

Amazing Love



A Lent Bible Study Course
based upon Isaac Watt's hymn
'When I survey the wondrous Cross'

John Birch

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Isaac Watts

Isaac Watts the man and his mission

Isaac Watts was born at Southampton on 17th July 1674, the same year in which John Milton died. Isaac's grandfather had commanded a man-of-war and died in the prime of life as a result of an unfortunate explosion on board his ship; his father occupied a somewhat more sedate position, described as a clothier. As a Dissenter* (or Non-Conformist) Isaac's father was put in jail for his religious opinions at the time of his son's birth and again as Isaac grew into childhood. His mother was often to be seen nursing the infant Isaac on the steps of the jail as she visited her husband.

Isaac was the eldest of nine children, and seems to have excelled at school, particularly at English verse. However, it is recorded that his enthusiasm for verse was not universally encouraged, particularly at home. An apocryphal story is told that one day a particularly grumpy father told his son to stop or be whipped, and when even that warning went unheeded, Isaac cried out

'O father, do some pity take
And I will no more verses make!'

Watts records that at this point his father finally gave in!

A local physician, Dr John Speed offered to sponsor the precocious Isaac through university, and as a committed dissenter, rather than go to a more prestigious institution he chose to go to the dissenter academy at Stoke Newington in 1690, where he excelled in classics, logic, Hebrew and divinity. After leaving the academy, Isaac spent just over 2 years at home, and it was here that his hymn composition began.

Hymn singing in the 17th century does not seem to have been a particularly joyful experience, consisting in the ponderous repetition of Psalms and often inelegant verses such as

'Ye monsters of the bubbling deep, Your Master's praises spout;
Up from the sands ye docclings peep, and wag your tails about.'

Isaac commented that 'the singing of God's praise is the part of worship most closely related to heaven, but its performance among us is the worst on earth.' One Sunday his father, who was a deacon in the local independent congregation noticed that his son wasn't singing and when they were back home asked him why. Isaac replied that the psalms were too difficult and dreary to be sung with any enthusiasm.

Before the evening service, Isaac had written his first hymn

Behold the glories of the Lamb
Amidst his Father's throne;
Prepare new honours for his name,
And songs before unknown.

Lo! Elders worship at his feet;
The church adores around,
With vials full of odours rich,
And harps of sweetest sound.

These odours are the prayers of saints,
These sounds the hymns they raise;
God bends his ear to their requests,
He loves to hear their praise.

Who shall the Father's record search,
And hidden things reveal?
Behold the Son that record takes,
And opens ev'ry seal!

Hark how th'adoring hosts above
With songs surround the throne!
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues;
But all their hearts are one.

Worthy the Lamb that died, they cry,
To be exalted thus;
Worthy the Lamb, let us reply,
For he was slain for us.

This new hymn was sung at the next meeting. Others followed, circulating in manuscript form and given out line by line when sung, as was the tradition of the day.

Isaac Watts went on to write around 600 hymns including new metrical versions of the Psalms, with a desire to ‘Christianise the Psalms with the New Testament message and style.’ Several of his hymns based on these new Psalm settings are still favourites of modern congregations such as ‘Jesus Shall Reign’ and ‘O God, Our Help in Ages Past.’

He was a great innovator, never afraid to rewrite the words of the Bible in language easily understood in the chapels of his day. He wanted to use the Psalms for evangelism, giving them new meaning and life for the contemporary church of his day by paraphrasing them into the language of common usage. Isaac did not consider the Psalms in themselves to be Christian songs, commenting ‘Where can you find a Psalm that speaks of the miracles of wisdom and power as they are discovered in a crucified Christ?’ He wanted congregations to magnify Christ and His Grace rather than echoing Jewish worship.

To try and appreciate how accomplished a poet and writer Isaac was, let us look at his re-working of Psalm 8, that wonderful song of praise (and we’ll compare it using the King James Bible to make it a little more contemporary of the day.)

O Lord, our heav’nly King,
Thy name is all divine;
Thy glories round the earth are spread,
And o’er the heav’ns they shine.

When to thy works on high
I raise my wondering eyes,
And see the moon, complete in light,
Adorn the darksome skies

When I survey the stars,
And all their shining forms,
Lord, what is man, that worthless thing,
Akin to dust and worms?

Lord, what is worthless man,
That thou shouldst love him so?
Next to thine angels is he placed,
And lord of all below.

Thine honors crown his head,
While beasts, like slaves, obey;
And birds that cut the air with wings,
And fish that cleave the sea.

How rich thy bounties are!
And wondrous are thy ways
Of dust and worms thy power can frame
A monument of praise.

Psalm 8 (KJV)

1O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is thy name
in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the
heavens.

2Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou
ordained strength because of thine enemies, that
thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

3When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy
fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast
ordained;

4What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the
son of man, that thou visitest him?

5For thou hast made him a little lower than the an-
gels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

6Thou madest him to have dominion over the
works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under
his feet:

7All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the
field;

8The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and
whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

9O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in
all the earth!

In his writing Isaac had to contend with real difficulties such as the lack of usable tunes, the general ignorance of congregations, and the tradition of giving out the verses one by one, or even line by line. As a result of the constrictions placed upon his writing, the style can seem a little turgid at times - but within his collected works are among the finest hymns in the English language.

In 1696 Isaac became tutor and chaplain to the family of Sir John Hartopp of Leicestershire. He preached

his first sermon on 17th July 1698 and a year later became assistant minister at Mark Lane Independent Chapel in London, and full pastor in 1702. Isaac was 28 years old, a renowned preacher and hymn writer with a determination that music should stir people's souls. The congregation twice outgrew its premises, moving from its original site in Mark Lane to Bury Street.

Then tragically, poor Isaac's health seems to have failed. He was invited to the home of the wealthy dissenter Sir Thomas Abney in Hertfordshire in 1712, and ended up staying there for the next 36 years until his death, devoting himself to writing. When unable to work during his illness he asked the congregation to discontinue his salary. They refused, and instead raised it so that he could pay his medical bills.

Along with his hymns and psalms, Isaac was the author (among others) of a text book on logic. The full title was *Logic, or The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth With a Variety of Rules to Guard Against Error in the Affairs of Religion and Human Life, as well as in the Sciences*. Published in 1724, the book was so well thought of in university circles that it went through twenty editions.

Most importantly for Christians, he wrote for the masses in words that they could understand. In the preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) he wrote: 'I have aimed at ease of numbers and smoothness of sound, and endeavoured to make the sense plain and obvious; if the verse appears so gentle and flowing as to incur the Censure of Feebleness, I may honestly affirm that sometimes it has cost me labour to make it so.'

He also added this comment about the worship of his day: 'It is much to be feared that the minds of most of the worshippers are absent and unconcerned. Perhaps the modes of preaching still want some reformation; nor are the methods of prayer so perfect as to stand in need of no correction or improvement. But of all religious [practices] psalmody is the most unhappily managed. The very action that should elevate us to the most delightful and divine sensations not only flattens our devotion but too often awakes our regret and touches all the springs of uneasiness within us.'

Isaac Watts was the first writer to publish a book of hymns, but it is one hymn in particular which has captured the imagination of Christians throughout succeeding generations and it was written in 1707 for a communion service, and based upon Galatians 6:14 'But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.'

The hymn was originally entitled 'Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ' in the tradition of the time which was to try and sum up the theme of the hymn within its title.

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.

His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the Globe
And all the Globe is dead to me.

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.

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

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?

When it was first published, the second line read 'Where the young Prince of Glory died.' In an enlarged edition of the hymnal in 1709, Watts changed the second line to the familiar 'On which the Prince of Glory died' and bracketed the fourth stanza for optional use.

This was one of the first English-language hymns to use the word ‘I’ and have at its core personal religious experience. The hymn is also an example of how Isaac Watts, who has been called the father of English hymnody, enlarged the boundaries of English hymn writing beyond the metrical psalms to include freer verse that readily lent itself to new musical settings.

In 1757, George Whitefield included ‘When I Survey’ in the Supplement to his popular Collection of Hymns. The next year, it appeared in a hymnal published in the United States--The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Old and New Testament (1758).

Over the years, it has been found in the hymn books of denominations as varied as traditional Protestants, Roman Catholics, Mormons, Unitarians and the Assemblies of God, seldom altered beyond omitting Watts’ fourth stanza (considered by some to be a little too gory!)

Isaac Watts died in Hertfordshire in 1748, but his legacy lives on.

Tune Note: The familiar tune to this hymn, which is known as “Hamburg” was adapted in 1824 from an ancient Gregorian chant, the earliest church music known by Lowell Mason, considered by many as the father of American public school and church music. The entire melody of the hymn encompasses a range of only five-notes.

* Dissenters were Protestants who did not think that the Church of England had departed sufficiently from the beliefs and practices of Rome, and who accordingly refused to conform to it

At the start of a meeting

It is good, as we start to look at God's Word and journey through this season of Lent, that we begin both with the Word of God and with prayer. Use the following or other suitable resources.

We start with a moment of silence.

Grant we beseech thee, O Lord, that by the observation of this Lent we may advance in the knowledge of the mystery of Christ, and show forth his mind in conduct worthy of our calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gelasian Sacramentary, 5th century

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

1 Peter 1:18-21

We spend a few moments thinking about this season of Lent and Easter, considering such words as sacrifice ... suffering ... forgiveness ... joy ... life ... freedom ... grace ...

God of Easter,
Giver of Grace,
Source of all Love,
Heavenly Father;
Draw us, your prodigal
Sons and daughters
Into the warmth of your embrace,
Feed us with your word
Nourish us for the journey
Equip us for the call
You make upon our lives

Study One - When I survey the wondrous cross

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?

His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the Globe
And all the Globe is dead to me.

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

Contemplating the Cross

Galatians 6:14

‘May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.’

As our guide for this journey through Lent, Isaac Watts does not want us to simply look at the cross, but asks us to ‘survey’ it.

We are probably quite used to surveys. Someone stops us on the street and politely asks us if we can spare a moment or two to answer a few questions. This is mainly an information gathering process, a snapshot of life or opinions at one moment in time. A survey can also determine the exact form or boundaries of a piece of land, or maybe involve a detailed examination of a property.

For Isaac, the moment in time was the early 1700s. As he was standing up to give his first sermon, the Popery Act of 1698 provided that any person who apprehended a “Popish Bishop, Priest or Jesuite” who was then prosecuted for “saying Mass or exercising any other Part of the Office or Function of a Popish Bishop or Priest within these Realmes” was to receive £100 from the Sheriff of that county within four months of the priest’s conviction. In effect, it placed a bounty on Catholic priests.

In 1700 Princess Anne’s only surviving child, Prince William, Duke of Gloucester, died aged 12 leaving the Protestant succession to the Crown in doubt. After being convicted of murder and piracy, Captain William Kidd was hanged in London and Jethro Tull invented a drill for planting seeds in rows. John Wesley, founder of Methodism was born in 1703, the year that Isaac Newton became chairman of the Royal Society, which was also the year of the Great Storm which ravaged southern England and the English Channel, killing thousands and destroying the Eddystone Lighthouse near Plymouth.

Under the Acts of Union of 1707 the United Kingdom was created by the merger of the Kingdom of Scotland and the Kingdom of England. Queen Anne became formally the first occupant of the unified British throne and Scotland sent 45 MPs to the new parliament at Westminster. There was the disastrous stock market crash of 1720 known as the South Sea Bubble, in which many English people lost a great deal of money. In 1739 Dick Turpin, highwayman was hanged. On the wider front the War of the Spanish Succession was a conflict which involved most of Europe.

These were interesting and challenging times in which to be growing up. While Isaac was alive, the artist and satirist William Hogarth was working hard depicting England warts and all. In 1735 he produced ‘A Rake’s Progress’ showing in eight pictures the reckless life of Tom Rakewell, the son of a rich merchant who wastes all his money on luxurious living, whoring, and gambling, and ultimately finishes his life in Bedlam. Later he engraved Beer Street to show a happy city drinking the ‘good’ beverage of English beer, versus Gin Lane which showed the effects of drinking gin which, as hard liquor, caused more problems for society. People are shown as healthy, happy and prosperous in Beer Street, while in Gin Lane they are scrawny, lazy and careless. The woman at the front of Gin Lane, who lets her baby fall to its death, echoes the tale of Judith Dufour who strangled her baby so she could sell its clothes for gin money.

This was the world that Isaac Watts grew up in, a world of contrasts – vast wealth and urban squalor, a new political era, religious struggle, scientific discovery. He seems to have been fortunate in attracting sponsorship to an education which allowed him to achieve his personal ambition and calling. But he certainly did not take this for granted. His was a privileged position compared to the world depicted by Hogarth but certainly not one to boast about. At the very centre of Isaac’s life was his Saviour and the Cross of Easter.

Our survey of Lent, which leads us to Easter Day, ends with Jesus rising triumphantly from death but has at its core the image of a cross which has become for Christians a symbol both of horrifying cruelty and unimaginable love.

When Jesus hung on that cross, enduring the excruciating pain from the nails, struggling for breath and weakened from a savage scourging there was something in his eyes, his demeanour that spoke to the two criminals and a Roman soldier nearby. It was as if he was saying to the world: ‘There is nothing that you or humankind can do that will ever stop me from loving you.’

The ‘wonder’ of the cross that Isaac Watts writes about in his first verse is simply that if Jesus had not died there, if somehow he had been rescued from the point of death, it would be as if God was saying that there is some point beyond which his love and forgiveness is not possible - and we know in our hearts that this not true. God’s love is endless, and it is the wonder of God’s love that focuses our minds away from self and pride and upon the Cross and our response to it, which is Isaac’s intention through the words of his hymn.

In one of his sermons on ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Use of it’ Watts said: ‘Christ came to reconcile us to God, by fulfilling perfect obedience to the law which we had broken, and by sustaining the punishment and death which was due to our sins... Christ Jesus the Son of God taking flesh and blood upon him, ‘took our sins also, and became a sacrifice for sin; he bare our sins in his body on the cursed tree, and by his blood has made complete atonement for sin... ’ Words which emphasise the importance of the Cross to his faith, at the very centre of his personal experience of Jesus. The ‘cursed tree’ becomes the ‘wondrous cross’

‘When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died..’

Isaac considers his life, one which had begun in humble surroundings but had since been blessed by the gift of poetry and music as well as the generosity of sponsors. He was now in a privileged position, a man of the cloth, in authority over others, someone of influence and importance and yet this is not what comes across as important when we look at his life and writings. Here was someone of great but humble faith who desired to pass on that faith to others through simple words that could be readily understood by the congregations to which they were taught. His was a great gift humbly used in service, and we see this in his writing

‘..My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.’

I wonder if Isaac had in mind these words of Jesus from Matthew 16:24-26 as he wrote this hymn

‘Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?’ (New International Version)

As we walk with Isaac Watts though Lent this is a good point at which to stop for a moment, consider those words and ask ourselves how central to the way we live our lives is our understanding of what Jesus achieved by his death on the Cross. Isaac was in no doubt that all that he had done in his life, his gifts, his success and influence faded into insignificance when compared with Jesus. The only achievement that matters is the achievement of the cross of Christ.

Thought for meditation

‘The essential fact of Christianity is that God thought all men worth the sacrifice of his Son’

William Barclay

Questions for discussion

- 1) Comparing the society in which Isaac Watts grew up with our own are there areas where we can connect, and if so what does that tell us about the world in which we live?

- 2) How relevant is the Cross to modern society, and to individual lives today?

- 3) Thinking about those words of William Barclay, are you happy with his comment that Jesus' sacrifice was for all men rather than those who might seem more 'deserving' such a sacrifice?

- 4) We are used to Jesus having several titles, including Son of God or Lamb of God. Watts calls Jesus 'Prince of Glory' – what do we understand by that title?

- 5) Isaac Watts talks of the 'Wondrous Cross.' Is it right to think of such a cruel and barbaric method of execution as 'Wondrous'?

- 6) Consider the shape of the Cross, and consider whether its form, construction or materials used can be used as an illustration of any aspect of God's character.

Study Two Forbid it Lord that I should boast

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?

His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the Globe
And all the Globe is dead to me.

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

Getting the perspective right

Romans 14:7-8

For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

Paul was in some ways a complicated character – certainly an object of suspicion after his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. Unlike the simple fishermen who followed Jesus here was someone with a more complex and interesting background. At some stage he became an enthusiastic member of the Pharisees and trained in Jerusalem when he was around 13 under a well known teacher called Gamaliel.

Paul did not meet Jesus but learned enough about him and his followers to regard the Christian movement as a threat to the Pharisaic Judaism that he had embraced so eagerly.

Serious persecution of Christians first arose in connection with converts among the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem. They had not only proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, but they also claimed that the temple and its sacrifices were superseded by the sacrificial death of Jesus. Paul therefore appears on the scene as a persecutor of the newly founded church – he was there when Stephen was stoned to death and the murderers ‘laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul’ (Acts 7:58).

Paul had every reason to boast at his achievements, both before and after his conversion, a zealous Pharisee and now a zealous Christian with a powerful and successful ministry. But Paul knew, as did Isaac Watts that it is not really possible to examine at our lives in isolation from the rest of humankind. We also cannot isolate ourselves from our past, our present or of course from Jesus.

What I am today has been influenced by the family I grew up in, the friends I made, the places I have lived, the teaching I received and the traditions of my culture and religion. To all these I have added my own mark, but I cannot distance myself totally from all that has gone before, just as Paul’s background steeped in the Scriptures and Rabbinic tradition influenced his teaching and authority.

What I am today also influences others, and sometimes we forget this. As we interact in our daily lives with those among whom we work, live or move then we can affect others by our actions and words. We can bring joy or sorrow, influence for good or bad, be generous or selfish, kind or cruel. Everything that we say or do has consequences, some greater than others, but essentially this means that we cannot isolate ourselves from the world in which we live – we are a part of it and must share our responsibility for it.

And as for the future, William Barclay comments that ‘As a man receives life so he hands life on’ and Paul reminds us that ‘none of us lives to himself alone.’ Whether we might consider it a good thing or not we do influence the future because of our interactions with others – something of us lives on in others, and the sins which we commit or hold onto can regrettably be our gift to the future.

‘Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!’

Isaac Watts brings our thoughts back to the importance of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial offering of love on the Cross, as indeed does the Apostle Paul as he says ‘If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord’

If we think we can live in isolation from people, then the reality is that it is impossible to live as Christians outside of the presence of Christ. The Cross is as central to our faith as our heart is to our life, and the resurrected Christ is our hope for the future.

‘All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.’

The Apostle Paul was a successful man by whatever measure you might care to use, both before and after his conversion. His missionary journeys ranged far and wide and his powerful ministry set the Christian Church on the path that we now follow, such was his influence – but the glory belonged to God. Within the church it is quite possible to have a cult of personality, be it a powerful teacher, worship leader or evangelist, where the message can almost take second place to the personality.

Keeping our feet on the ground is important as Christians, remembering where our salvation has its source and in whom we have our hope for eternity. When we consider the Cross all our vanity and pride is exposed for what it is, and our response should be to bring those things to his feet as a sacrificial offering. Only by doing so can we be effective as Christians, only by doing so can we become the people God would have us be.

Our only boast should be that we have known and benefited from the saving Grace of Jesus Christ.

Thought for meditation:

It's the picture of violence
Yet the key to peace
A picture of suffering
Yet the key to healing
A picture of death
Yet the key to life
A picture of utter weakness
Yet the key to power
A picture of capital punishment
Yet the key to mercy and forgiveness
A picture of vicious hatred
Yet the key of love
A picture of supreme shame
Yet the Christian's supreme boast

David Watson

Study Three: See from his head, his hands, his feet

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?

His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the Globe
And all the Globe is dead to me.

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

Mourning the world

1 Peter 2:24

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Watts lived the majority of his life in days of spiritual decline and decadence.

Michael Haykin, in an article for *Evangelical Times*, explaining what England was like before the Evangelical Awakening, says this about the period:

‘Homosexuality, profanity, immorality, drunkenness and gluttony were widespread... The moral tone of the nation was set by its monarchs and leading politicians. George I was primarily interested in food, horses, and women. He had many mistresses. Sir Robert Walpole, Prime Minister 1721-1742, lived in undisguised adultery with his mistress... The possession of lovers and mistresses was regarded as commonplace, a matter of gossip but not of reproach.’

Clearly, sin is not a modern invention, and the Bible traces its source back to the emergence of humankind in the Garden of Eden and rebellion against God. It is a sad fact that we have always thought that we knew better than our Creator, and throughout the Bible we see evidence of this rebellion and the consequences which followed, both to individuals and nation. Today, in a world which has largely turned away from belief in God it is easy to see, perhaps, that it also struggles to understand the concept of sin.

From *The Guardian*, Tuesday May 9 2006

Sin n. (obs.): Something young people do not know or care about. This definition has somewhat shocked the Church of England, which has investigated the beliefs of “generation Y” (15-to-25-year-olds) and is staggered to discover that they, like, you know, don’t have any real sense of sin. The biggest surprise here is that of the church. Sin is as alien to the contemporary mind as fetching water from a well, darning your own socks or finding Demis Roussos sexy.

Against this backdrop of sin and rebellion which is as old as humanity itself, God entered our world in the person of Jesus, lived among us and loved us to the ultimate on the Cross. Up to this moment God’s People had known God’s Salvation in terms of the physical, and the Old Testament is full of examples of God rescuing his people from their enemies as they turned to him for help (usually after a considerable time of ignoring him!) Now Jesus opens up a new dimension to the word Salvation, as on the Cross he moves from the physical to the eternal.

It is to this wonderful mystery of the Cross that Isaac Watt’s thoughts turn, picturing in his mind the sorrow that Jesus felt for the state of the world into which he had come, the responsibility which had been laid upon his shoulders and the forgiving love that flowed from his veins as he suffered such excruciating pain, crowned with a garland of thorns.

(Interestingly, the word ‘excruciate’ has at its root ‘ex’, meaning out of, or from, and ‘cruciate’ meaning cross, so the word excruciate comes from the Latin for ‘from the cross’)

A question: Could thorns ever be thought of as a crown, as Watts sees them?

Crowns are worn by priests and royalty as signs of authority. Golden crowns symbolize power, rank, honour, victory, wealth, reward and achievement. The jewels of a crown are witnesses to the wealth of a kingdom. To Christians, crowns are visual representations of the favour of God; the rewards of the faithful, especially martyrs; and victory over sin and death.

Thorns are mentioned soon after humankind's first rebellion against God, as a consequence of that action, and afterwards thorns became associated with evil and the enemies of Israel.

Genesis 3:17-18: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field." Isaiah 1:18

'They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off. Psalm 118:12.'

Thorns and brambles by their nature cause us pain; they snag our clothes or skin, sometimes causing infection and are invasive and crowd out other plants. Thorns are perhaps a good picture to use when considering sins because spiritually they do the same, crowding our lives so that there's no room for God, causing pain both to ourselves and others, infecting this world through words and actions.

To be wearing that crown of thorns on his head was symbolic in that it showed Jesus willing to take the sins of humankind to the Cross and beyond – this was the purpose of the Cross, and painful though it must have been, those thorns were a visible reminder of Jesus' true nature, that as he cried out for the sins of the world that they represented, so his forgiving love poured out... tears of Grace.

In our world today we have our own thorns to contend with – there are many people and acts which we might categorise as evil, and in their wake are victims who have been scarred by those thorns both physically and mentally. A quick glance at our newspapers or TV screen soon reminds us that all is not well with humankind. Humankind in the 21st Century is not much removed in morals from that of Isaac Watt's day, or that of much earlier centuries.

How does our church react to all that goes on outside its walls? How involved are we with the local community, and how do we reach out where there is need. We are used to the idea of Jesus dying on the cross for the sake and sins of humankind, but how does our understanding of God's love for the world translate into our own lives? Do we 'mourn' as we see the condition of humankind, and watch the cruelty, hatred and conditions under which so many millions live?

Thought for meditation:

'Sin is the most expensive thing in the universe, pardoned or unforgiven – pardoned, its cost falls on the atoning sacrifice; unforgiven, it must forever lie upon the impenitent soul.'

Charles Finney, writing in the 19th Century

Questions for discussion:

1) Simeon bar Sabba'e, Bishop of Seleucia in Persia around 340BC prayed 'Give me this crown, Lord; you know how I long for it, for I have loved you with all my heart and all my being. When I see you I shall be filled with joy and you will give me rest.'

Isaac Watts focussed on the Crown of Thorns as a symbol of all that Jesus was prepared to endure for the love of humankind. We are unlikely to be asked to die for the love of anyone but how far should our concern for this world, our neighbour, our family, the stranger begging on the street corner and the shoplifter, mugger or murderer go? How do we relate to the Crown of Thorns and should we be prepared to feel those thorns?

2) It would seem that young people particularly have lost an understanding of just what the church means by 'sin' and the word has ceased to have any meaning – to them it has connotations with a Victorian past and not contemporary society. Does this mean that we need to update our language and re-define what we mean by sin, maybe call it something else that today's generations X and Y can relate to?

3) If you haven't already done this, then how would you define 'sin' using contemporary words or examples?

4) Consider these words from Martin Luther. How do they challenge you?
'They gave our Master a crown of thorns – Why do we hope for a crown of roses?'

Study Four His dying Crimson, like a Robe

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?

His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the Globe
And all the Globe is dead to me.

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

Overcomers

1 John 5:4-5

‘...for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.’

Isaac Watts resorts to some tremendous imagery in this fourth stanza. Crowns and Crimson robes are associated with royalty, as can a globe in one of its meanings (as an orb carried by the sovereign as a symbol of authority)

Beneath the imagery of course is the fact that ‘crimson’ is the blood of Jesus, and the tree is the Cross. For those who have seen Mel Gibson’s film ‘The Passion of the Christ’ these first two lines conjures up images of the violence that Jesus endured and which previous films of the Passion had really skipped over – perhaps to avoid causing undue distress to their audience.

Watts then takes those symbols of royalty and kingship and paints a picture in verse which tells of the transformation of suffering, death and sin by the blood of Jesus shed on the Cross. This is the one single act which could separate humankind from the sin which held it in its grip and bring them back into fellowship with God and the triumphant action of a King not a defeated Messiah. Its consequences spread over the world as clearly as the blood spread over Jesus’ body so visibly on the Cross.

Blood features pretty heavily in the relationship between God and his people, as does the idea of sacrifice and salvation. Soon after the story of Creation and the appearance of the first human beings we have the spilling of Abel’s blood. The King James Version of the Bible mentions the word blood 447 times (346 times in the Old Testament, and 101 times in the New Testament.)

In Exodus chapter 12 we read about the Passover which remembers the liberation of the Children of Israel from Egypt by Moses. The Children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for 210 years. God promised he would release them from slavery, but not before Pharaoh had refused their release and God had sent ten plagues on Egypt to demonstrate his power. In the following chapter the rituals are laid out as to how this day would be commemorated in the future.

An avenging angel would go from house to house killing every first-born son. Israelite children would not be killed and thus God would show that they were his chosen people. So that the angel would know which houses were Israelite homes, the Children of Israel were to follow very specific instructions. Each household was to take an unblemished, male lamb, look after it, and slaughter it at twilight four days later. Blood from the lamb was to be brushed on the door frames. This would tell the avenging angel that it was an Israelite home and to ‘pass over’. God’s saving power!

It was at Passover that Jesus shared his last meal with the disciples. A remembrance of God’s saving power with the One who would offer his blood as a once for ever sacrifice to show that God’s forgiveness of sins was no longer dependent on human actions, but available for all.

Matt 28: 26 ‘Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”’

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”’

In this verse of the hymn, Isaac Watts manages to encompass so much truth about Jesus’ death on the Cross. Yes, his blood was spilt, as was those of the criminals crucified beside him, but this was not a defeated Messiah. This was Jesus overcoming the world on behalf of, and for the love of humankind.

1 Peter 2: 24 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.'

Jesus is the 'Overcomer' because, as John reminds us, 'This is the victory that has overcome the world.' And because of his triumph we can also be Overcomers – that is the promise of our faith. Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross changes the relationship that we have with the world. No longer should we be pushed willingly or unwillingly against the will of God, but instead have the assurance to stand up with confidence when temptation leads us astray. 'Not my way, but yours!' said Jesus to his Father in those stressful moments before his betrayal. 'Not the world's way, but yours!' should be our response when we find ourselves almost at the point of betraying Jesus by our actions or words.

'We must look on all things of this world as none of ours, and not desire them. This world and that to come are enemies. We cannot therefore be friends to both, but must resolve which to forsake and which to enjoy.'

Clement of Rome (d.c.95)

The blood which spread like crimson over Jesus' body in a mysterious and wonderful way spread and continues to spread throughout the world. For that blood symbolised God's eternal love and forgiveness reaching out through Jesus' outstretched arms toward the whole world. And of course it does not stop there, because when God's love, when that ripple of crimson touches our lives then we too are changed, and our words and actions are used by God to bring others to Him.

"This is faith: a renouncing of everything we are apt to call our own and relying wholly upon the blood, righteousness and intercession of Jesus"

John Newton

Thought for meditation:

'Every day the choice between good and evil is presented to us in simple ways'

W.E. Sangster (English Methodist preacher)

Questions for discussion:

1 John Powell, a North American Jesuit is quoted as saying ‘If you knew me yesterday, please do not think that it is the same person you are meeting today’. How do you relate this statement to the Christian life?

2 Many people were shocked by the violence and horror depicted in Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ’. Do you feel that protecting our sensitivities is a good thing, or have we lost something by not fully appreciating just what Jesus endured prior to and whilst on the Cross?

3 At the celebration of Holy Communion we drink the wine in remembrance of that crimson flow of blood that Isaac Watts describes, and the New Covenant which Jesus heralded - “the blood of the covenant shed for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). At the Passover meal, Jesus was affirming that his death was the means by which the new covenant—a synonym for the Kingdom of God—would come about. How central to our faith is this sharing of the bread and wine, and why?

4 Do you consider yourself an ‘Overcomer’?

What are the outward and inward signs of one who is an overcomer – one who can say ‘Then I am dead to all the Globe and all the Globe is dead to me’?

5 Consider Sangster’s words ‘Every day the choice between good and evil is presented to us in simple ways’ and consider in a few examples from everyday life of how easy it is to be given that choice.

Study Five Were the whole realm of nature mine

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?

His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the Globe
And all the Globe is dead to me.

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

Our Acceptable Worship

Romans 12:1

‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.’

God’s amazing Grace is in many ways a mystery to us. He created this world, placed at the very heart of its beauty human beings, and gave them stewardship of a magnificent garden – and garden is a useful analogy, for God provided not only the garden but also the means by which its inhabitants could be fed.

What a gift to humankind, a world that not only looks magnificent but also has within it the resources to feed, clothe and shelter those God has placed upon it!

And yet even this, says Watts, this gift is nothing at all compared to the Grace given freely through Jesus on the Cross. This world in all its beauty and diversity, its complexity and capacity to surprise cannot be compared with the amazing truth that God loves someone as small, insignificant and unworthy as me, and loves me enough to endure the humiliation of hanging on that Cross.

This is essence is what Isaac Watts is pondering in this hymn. ‘When I consider my life as a sinner, with little hope of being found innocent if judged on my thoughts and actions, who am I that God should care so much for me?’

We probably all have ‘grain of sand’ moments where we echo the thoughts of David in Psalm 8

‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him...’

And then we discover that God loves sand, and uses it to create some of the most beautiful, evocative and peaceful places on earth!

The realisation that God’s love extends to all of his creation is a humbling thought, and is the point at which so many have found themselves making a commitment to him – a response to God’s amazing Grace by someone so undeserving. It is important to understand that with all gifts there is an onus on the one to whom the gift is offered to accept that which is given. God does not impose or force his will upon us, but Watts challenges us to try and ignore all that God has done for us.

‘Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.’

This is the start of a new life, lived in the presence and the worship of God. We are to have, as someone has said, ‘an attitude of gratitude’. It’s a response that is beyond the capability of any of us to undertake on our own (how can we give everything?), but is perfectly possible with God’s love and support.

Lamentations 3:22-23 The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. (New Living Translation)

God’s mercies begin afresh each morning, and therefore so should our worship and service. It should be an ongoing activity which is part of our daily lives. There is an imperative in Isaac Watts’ last line that ‘Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.’

This is the offering of our lives that Romans 12 talks about, and a modern translation puts it beautifully:

‘So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering...’ (The Message)

This is the spiritual worship which Paul assures us is holy and pleasing to God, the offering of our lives in service. This is a challenging thought if ‘worship’ has been hitherto confined within the fence of our Sunday mix of liturgy and hymn singing. It means that barriers have to be broken down so that our worship can have the freedom to invade our daily lives; in the way that we tackle everyday tasks, talk to people and interact with the daily joys and struggles of life. The early Christian saints in this country knew what the writer to Romans was saying. Saint Patrick famously writes of praying constantly whilst he was performing the most menial of tasks, milking the cows in the field and tending to the land.

God’s love is so amazing, writes Isaac Watts, that it demands as a response everything that we are - our lives and souls. How many times have we sung those words and actually pondered the enormity of what the hymn writer is saying here?

Thought for meditation:

Long plunged in sorrow, I resign
My soul to that dear hand of thine,
Without reserve or fear;
That hand shall wipe my streaming eyes;
Or into smiles of glad surprise
Transform the falling tear.
My sole possession is thy love;
In earth beneath, or heaven above,
I have no other store;
And, though with fervent suit I pray,
And importune thee night and day,
I ask thee nothing more.

Guion Poems by William Cowper.

Questions for discussion

1) How would you re-define 'acceptable worship' as applied to the 21st century, or is Paul's description in Romans 12 still relevant?

2) We can relate to the idea of Christian service within the community or workplace, but how practically can we take the elements of our worship outside the confines of the church where we meet weekly and into our daily lives?

3) The challenge from Watts in this final verse to give all in worship and service seems on the surface to be an onerous task, and yet of course merely reflects Jesus' own words to his disciples and others of the seriousness of discipleship.

Can you think of some of the encounters that Jesus had with people where he makes similar demands on their lives?

4) How easy is it within the context of our modern culture to make this response, or does it need amending to take into account the busyness of our lives?

Look again at those words of Paul from Romans, as presented in *The Message*:

'So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering...' (*The Message*)

Can you see how you might put this into practice?

At the end of a meeting

It is good to end a meeting with a time of prayer and meditation. Use these, other suitable prayers, or alternatively encourage your group to pray openly as the Spirit leads.

Start with a moment of silence, and then read again the verse that was the focus of your study.

Let us share a time of quiet reflection, bringing to the feet of our God the prayers of our hearts and the remembrance of our own awakening to spiritual life with Christ.

(Silence)

Let us join together and say the Lord's Prayer

All: Our Father.....

O Lord open our lips

All: And our mouths will declare your praise.

O Lord you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not delight in burnt offerings

All: The sacrifices of God are a humble spirit. He will not reject a humble and repentant heart

Gracious and loving Father, in accepting your call on our lives, we left self behind and took on the new mantle of your sacrificial love.

All: Together we share in your sacrifice and the resurrection life of Jesus

In doing so we acknowledged your supreme act of love in giving your Son to this world, and also our share of mankind's guilt in the cross.

All: Together we share in your sacrifice and the resurrection life of Jesus

We looked from the sorrow of Good Friday to the joy of Easter and the promise of the Resurrection. We now share together in that promise and look forward with anticipation to spending an eternity in your presence.

God of sacrifice and love

All: Together we share in your sacrifice and the resurrection life of Jesus

You call us to service
to be your eyes and ears
hands and voice in this your world
To open our eyes not only
to the beauty and love which you create
but the injustice
hate and suffering that mankind generates
To open our ears not only
to the chattering of this coming week
but the searching
fears and questioning of all whom we shall meet
To open our hands not only
to those we choose our lives to share
but in welcome

love and fellowship to all who you draw near
To open our mouths not only
to speak platitudes and simple words
But the truths you lay
upon our hearts Your Word for this your world

You call us to service
to be your eyes and ears
hands and voice in this your world

As we take our worship, prayer and understanding from this place and into our daily lives, may our lives be sustained through the love of our Heavenly Father. May we feel the presence of our Saviour walking beside us, and know the power of the Spirit in both our actions and our words.

1 Cor 15: 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

1 Cor 1:18 For the message about the cross is nonsense to those who are being destroyed, but it is God's power to us who are being saved. ...

Gal 6:14 But may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world! ...

Through our study, our prayer and meditation, the joining of our lives in fellowship we worship you, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Enfold us in your love, and empower our lives that your name might be glorified in them, each and every day.

References and further reading

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