

## When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

**Intro:** Isaac Watts has been called “the father of English hymnody.” He was born in 1674 and became an English Congregational minister, hymn writer, theologian, and logician. As a child he was a precocious language student, learning Latin when he was 5, Greek at 9, French at 11 and Hebrew at 12. As he grew up, he became increasingly disturbed by the uninspiring psalm-singing in the English churches. He is said to have commented on one occasion, “*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.*” Consequently Watts sought throughout his life to rectify that by departing from the rather repetitive phrases common to the hymn singing of the day and replacing it with moving hymns written in a more personal style. And yet he affirmed that he wrote his hymns without any personal ambition. He is quoted as saying, “*It was not my design to exalt myself to the rank and glory of poets, but I wanted to be a servant of the churches, and a helper to the joy of the meanest Christian.*”

Over his lifetime, Watts wrote over 700 hymns. Most of his hymns were strong and triumphant statements of the Christian faith, yet it is said that none of them ever equaled the colorful imagery and genuine devotion of this emotionally stirring and magnificent hymn text that we are considering tonight.

While preparing for a communion service in 1707, Isaac Watts wrote this deeply moving and very personal expression of gratitude for the amazing love that the death of Christ on the cross revealed. Noted Theologian Matthew Arnold considered this hymn as the greatest hymn in the English language. You will immediately recognize its words:

*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?  
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.*

Watt’s hymn was originally titled “Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ.” It first appeared in print that same year in Watts’ outstanding collection, “Hymns and Spiritual Songs.” It was sung to various melodies in the decades that followed; but in 1824 it was arranged in its present form by the talented musician Lowell Mason based on a Gregorian chant from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It uses only five notes of the diatonic scale, making it quite easy to learn and sing.

Let’s spend some time tonight reflecting upon...

## **The Message of the Hymn**

***Watt's poem was a spiritual reflection on the meaning of the cross. It embodies the message of Paul's remarks to the Galatians in Gal. 6:14:***

*"But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*  
(Galatians 6:14)

***Watts imaginatively places himself before the cross and expresses the moving response of one who reflects upon the impact the cross should have on the life of the true believer.***

***In the first verse Watts stressed that reflecting upon the cross should cause us to humble ourselves before God.***

*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.*

When we reflect upon the cross we realize that no human achievement can compare with what we gain through His sacrifice.

Again it reflects the attitude of the apostle Paul when he compared what he had achieved in Judaism with what he had gained in Christ.

*"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ."* (Philippians 3:7)

And when we compare what we have gained on our own with what the Lord has given us by His grace we should be humbled by the immensity of His gift to us.

*"WHAT then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God."* (Romans 4:1-2)

What was true for Abraham is also true for us as well!

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

***In the second verse Watts stressed that reflecting upon the cross should cause us to surrender any earthly charm.***

*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.*

Watt's words would remind us of Paul's words to the Galatians in their erroneous reliance upon the works of the Law to save:

*"But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."* (Galatians 6:14)

Anything that a life of sin offers us and which has charmed us in the past can only be considered vain in view of the superior gift of salvation. Think of how Paul described his earthly status and achievements in his letter to the Philippians:

*"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the*

*loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ,”* (Philippians 3:8)

Consequently these we should sacrifice to His blood, that is, relinquish them in exchange for what His blood can provide for us. There is a lot to charm us in the sinful word—our own self-direction, our possessions, sinful pleasure, our family, Jesus taught that all these must be surrendered in order to become a disciples. We only have to read the requirements of discipleship in Luke 14 to realize the importance of Watt’s statement.

*“If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.”* (Luke 14:26)

*“Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”* (Luke 14:27)

*“So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.”* (Luke 14:33)

***In the third verse Watts stressed that reflecting upon the cross will make us aware of the great love that the cross expresses.***

*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?*

There is an irony that Watts saw in Jesus’ sacrifice. It combined the greatest sorrow with the greatest love ever shown.

*“For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:7–8)

The painful thorns that made up His cross are an expression of the richness of His royal love.

***In the fourth verse Watts stressed that reflecting upon the cross will make us aware of the need to give ourselves wholly to Him in return for His love.***

*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.*

There is no earthly gift that is great enough to repay Him for His love. Salvation is “without cost” because there no amount of money sufficient to purchase it.

And the only gift worthy of such a sacrifice is total surrender of ourselves to the Lord.

*“I URGE you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”* (Romans 12:1)

***Watt’s included a fifth verse (v. 4 in Watt’s poem) which is not usually included in our modern versions. In it Watts stressed that reflecting upon the cross will make us aware of the fact that through the cross we die to the world and the world to us.***

*“His dying crimson, like a robe, Spreads o’er His body on the tree;*

*Then I am dead to all the globe, And all the globe is dead to me."*

The language is highly figurative here; but the idea is that the blood that flowed from Jesus' body spread over him like a crimson robe. Through His shed blood we are made dead to the world and the world to us. Again it is as Paul had expressed it in Galatians:

*"But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."* (Galatians 6:14)

It is reminder that faith in the cross involves dying to the old man and to the world of sin. That is to say, that we no longer live under the influence of sin or the world of sinners, but rather under the influence of Holy Spirit.

*"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God."* (Romans 6:12–13)

**What beautiful conceptions this song contains. The power of the cross in our lives should be real and life-changing.**

**It makes us see the extraordinary greatness of His love.**

**It makes us humble to think of what was necessary to redeem us from sin.**

**It makes us see that no earthly achievement or attraction can compare with the gift of His salvation.**

**It causes us to give ourselves wholly to God.**

**It causes us to put away the influence of the world.**

**Conclusion: Have you come to the cross for forgiveness? Are living a life shaped by the sacrifice Jesus made for you?**

**If not...**