

O, GOD, OUR HELP IN AGES PAST

Christians all over the world join in singing Isaac Watts' setting of the 90th Psalm, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" – but in 1719 when Isaac Watts lived hymns written by men or women for public worship services were considered by most English churchmen as works of the devil! (Yes, and Americans, also).

Isaac Watts was a little man – five feet tall with a huge wig and a crooked nose – but his courage in not conforming to the popular church customs of his times blazed the trail for a whole new type of songs to be used in public worship. They earned him the title of "Father of English Hymnody."

Watts was writing poems before he was seven years old; and in his lifetime, he wrote over 750 hymns – including such excellent hymns as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "Joy To the World," "Jesus Shall Reign," "Come, We That Love The Lord" – and also such unsuitable texts as this one:

"The tulip and the butterfly
Appear in gayer coats than I;
Let me dress fine as I will,
Flies, worms and flowers exceed me still."

Notice how simple – and yet deeply beautiful – the words are in "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." Most of them are of two syllables or less. Dr. R. Guy McCutcheon of the Methodist Church once said, "Not always are simple things great, but great things are always simple," when he spoke about this hymn.

Just as the hymn, "O God Our Help," has been a source of strength for people and used at all important national occasions – (the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth, Thanksgiving Services, etc.) – so the 90th Psalm upon which the hymn is based was written on the death of King Josiah told about in the Bible. Copy the words of Psalm 90 that remind us that God always has been and will be: _____

What is the name of the tune to which we sing "O God, Our Help?" _____

Who composed it? _____

Try singing the tune by syllables or scale steps. Are any two phrases of the tune identical? _____

How many times do you find the tonic chord used in the tune – (C, E, G)? _____

Does this increase or decrease the feeling of strength? _____

It's easy to become so accustomed to certain types of music that we fail to appreciate the possibility of the new ways of saying things with music. . . just as the Church of England, long ago, did not want to listen to Isaac Watts! Who knows? Maybe you'll be the one to put the message of the Bible to music in a brand new way. Let's all try!

NOTE: Take a good look at the last note in the bass part of the Amen. What kind of a note is it? Ask your director.

