

Joy to the World

By

Bill Dagle

It's been said that "joy" is the keynote of the entire Christmas season, for God Himself came to this world and provided a means whereby sinful man might live eternally in heaven.

To remind ourselves of this wonderful truth, we joyfully sing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come." But did you know that the original title did not proclaim joy? Instead, it announced Christ's coming and also His coming kingdom.

The original title was "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom." Is "Joy to the World" just a Christmas carol or could it be more? Could it be that this favorite Christmas hymn is actually referring to the millennium when Christ will literally fulfill Isaac Watt's words?

In 1719, Watts wrote a paraphrase of Psalm 98 and included it in his hymnal, "Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament," a lengthy title to say the least. Yet here lies the key to what he was saying. Isaac Watts wanted to give a fresh interpretation of the Old Testament Psalm, for he did this in many of his hymns. "Joy to the World" was a New Testament expression of praise for the salvation that began in Bethlehem and also a song of adoration for what Christ would do in the future at His second coming. The words, "Let earth receive her King," and "Let every heart prepare Him room," are yet to be fulfilled!

Of course, this does not diminish its use as a Christmas carol. Instead, it opens a door of joyful anticipation for the believer and challenges the same to prepare. While so much of Christmas celebration has become frivolous and irrelevant to its true meaning, the Christian has the opportunity each year to proclaim the real message of Christmas through Christ-centered music.

It is interesting to note that for more than 120 years this hymn was sung to numerous musical settings. Then, in 1839, a Boston music educator, Lowell Mason, published "Joy to the World" with a new set of notes, new to the words but old in their origin. The music was not original with Mason for he had borrowed two musical phrases from George Handel's "Messiah," making the story even more interesting.

You see, in the 1700's, both Watts and Handel had lived in London and had known each other, never realizing that one day their independent efforts would produce one of the classic Christmas hymns of all times.