

Week 5: Common Meter

O God, Our Help In Ages Past

Text: Isaac Watts (1674–1748), 1719

- Son of committed Nonconformists in England (protestants who refused to join the Church of England)
- Began writing hymns at 17, being dissatisfied with the strict psalm translations in use at the time
- Watts aimed to recast the psalms in a modern light to make them more relevant and approachable
- As he wrote to the famous Boston preacher Cotton Mather in 1717:

'Tis not a translation of David that that I pretend, but an imitation of him, so nearly in Christian hymns that the Jewish Psalmist may plainly appear, and yet leave Judaism behind.

- In 1712, a prolonged illness forced him to retire from pastoral duties, though his church refused to discontinue his salary
- Watts moved into the estate of Sir Thomas Abney, a wealthy churchmember, and stayed until his death
- While there, Watts worked on paraphrasing most of the 150 psalms, and published them in 1719 as *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*
- This hymn is from that collection, based on Psalm 90:1-5

Tune: William Croft (1678–1727), 1708

- A prominent church musician in his time, Croft served as organist in a number of London churches, including the famed Westminster Abbey
- Also a composer of instrumental music, he wrote some for the funeral of Queen Anne and the coronation of her successor, King George I
- This tune, ST. ANNE, is believed to have been written during his time at St. Anne's Church from 1700–1711
- First published in *A Supplement to the New Version of Psalms*, paired with a setting of Psalm 42
- Later matched with "O God, Our Help" in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861

1. Compare the hymn text with the original scripture in Psalm 90:1-5. How well do you think Watts captured the overall "feeling" of this passage? Does he follow the psalm strictly, or are there additions or modifications you can find that make the text more poetic?
2. In its original version, the opening line was "Our God, our help", which John Wesley changed to "O God, our help" when he republished it in 1738. Although "O God" is the more common of the two, both versions remain in use today. Which do you think is more effective stylistically? Are there theological implications from this small change?

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

Text: William Cowper (1731–1800), 1773

- Youngest child of an Anglican minister, his three older siblings and his mother all died before he was 7
- Although educated to be an attorney, Cowper suffered from severe depression and never practiced law
- Fear of examination for a clerkship in the House of Lords led to an unsuccessful suicide attempt in 1763
- Committed to an asylum run by a Christian doctor, he began to work out of his depression and renewed his personal commitment to Christ
- He lived with church friends following his discharge, moving with them to Olney where John Newton (author of "Amazing Grace") was serving as a pastor
- There, he functioned as assistant to Newton and collaborated on the collection of *Olney Hymns*, published in 1779 with 68 hymns by Cowper included
- This hymn was written just before Cowper was struck by another bout of depression
- He attempted suicide again later the same year, but through care of friends continued to survive to the age of 69

Tune: Thomas Ravenscroft, 1615

- First published in the 1615 *Scottish Psalter* as one of a dozen "common tunes", without any particular text
- Thomas Ravenscroft later published a harmonized version in his *Whole Booke of Psalms* six years later
- Ravenscroft is best known for collecting and publishing folk tunes (one of which has the earliest known version of "Three Blind Mice")
- Named DUNDEE after the city in Scotland of the same name, a leading city in the Scottish Reformation

1. This hymn gets much of its power through the use of contrasts, which its original subtitle “Light shining out of darkness” alludes to. What examples of this do you see in the text? Which metaphors do you find most effective?
2. This hymn deals with the same topic as “O God, Our Help In Ages Past” – seeking God in times of trouble – but takes a slightly different approach. What differences and similarities do you see between the two hymns? In what situations would one be more appropriate than the other?

Exercises

Stanzas in common meter follow the pattern 8.6.8.6, with iambic feet in groups of 4 and 3. For example:

× / × / × / × /
 O God, our help in ag - es past

× / × / × /
 and hope for years to come

1. Complete a line of 8 syllables following the common meter pattern, that starts with the following:

× / × / × / × /
 At church to - day, _____

2. Continue on to a second line of 6 syllables (without worrying about rhyme):

× / × / × /

3. Now follow the same process to write two lines of common meter about one of the fruits of the spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control):