

The Psalms

4. The Poetry of the Psalms: Isaac Watts

Aim: To look at the life and work of Isaac Watts, one of the first people to translate the psalms into 'lyrical English' and to 'Christianise' them, to explore and discuss this way of using of the psalms.

To start with:

How do you feel about poetry? If you have a favourite piece of poetry what is it and why?

Engaging with the text:

Background Info: *Tonight we're going to be looking at the psalms by considering the life and work of Isaac Watts. He was born in 1674 and was brought up a non-Conformist (i.e. not part of the established Church of England) and as a young man he was a talented poet and was often scolded by his parents by insisting to speak in rhyming couplets! He is today probably best known for his hymns, of which he wrote around 750 (such as 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross' and 'Joy to the World!') He was noted for having a real talent for expressing deep doctrinal truths along with human emotion in his lyrics.*

1. Alongside hymn-writing, Watts rewrote many of the psalms for Christian worship in church. In Handout 1, Watts writes his reasons for wanting to rewrite the psalms in a more 'lyrical' and more 'Christian' manner.

Read Handout 1 round the group.

- What do you think of Watts' reasons for wanting to rewrite the Biblical psalms?
- To what extent do you think this is a good idea, and why/why not?

2. *Give out Handout 2.* On the handout are three different versions of Psalm 1 which Watts wrote in different poetic meters. Divide your cell into three, each third reading out and discussing one of the psalms and comparing it to the 'real' Psalm 1.

- What do you like/dislike about this version of the psalm?
- How do you feel it add/detracts from the original, and why? Feedback briefly to the group.

(If you have time do Q3 - if not, skip to Q4)

3. *Give out Handout 3* - read Watt's "Psalm 22" round the group. In the past, Christians have been generally wary of trying to modernise or change the Old Testament in order to 'fulfil' the prophecies in the New Testament. To what extent do you think the way Watts has rewritten this psalm helps the reader understand its connection to Jesus' life - and is it necessary/helpful?

4. Have a go at writing your own 'lyrical Christian' Psalm in the style of Isaac Watts:

Give your cell a short psalm that you have chosen in advance (or one the group decides on) - and give each person one or two verses to turn into a 'rhyming couplet', using Watts' psalms as a template or for inspiration. Give people 5-10 minutes to come up with their rhyming couplet, and put them together - discuss briefly if you feel you've improved on the original and why!

