



The Poetic Wonder of

Isaac Watts

DOUGLAS BOND



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

ENDORSEMENTS

“Who among us has not had heart and mind stirred by a Watts hymn? Here we learn the story behind the hymns. We learn of a Christ-centered life, a doxological life. And from that wellspring has come the hymns we love to sing. Watts’s hymns are a gift for the church, and so is this biography by Douglas Bond.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS
President, Reformation Bible College
Sanford, Fla.

“We all know and love ‘Joy to the World,’ ‘Jesus Shall Reign,’ ‘Alas and Did My Savior Bleed,’ ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,’ ‘O God, Our Help in Ages Past,’ and a host of his other compositions. And yet, most Christians know precious little about the author of these great hymn texts—the man history has dubbed as the ‘Father of English Hymnody.’ At least, until now. Thanks to the prolific and eloquent pen of Douglas Bond, we now have an insightful glimpse into the life, the faith, and the poetic wonder of this remarkable servant of the church: Isaac Watts. This delightful book needs to be put at the top of your must-read list.”

—DR. GEORGE GRANT
Pastor, Parish Presbyterian Church
Franklin, Tenn.

The Poetic Wonder *of*

Isaac Watts

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A **Long Line of Godly Men** Profile

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Isaac Watts

DOUGLAS BOND



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To my wife

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	Followers Worthy to Be Followed	xi
<i>Preface</i>	Doxology for All Time	x
<i>Chapter One</i>	Watts' Life and Legacy	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	Watts as Educator	27
<i>Chapter Three</i>	Watts' Sermon Hymns	37
<i>Chapter Four</i>	Watts as Lyric Poet	49
<i>Chapter Five</i>	Watts as Hymn Writer	57
<i>Chapter Six</i>	Watts as Poet Theologian.	71
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	Watts as Children's Poet	85
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	Watts as Psalm Interpreter	99
<i>Conclusion</i>	Watts for Our Time	121
<i>Appendix A:</i>	An Isaac Watts Timeline	139
<i>Appendix B:</i>	Favorite Isaac Watts Hymns	143
<i>Appendix C:</i>	Books by Isaac Watts	145
<i>Notes</i>		149
<i>Bibliography</i>		157
<i>Index</i>		161

Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has providentially raised up a long line of godly men, whom He has mightily used at strategic moments in church history. These valiant soldiers of the cross have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures have had much in common.

Each man possessed an unwavering faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But more can be said about these luminous figures. Each of these stalwarts of the faith held deep convictions in the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they

stood shoulder to shoulder in championing these five biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign grace of God in salvation. They upheld the foundational truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

Far from paralyzing these spiritual giants, the doctrines of grace enflamed their hearts with reverential awe for God and humbled their souls before His throne. The truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to rise up and advance the cause of Christ on the earth. Any survey of history reveals that those who embrace these Reformed truths are granted extraordinary confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision of His saving grace, they stepped forward boldly and accomplished the work of ten, even twenty men. They arose with wings like eagles and soared over their times in human history. Experientially, the doctrines of grace empowered them to serve God in their divinely appointed hour, leaving a godly influence upon future generations.

This *Long Line of Godly Men Profile* series highlights key figures in the age-long procession of sovereign-grace men. The purpose of this series is to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to impact their times and further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were courageous followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

The focus of this next volume is upon the preeminent English hymn writer Isaac Watts. The poetic beauty of his doctrinally steeped hymns transcend the centuries and continue to enrich the church today. By his extraordinary literary

skill, he made hymn-singing a devotional force in the Protestant church. Captured by a towering vision of God, this gifted composer revitalized congregational singing by restating rich theology in lyrics that matched the musical style with the weightiness of the biblical message. All this—the rise and fall of a phrase, striking metaphors, the cadence of the line—conveyed the majesty and transcendence of God in unforgettable words. Called the Melancthon of his times, this pastor-hymnologist influenced the course of congregational worship that has lasted until this day. His hymns remain a staple in the spiritual life of the church.

This gift for poetic wonder is needed, once again, in this present hour. In a day where there is much shallowness in corporate worship, the church must recapture a high view of God that leads to transcendent worship. In the final analysis, it is theology that inevitably produces doxology. The recent resurgence of Reformed theology must inspire towering praise in the hearts of believers. May the Lord use this book to ignite a new generation to “survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died.”

Soli Deo gloria!
— *Steven J. Lawson*
Series editor

Doxology for All Time

It was an autumn Sunday evening in 1976 when, as a seven-teen-year-old, the gospel of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone became irrevocably real to my soul. I remember it vividly: the awakened hearing of truths I had been tenderly taught since my earliest recollections, the sense of wonder at divine grace, and the experiential thrill of the reality of the cross and of Christ my Savior shedding His blood, suffering and dying in my place, for my sin and my guilt. I remember hot tears stinging my cheeks as the genuineness of grace and the gospel washed over me that evening.

With a trembling hand and a heart nearly bursting with love and gratitude for the free grace of God, I reached for the elements of bread and wine, Christ therein pictured, symbolized, and made spiritually real before me.

What was the means that awakened a young man that glorious evening? Was it an entertaining sermon delivered by a celebrity preacher? Was it the emotional hype concocted by the latest Christian rock band? Was it high-church ceremony attempting to fabricate the transcendent? No, it was none of these.

It was Isaac Watts.

I had sung the words of his hymn at Communion every month for eleven years, but that evening, Watts' rich poetry dazzled my imagination and made a deep and lasting impression on my heart. It's not cool at seventeen to weep publicly, but I wept, and though I did, I managed to join Watts in his slack-jawed wonder at the 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.¹*

By his incomparable imagination, Watts transported me back to hot, dusty Golgotha, where I heard the thudding of the hammer on the spikes, the taunting and spitting, the moaning and wails of sorrow. With Watts' words, I became the young man surveying that wondrous cross. With eyes of faith, I was the one seeing the Prince of glory forsaken by His Father and dying in anguish. And because I was now seeing it, I was the one resolving to count but loss all my aspirations

to riches and greatness. I was, for the first time, pouring contempt on all my delusional pride of body and mind.

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the cross of Christ my God:
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.*

Watts, by his sense of wonder at the cross of Christ, and with skillful strokes of his poetic pen, showed me the absurdity of my view of the world. He deftly stirred up in me the ugliness and utter inappropriateness of my pride and boasting, my preoccupation with empty things that so captivated my teen world. By vividly holding before me the cross of Jesus, he demanded that I drop everything and reckon with it. By his words, Watts compelled me to join him, to see with him the One who hung on that cross for me.

*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?*

Watts' rhetorical question caused me to see how ridiculous my sense of value had been. I had been scrambling after the world's riches, wisdom, and entertainments. But Watts held before me Christ—His head, His hands, His feet—and

the surpassing richness of His thorny crown. It was as if I was there and could see it, hear Him groaning, and feel the penetration of each thorn in His brow. I was compelled to respond.

*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.*

Watts assaulted my deeply flawed value system with this closing quatrain. How absurd it was for me to think that I could own every piece of wealth in the entire natural world, and then to imagine that I could offer it as a gift, and it would somehow be proportionate to Jesus Himself. With a few strokes of his quill, Watts smashed all that for me. His imaginative comparison of all the temporal riches of nature heaped up as a present on one side, and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for my sins on the other, shamed me; it made me “hide my blushing face while His dear cross appeared.”²

In sixteen short lines of poetry, in 128 syllables, Watts demolished my twisted sense of value and drove me to my knees at the foot of that cross. He had peeled back the glitter of the temporal world, had parted the clouds with his pen, and in that parting he had dazzled me with divine love, love so amazing that it demanded my soul, my life, my all—every part of me belonged to Jesus. He purchased my life on that cross, and such amazing love for me graciously drew me, irresistibly

compelled me, to want more than anything to forsake all else and follow Jesus.

WHY ISAAC WATTS?

As a consequence of having my spiritual imagination baptized by Watts' imagination, he has long held an important place in my mind and heart. When my devotion is cold and stale in public or in private, I turn to Watts, who "give[s] me the wings of faith"³ and turns me to Jesus. I'm inclined to think that if Watts, more than two hundred years after his death, can be the means of awakening the soul of a seventeen-year-old young man, there just may be a great deal in his body of work that no generation of Christians can afford to live without.

First, we need Watts' poetry in our lives. Our world clambers after the latest thing, and as we wear ourselves out in the process, great poets such as Watts often get put in a box on the curb for the thrift store pickup. How could a gawky, male poet, living and writing three hundred years ago, be relevant today? Our postmodern, post-Christian, post-biblical culture has almost totally dismissed what was called poetry in Watts' day. Few deny it: ours is a post-poetry culture.

Martin Luther insisted that in a reformation, "We need poets."⁴ However, Christians often accept the decline of poetry without a whimper. Won't the machinations of society carry on just fine without poetry? Won't the church do just fine without it? It's not like poetry contributes anything vital. You

can't eat it. So thought Hanoverian King George II: "I hate all poets!" he declared. But are Christians to stand deferentially aside as culture pitches poetry—the highest form—into the lowest circle of hell?

What happened to real poetry, and why do we so desperately need Watts to help us recover it? Arguably the decline was fueled by Walt Whitman, a man with new ideas that demanded a new form. "Through me," he wrote, "forbidden voices, voices of sexes and lust, voices veiled, and I removed the veil."⁵

Whitman-like *vers libre* poetry dictates against any conventional structure of meter or rhyme, lyric elements necessary to make poetry singable, as Watts understood so well. Whitman's throw-off-the-shackles impulse created a blurring of literary genre wherein poetic form was abandoned in favor of irregular bursts of feeling. What often remains is fragmented prose. "Poetry" thus conceived provides a pseudo-form for saying private things about one's self, things one would never utter in direct speech—until Whitman removed the veil.

Such redefining of poetry has led to a proliferation of words and phrases that seem more like emotive exhibitionism penned by therapeutic zealots than anything resembling real poetry. I once heard John Stott quip about Americans, "The trouble with you Americans is you're constantly engaged in a spiritual strip-tease."⁶

Abandoning form for raw emotion is not unique to poets. Most artists are quite pleased with themselves for smashing

outmoded forms in favor of new structures, ones better suited to self-expression, the now-primary sphere of art.

It's no coincidence that poetry began its descent into "gaseous emotionalizing" in egalitarian America. Alexis de Tocqueville placed the blame squarely on the devolutions of democracy: "Nothing is more repugnant to the human mind, in an age of equality, than the idea of subjection to forms." As he continued, one wonders whether de Tocqueville was thinking of Whitman: "Democracy diverts the imagination from all that is external to man, and fixes it on man alone. Each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely, himself."⁷

Meanwhile, Whitman was working on his signature poem, *Song of Myself*, the prototype of vacuous praise—of the wrong object. Man-centered praise poetry was born. How vastly different from Watts, who wrote of his poetic purpose:

*Begin, my tongue, some heav'nly theme,
And speak some boundless thing.
The mighty works, or mightier Name
Of our eternal King.*⁸

While Watts had made Christ the theme of his poetry, Whitman's *Song of Myself* set the mortar of poetic self-referentialism. Much of his poetry is disgusting material: "I believe in the flesh and the appetites," he crooned in *Song of Myself*. "Divine am I inside and out. . . . The scent of these armpits

aroma finer than prayer, [t]his head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds. . . . Nothing, not God, is greater . . . more wonderful than myself.”⁹ One wishes Whitman would have stopped, but he did not. Nor have poets since.

One tragic result of Whitman and his imitators is that we have forfeited the ability to measure the quality of poetry, so free verse proliferates without censure as everyone and his cocker spaniel gets in touch with the poet within, including well-intentioned youthful worship leaders. There’s little place for Watts in such a literary world. Ours is without a rudder, where poetry has no boundaries, no canvas, no walls, no arches, no vaulted ceilings—and, hence, no enduring grandeur. Today one can create verse and call it poetry by doing a Google search, then blending the results into lines of absurdity. And, yes, it has a name: flarf. Flarf poetry and its derivatives have redefined what poetry is. Redefining is what postmodernity does best, and the result is that the rich literary legacy of the past is on the verge of being forgotten—and Watts with it.

Were he alive today, I doubt that it would occur to Watts to celebrate cyber randomness with his pen—or to write a hymn in celebration of himself. Watts was an extraordinarily gifted poet, one who virtually thought in rhyme and meter, and who wrote most of his poetry in first draft. With such skills, he could have been a leading man of letters in neo-classical Britain. Watts’ era was termed the Age of Johnson, and Samuel Johnson himself ranked Watts among the great

authors and said of him, “His ear was well tuned, and his diction was elegant and copious.”¹⁰

Though the University of Edinburgh and the University of Aberdeen conferred on Watts the honor of doctor of divinity degrees in 1728, many literary critics have considered his poetry to be too explicitly Christian for literary acclaim. This was by design. Brilliant poet that he was, Watts avoided, as he termed it, the “excess baggage of intricate form as well as of poetical adornment.”¹¹ His was a gospel objective first and last. Poetry, for Watts, was a means to a higher end, perhaps a requirement of all great poetry.

Hence, he was unapologetically a biblical and theological poet who has given to all Christians a rich legacy of sung worship, full of imagination, skill, deep theological perception, vivid sensory insight, cheerfulness in the midst of suffering and disadvantages, and a contagious sense of wonder at the majesty of God. Ours is a world that desperately needs Watts’ poetry.

Second, we need Watts’ voice in our worship. Christian worship desperately needs Watts. I have recently sat in worship services with well-meaning Christians singing, “Yes, Lord, yes, Lord, yes, yes, Lord.” In another service, I sat bewildered as all around me folks held their hands aloft, caressing the air, singing, “Just think about it, just think about it, just think about it.” Not wanting to stand there being the critic, I attempted to get my mind around just what it was I was supposed to be thinking about. Try as I might, I could find little in the

vacuous lyrics they were crooning that required any degree of thought about anything.

I pity a world without Watts. I pity a church without him. Why would Christians want to cut themselves off from rich theological passion skillfully adorned, as in Watts' finest hymns?

In yet another service, I watched others sing Watts' "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," but I was little moved by the words. As near as I can tell, the reason Watts did not move me this time was that there were many elements in that worship that distracted me from taking the words on my lips and into my heart as my own in singing them. The swaying worship leaders and all the paraphernalia of the indie-rock band filled the stage, and the volume was cranked up so loud that I was eventually forced to take my seven-year-old out of the place, his hands clamped tightly over his ears. I watched rather than sang because in this kind of entertainment venue, it matters little whether the congregation participates in the singing. It's fine if they do, of course, but it makes no difference to what one hears. The emotive vocal inflections and the pinched facial contortions of the well-meaning worship leader are difficult for most of us to emulate, and the occasional unexpected repetition of lines or addition of improvised lyrics leaves one singing something other than what the worship leader is singing. Not to worry, no one will hear you anyway.

I stood next to my eldest son in an urban warehouse church in Seattle, Washington, the walls painted black, various colored lighting flashing around the stage and room, the

videographer projecting on the screen behind the band a giant close-up of the lead guitarist's fingers sliding up and down the neck of his instrument. Under the assaulting influence of the new nightclub liturgy, I again wondered whether I was supposed to be singing something. There were two thousand nineteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in the room, but I could not hear anyone singing except the lead guitarist, and he was groaning in a manner I felt intensely uncomfortable attempting to emulate. I turned to my son, took a deep breath, and yelled, "Are we supposed to be singing?" He turned and hollered back in my ear, "I don't know." No one around us was disturbed in the slightest by our exchange.

Just as the medieval church cut off the congregation from participating in the sung worship of the service, today many well-meaning Christian leaders have reconstructed a sung worship wherein congregational participation does not matter. We sit or stand as our medieval forbears did and watch others sing for us. Worship has become a show, amusement, an entertaining means of connecting to the hip youth culture with, ostensibly, the gospel. Such a venue produces a response in the hearer—one super-charged with raw emotion—but I wonder whether it is an emotional response produced by a mind renewed by deep consideration of the objective truths of the gospel of grace or by the music itself.

Watts clearly understood all this. He no doubt learned it from the Psalms and perhaps from John Calvin's preface to his commentary on the Psalms:

We know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says), and also, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels.¹²

In an age of entertainment-driven worship, a recovered appreciation of Watts as a hymn writer is critical to correcting the “light” and “frivolous” tendencies of the postmodern church, and perhaps the dark and edgy ones, too. Every biblically mature generation in the church will want to contribute poetry and music to the church’s worship—but, alas, so will every biblically immature one. Watts makes an excellent role model to guide the new generations of poets who presume to write lyrics for the corporate worship of God’s people.

Instead of letting his son be guided by the transient poetic and music appetites of the moment, Watts’ father taught him who must guide his pen:

*In ancient times God’s worship did accord,
Not with tradition, but the written word;
Himself has told us how He’ll be adored.*¹³

Watts got his father's message: what Christians sing in worship must be guided by what God has revealed about how we are to sing to such a God. Watts mastered the poetic gift with which he was entrusted and earned the undisputed title "the Father of English Hymnody." If hymns are poems written in praise and adoration of God, then that makes Watts the father of English-speaking praise of God. Every Christian who cares about living a life of praise will want his sung worship to be guided by Watts' heart, mind, and poetic devotion. Why? Because Watts was consumed with wonder at Jesus Christ, the supreme object of Christian worship.

Third, we need Watts' example as we live in our frailty. Yet another important reason for surveying Watts' life and work is that his life is a model of patience in affliction for all Christians who suffer. The first years of his life were ones of constant political struggle, uncertainty, and persecution, during which his father was in and out of prison for his faith in Christ. All of his seventy-four years were ones of overcoming great difficulties. Watts was chronically ill throughout much of his adult life, suffering with a continual low-grade fever and often enduring intense physical discomfort.

Moreover, Watts lived with inescapable personal unattractiveness. Put bluntly, he was not a handsome man. This is big for Americans, who spend \$15 billion a year on cosmetic surgery—one hundred times the entire annual gross domestic product of Uganda. We might dismiss the significance of his ugliness by assuming his society did not care about such

frivolities. But it did. Perhaps next only to our own, people in the Enlightenment were profoundly preoccupied with physical appearance and adornment, including ridiculously elaborate wigs, male make-up, and pink satin culottes—for men. In our therapeutic culture, Watts would be a candidate for insecurity and a life of low self-esteem. Today his doctor would prescribe counseling, perhaps a regimen of anti-depressant drugs—and a face-lift.

Furthermore, Watts held religious views that were the mockery of the elite in his society, and he made the unforgivable social blunder of not attending the right schools. As a Nonconformist, he was unwelcome at Oxford and Cambridge, and was forced to attend small, insignificant institutions, under the censure and scorn of a refined society.

We need Watts for many reasons. We need his poetry to aid us in recovering a sanctified understanding and imagination. We need him to help reform worship and singing in our churches today. And all of us who have ever felt marginalized for our frailty, our unattractiveness, our lack of formal learning in elite schools, or for any other limitation—real or perceived—need Watts. All people will find a wealth of enrichment and encouragement by learning more of the poetic wonder of Isaac Watts.

Watts' Life and Legacy

Born July 17, 1674,¹ Isaac Watts entered a deeply troubled Britain. Eleven years before his birth, a horrific outbreak of the bubonic plague swept through London, killing more than one hundred thousand people. Watts' birthplace, the port city of Southampton, was nearly depopulated by the same outbreak; streets were deserted and overgrown with weeds. The following year, all England was devastated at the news of the Great Fire leveling much of the capital city.

But disease and disaster were not the only afflictions on Britain at the time of Watts' birth. The nation was still struggling through massive, interrelated religious and political upheavals.

PERSECUTION

Earlier in the century, Roman Catholic-friendly Stuart monarchs had begun to assert their divine right and to rule as absolutists over both state and church. Puritans and Separatists who were able fled to the American colonies for religious freedom. After centuries of monarchial rule limited by a representative Parliament, it was inevitable that king and Parliament would come to blows. In 1642, King Charles I engaged in a bloody civil war with Parliament, ending with the defeat of the royalists and the beheading of the monarch. Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell commenced efforts to unite the country but found himself at odds with Presbyterian Scotland, with which he fought another civil war.

Finally, in 1660, Parliament invited Charles' son to assume the throne as King Charles II, restoring the monarchy. Charles promptly asserted his divine right and began a wholesale persecution of Nonconformists (Christians who refused to worship according to the dictates of the Anglican Church) throughout the realm. With the Act of Uniformity in 1662, Charles determined to reclaim his headship of the Anglican Church, the church everyone in his realm was required to attend. For refusing to acknowledge the king as head over the church, and for failing to be licensed to preach by the local bishop, John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, was imprisoned for twelve years, and many other ministers suffered the same fate. Charles II's policies, carried on by his brother, James II, led

to the deaths of more than eighteen thousand Scottish Covenanters, who refused to bow to the usurper of the "Crown Rights of the Redeemer in His Kirk."²

Troubles far away are easily endured, but these troubles were at the Watts family's door. Isaac Watts Sr. was a Nonconformist deacon at the Above Bar Congregational Chapel in Southampton, where Rev. Nathanael Robinson was the pastor. When Watts was born, his father was serving a second term in prison for failing to conform to the Anglican Church. His mother, Sarah Taunton, would sit on a stone mounting block in front of the prison and nurse the newborn Isaac while talking with her husband through the bars. Sarah, "a pious woman, and a woman of taste,"³ was the daughter of Alderman Taunton, whose ancestors had escaped, along with many other French Protestants (the Huguenots), to Southampton after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. In 1685, when Watts was eleven, another wave of Huguenots immigrated to England with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by French King Louis XIV and the restoration of state persecution of French Calvinists. The Watts family lived at 41 French Street, surrounded by Huguenot Christians whose families had suffered persecution for generations.⁴

Determined to bring Nonconformists to heel, the king and Parliament had implemented escalating penalties for those who refused to attend Anglican services, though these could be implemented arbitrarily. First came monetary fines, which often exceeded the entire annual incomes of families. Then

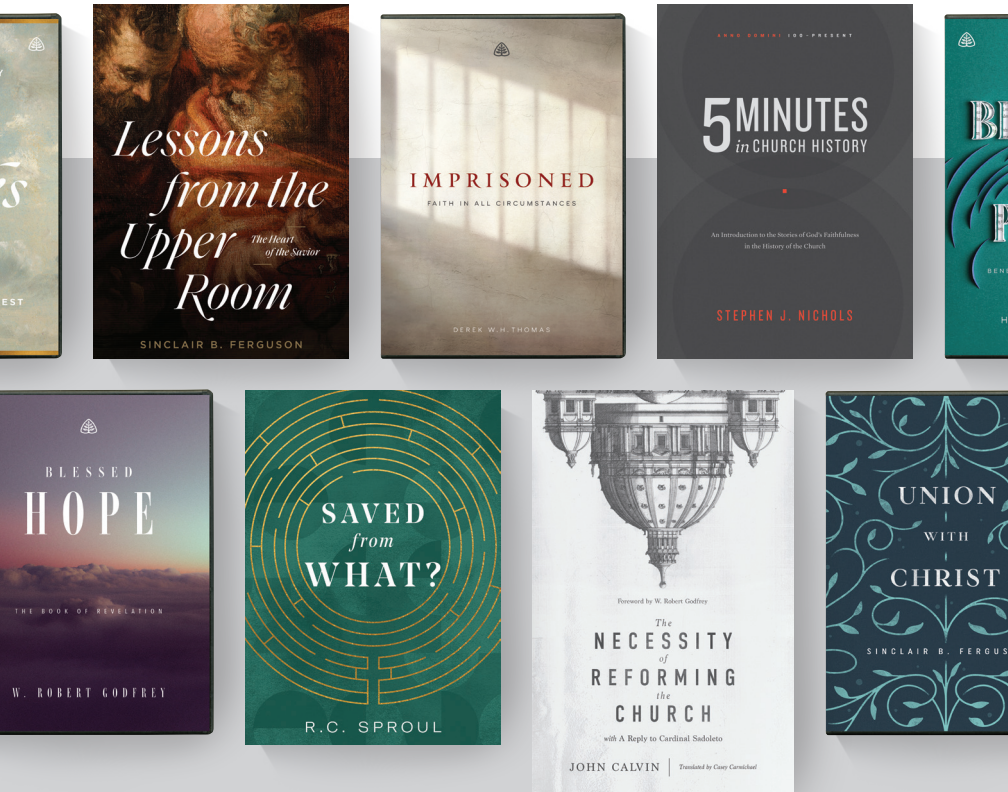
followed the seizure of land and property; imprisonment; banishment and exile; and, finally, death by hanging. Married only one year, the elder Watts had been arbitrarily imprisoned for his Nonconformity when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the first of their eight children. It would not be his last time behind bars.⁵

A FATHER'S INFLUENCE

When not in prison, Watts' father, a clothier by trade, conducted a boarding school in their home. Politicians and elitists today like to tar Christians as ignorant, uneducated roughs; rarely a fair representation at any time, it was certainly false in Watts' day. Nonconformist learning was rigorous, and the Watts' home school developed such a reputation for academic excellence that students came from as far away as America and the West Indies to study under the tutelage of the elder Isaac Watts.⁶

Watts Sr. took great care that his children should not be embittered against God because of his suffering. He told them, "Do not entertain any hard thoughts of God or of His ways, because His people are persecuted for them; for Jesus Christ Himself was persecuted to death by wicked men, for preaching the truth and doing good; and the holy apostles and prophets were cruelly used for serving God in His own way."⁷ During a lull in persecution, Watts Sr. was freed and began teaching his son Latin when he was only four years old. While still a young man, Watts would go on to master Greek, Hebrew, and French.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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