

Isaac Watts

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Isaac Watts (1674-1748), born in Southampton, was a Protestant English minister who wrote hymns and theology. Watts was raised in a home of nonconformists; his father, also named Isaac Watts, had been incarcerated because of his religious convictions. Watts began writing hymns so he could educate the public on the practice of preaching. Watts's biographer Thomas Gibbons (1780) tells a story of how Watts came to write hymns when young because he had complained to his father of the current hymns in congregation (quoted in Music 13). His intelligence allowed him to learn many languages as a small child, such as Greek, French, and Hebrew at a local school. In 1690, when Watts was sixteen, he was offered a scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge, but refused the offer because of mandatory devotion to the Church of England. Watts was very dedicated to expanding knowledge and changing the traditional beliefs of his time. In Watts's adult life, he started to publish his hymns and became famous for them. A fun fact about the hymn writer is he wrote the Christmas carol "Joy to the World" in 1719. He was one of the most profound poets of his time, teaching the next generations his ideas and theologies. There is no information on the cause of his death.

"Sickness Gives a Sight of Heaven" comes from his first book, *Horae Lyricae* (1706), and portrays the idea that sickness is a spiritual blessing. This poem appears in a section of hymns, but not ones intended for congregational singing. It is written in iambic tetrameter quatrains. Watts wrote this poem to remind people that, despite being sick, an illness will bring peace and a reconnection to God. The speaker tells us to seek comfort in death because the afterlife has a place for our souls.

Further Reading

Music, David, W. *Studies in the Hymnody of Isaac Watts*. Brill, 2022.

Stokes, Britt. "Seculum Est Speculum: Isaac Watts and Recovering the Use of Nature in Spiritual Formation." *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, vol.15, no.2, 2022 pp. 224–248.

References

Music, David, W. *Studies in the Hymnody of Isaac Watts*. Brill, 2022.

Sickness Gives a Sight of Heaven¹⁰⁷

OFT have I sat in Secret Sighs
 To feel my Flesh decay,
 Then groan'd aloud with frighted Eyes
 To view this tott'ring Clay.¹⁰⁸

But I forbid my Sorrows now, 5
 Nor dares the Flesh complain,
 Diseases bring their Profit too;
 The Joy o'recomes¹⁰⁹ the Pain.

My chearful Soul now all the Day
 Sits waiting here and Sings; 10
 Looks thro'¹¹⁰ the Ruins of her Clay,
 And practises her Wings.

Faith almost changes into Sight,
 While from afar she Spies
 Her fair Inheritance in Light¹¹¹ 15
 Above created Skies.

Had but the Prison-Walls been strong,
 And firm without a flaw,

¹⁰⁷ *Horæ Lyricæ: Poems, Chiefly of The Lyric Kind. In Two Books.* London, 1706, pp.18–20; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

¹⁰⁸ *tott'ring Clay* an unstable and fragile human body

¹⁰⁹ *o'recomes* overcomes

¹¹⁰ *Looks thro'* looks through the physical world into the spiritual one

¹¹¹ *Inheritance in Light* heaven, where the soul will go after death

In Darkness she had dwelt too long,¹¹² 20

And less of Glory saw.

But now the Everlasting Hills¹¹³

Thro' every Chink¹¹⁴ appear,

And something of the Joy she feels

While she's a Pris'ner here.

25

The Shines¹¹⁵ of Heaven rush sweetly in

At all the Gaping Flaws,

Visions of Endless Bliss¹¹⁶ are seen,

And Native¹¹⁷ Air she draws.

O may these Walls stand tott'ring still, 30

The Breaches¹¹⁸ never close,

If I must here in Darkness dwell,

And all this Glory lose.

Or rather let this Flesh decay,

The Ruins¹¹⁹ wider grow, 35

Till glad to see the Enlarged way

¹¹² *In Darkness she had dwelt too long* a reference to Isaiah 9:2 “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined”

¹¹³ *Everlasting Hills* heaven’s landscape

¹¹⁴ *Chink* “A long narrow aperture through the depth or thickness of an object; a slit, and opening in a joint between boards, etc.” (*OED*); here, glimpses of heaven from this world

¹¹⁵ *Shines* beam of light, halo

¹¹⁶ *Bliss* endless joy; the ultimate paradise

¹¹⁷ *Native* “belonging to or natural to a person by reason of place of birth or nationality” (*OED*); here, humans are native to heaven

¹¹⁸ *Breaches* holes in reality; the speaker wants to maintain the glimpses of heaven even when recovered from sickness

¹¹⁹ *Ruins* the losses in health due to aging, injury, and/or illness

I stretch my Pinions¹²⁰ thro'.¹²¹



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¹²⁰ *Pinions* wings

¹²¹ *I stretch my Pinions thro'* the speaker, dying, will break through into the spiritual word and take flight