**The Story & Theology of Particular Hymns**

Lesson 6 – Isaac Watts – “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” (#30) & “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (#252)

**Biography**

* 1674-1748
* Born in Southhampton, England
* His father was an educated deacon in a dissenting Congregational church.
* When Isaac was born, his father was in prison for his non-conformist beliefs.
* Watts displayed literary genius at an early age and was even said to turn every day conversation into a rhyme.
* Watts was challenged by his father to write “better” songs for their congregation because only metrical Psalms were song.
* For 2 years, Watts wrote a new hymn every Sunday.
* Because he used “hymns of human composure,” he was considered to be a radical churchman.
* He had frail health most of his life but was a genius of a scholar.
* He wrote essays on psychology and theology, 3 volumes of sermons, a logic textbook and catechisms.
* He is buried in Bunhill Cemetery in London, but his monument is in Westminster Abbey which is the highest honor an Englishman can have.
* He is called “the father of English hymnody.”

**Occasion for “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”**

* A paraphrase of Psalm 90
* In 1738, John Wesley in his hymnal changed the first line from “Our God” to “God”
* This hymn first appeared in Watts’ *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*.
* Watts paraphrased the entire book of Psalms except for 12 of them which he felt were unsuited for Christian usage.
* This hymn was played on the radio after the BBC announced the declaration of WW2 and also played at Winston Churchill’s funeral.

**Theology of “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”**

* Psalm 90 contemplates God in relation to time.
* Verse 1: God has been a refuge for His people in the past and is their hope for the future.
* Verse 2: Continues the theme of God as a refuge and prepares for verse 3 in God being timeless
* Verse 3: God stands outside of time. Indeed, time is part of God’s creation.
* Verse 4: Time is nothing for God. 1000 years are like a day to Him.
* Verse 5: Individuals are just a blip on the timeline.
* Verse 6: Continues the theme of the shortness of our lives and how we are here then gone
* Verse 7: A plea based on God’s timelessness to continue to be our refuge and dwelling place.

**Occasion for “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”**

* This hymn appeared in 1707 in Watts’ book of hymns.
* It was inspired by Galatians 6:14 and originally called “Crucifixion to the World, by the Cross of Christ”
* Galatians 6:14 – “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”
* Watts originally wrote this hymn to be used during times of communion when he was pastoring a church.

**Theology of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”**

* The hymn is a deeply moving and very personal expression of gratitude for the amazing love that the death of Christ on the cross revealed.
* Verse 1: When we contemplate the meaning of the cross, it should drive us to deep humility
* Verse 2: The preciousness of Christ’s work on the cross is more valuable than anything that the world can offer.
* Verse 3: Christ on the cross is a profound mystery on one level and where God’s love and justice meet.
* Verse 4: The cross of Christ is a call to death to self.