Hebrew: A Complete Course* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, [1955] 1993), pp. 67-70.

<sup>15</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the sentence “The Lord is come” was grammatically correct. Using modern English grammar, the sentence “The Lord has come” would be correct.

<sup>16</sup> In Psalm 96:13, the Psalmist connects this judgment to truth. Truth is a prerequisite for righteous judgment (Romans 2:2).

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world (John 16:8-11; Isaiah 11:3-5; I Corinthians 2:6-8). He sets things right in history by His providential judgments (Isaiah 26:9; Romans 1:18-32—this judgment of providence is reflected in verse 4 of Watts' hymn<sup>17</sup>). He will set things right at the last day (John 5:24-30; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:5-7; Revelation 20:11-15), the day when Christ will present the kingdom to His Father (I Corinthians 15:22-24).

In the context of God's approaching judgments, the apostle Paul concluded his first letter to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 16:22): *Maranatha* (meaning "The Lord has come"). Along with Watts, I implore the reader to receive the King of heaven and earth and ...

*let every heart prepare Him room.*

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<sup>17</sup> Note the phrase, "He makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and the wonders of His love." Watts, unlike *many* in modern evangelicalism and *all* in post-evangelicalism (i.e., emergentology with its specific denial of God's justice and hell), does not absolutize the love of God. When all that people can talk about is the love of God (with a particular emphasis on relationality), they have constructed an idol. They have permitted their rationalization of sin to intrude on their view of God. The justice (righteousness) of God is as beautiful as His love and mercy, glories that must be worshipped if we are to worship in truth.