

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

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Author Isaac Watts
Composer Lowell Mason

Ephesians 6: 10-20

Philippians 3: 7-11

John 19: 1-42

Mark 15: 1-47

Thoughts on the Text

The previews are over and the movie begins. A dim, crimson light grows brighter as the camera slowly pans up to capture the main character. No words are spoken, but the sounds of violins coupled with the agony on the character's face combine into intense emotion. Death, sadness and anguish unite in utter bleakness.

And so, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* begins.

Known as the father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts' greatest achievement and finest hymn is *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, originally entitled *Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ*. First printed in his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1707, it was part of the third section of this collection, in the category of "communion hymns." Appearing with the hymn was Galatians 6:14 (KJV), "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."

Immediately I am invited to make this my testimony. Watts does not use "we" or "our," but instead "I" and "my." Using first person in hymnody in the 17th century was startling and quite controversial. But before this can be "our" song, it must be "my" song.

As I sing, as I see the scene unfold, I am placed inside the text, participating in the unfolding drama. I examine the cross in an exacting way, seeing wonder in its wooden beams. I look at the cross itself and return to Calvary, seeing Christ hanging upon the cross. I gain perspective as I see my possessions in comparison to the sacrifice on that cross. As Madeleine Marshall, author of *Common Hymnsense* and the article "The Dramatic Art of Hymnody," says, His "sacrifice...suddenly gets me to see what I've [already] been looking at."

The third stanza unfolds with the word "See," opening my eyes to the picture of Christ on the cross. Watts writes the command "See" as if he is forcing me against my will to look at the horror displayed before me. My eyes meet those of the Christ, then His hands, and finally His feet. This stanza, physically in the middle of the original hymn, centralizes the chief matter at hand: the "Sorrow and Love" that Christ spilled.

Finally, I see a bird's-eye view of the cross, and my emotion can no longer be contained. I am insignificant in light of this cross, and yet through this sacrifice I gain eternal significance. I now can no longer contain myself, and so I sing the climatic words, "Demands my Soul, my Life, my All."

Sing it with strength!

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