

A Solemn Address to the Deity

By Sir Isaac Watts

About the Author: Sir Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Congregational pastor. Founder of modern English hymnody. Prior to his time only psalms had been sung in public worship. In 1707 he published his first hymnbook. Founder of children's hymnody. Wrote Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children. Author of six hundred hymns, some of which are the finest in the English language. More than a hymn writer, wrote on logic, astronomy, geography, English grammar, pedagogics and theology. Writings were influential and his learning and piety attracted many. Wrote, to mention only two of his choice hymns, O God Our Help in Ages Past, and When I Survey the Wondrous Cross. Prior to his death wrote a solemn Address to the Deity,"in which he poured out his soul to God over the whole subject of the Trinity in a manner which shows most clearly, his reverence for the Holy Scriptures, his humility, his teachableness, his earnest desire to understand and receive all that God had taught. As it is directly in point, showing the views of a clear, discerning mind, though still somewhat in darkness, and the feelings of a sincere, devout, and humble Christian on this important subject, the whole of it, as published in the London quarto edition of his works, of 1810, vol. iv., pp. 670-673. Friends, fearing it would greatly injure his popularity and influence, persuaded him to recall the edition,--which we are told consisted of only fifty copies, containing the Address prefixed to a treatise on the Trinity, -- and commit it to the flames. What a fact this in the history of that theory!....One copy of that work of Watts escaped the flames ; and half a century afterward, it was found in a bookstore at Southampton (England, 1796) ; so that it can tell us of the workings of his inquisitive, anxious, humble and devout mind, on this great subject. And it does tell us, that he was driven to the verge of infidelity ; from which, however, the grace of God--not that of scholastic theory--preserved him." (quote taken from Theophilus, p. 279)

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1 Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee concerning thy judgments. Permit me, O my God and Father, to plead with thee concerning the revelations of thy nature and thy grace, which are made in thy Gospel : And let me do it with all that humble reverence, and that holy awe of thy majesty, which becomes a creature in the presence of God.

Comment: Sir Isaac acknowledges God as a righteous God and petitions to be allowed to raise questions about the Godhead.

2 Hast thou not, O Lord God almighty, hast thou not transacted thy Divine and important affairs among men by thy Son Jesus Christ, and by thy Holy Spirit? and hast thou not ordained that men should transact their highest and most momentous concerns with thee, by the Son and by thy Spirit? Hast thou not, by the mouth of thy Son Jesus, required all that profess his religion to be washed with water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost? Is it not my duty then, to inquire, who or what are these sacred names, and what they signify? Must I not know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ thy Son, whom thou hast sent, that I may fulfill all my respective duties toward thyself and thy Son, in hope of eternal life? Hath not thy Son himself appealed to thee in his last prayer, that eternal life depends upon this knowledge? And since thou hast made so much use of thy Holy Spirit in our religion, must I not have some knowledge of this thy Spirit also, that I may pay thee all these honors thou requirest from this Divine revelation?

Comment: Sir Isaac states that he must know God in all of the ways he has revealed himself. Basing his petition upon John 17:3, he declares his salvation depends upon it.

3 Hast thou not ascribed Divine names, and titles, and characters to thy Son and thy Holy Spirit, in thy work, as well as assumed them to thyself? And hast thou not appointed to them such glorious offices as cannot be executed without something of Divinity or true Godhead in them? And yet art not thou, and thou alone, the true God? How shall a poor weak creature be able to adjust and reconcile these clashing ideas, or to understand this mystery? Or must I believe and act blindfold, without understanding?

Comment: He labors over the scriptural truth of the monarchy of God and the deity of Christ and the spirit of God which are clashing ideas.

4 Holy Father, thou knowest how firmly I believe, with all my soul, whatsoever thou hast plainly written and revealed in thy word. I believe thee to be the only true God, the supreme of beings, self sufficient for thine own existence, and for all thy infinite affairs and transactions among thy creatures. I believe thy Son Jesus Christ to be all-sufficient for the glorious work of mediation between God and man, to which thou hast appointed him. I believe he is a man, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. I believe he is one with God ; he is God manifest in the flesh ; and that the man Jesus is so closely and inseparably united with the true and eternal Godhead, as to become one Person, even as a human soul and body make one man. I believe that this illustrious Person is hereby possessed of Divine dignity sufficient to make full atonement for the sins of men by his sufferings and death, even though sin be accounted an infinite evil; and that he hath all-sufficient power to raise himself from the dead, to ascend to

heaven, and fulfill the blessed works for which thou has exalted him, and to govern and judge the world in thine own appointed time.

Comment: Sir Isaac acknowledges the supreme deity of Jesus.

5 I believe also thy blessed Spirit hath almighty power and influence to do all thy will, to instruct men effectually in Divine truths, to change the hearts of fallen mankind from sin to holiness, to carry on thy work of illumination, sanctification, and consolation on the hearts of all thy children, and to bring them safe to the heavenly world. I yield myself up joyfully and thankfully to this method of thy salvation, as it is revealed in thy Gospel. But I acknowledge my darkness still. I want to have this wonderful doctrine of the all-sufficiency of thy Son and thy Spirit, for these Divine works, made a little plainer. May not thy humble creature be permitted to know what share they can have in thy Deity? Is it a vain, sinful curiosity to desire to have this article in such a light, as may not diminish the eternal glory of the unity of the true God, nor of the supremacy of Thee, the Father of all?

Comment: He acknowledges that he believes all that he understands, but is still in darkness. Sir Isaac begs to have the truth of the Godhead made a little plainer.

6 Hadst thou informed me, gracious Father, in any place of thy word, that this Divine doctrine is not to be understood by men, and yet they were required to believe it, I would have subdued all my curiosity to faith, and submitted my wandering and doubtful imaginations, as far as it was possible, to the holy and wise determinations of thy word. But I cannot find thou hast anywhere forbid me to understand it, or to make these inquiries. My conscience is the best natural light thou hast put within me, and since thou hast given me the Scriptures, my own conscience bids me search the Scriptures, to find out truth and eternal life. It bids me try all things, and hold fast that which is good. And thy own word, by the same expressions, encourages this holy practice. I have, therefore, been long searching into this Divine doctrine, that I may pay thee due honor with understanding. Surely I ought to know the God whom I worship, whether he be one pure and simple being, or whether thou art a three-fold Deity, consisting of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Comment: Sir Isaac contends that the scriptures in no place declare that the truth of God is supposed to by a mystery. He states he needs to know pure and simply whether God is one or three!

7 Dear and blessed God! hadst thou been pleased, in any one plain Scripture, to have informed me which of the different opinions about the Holy Trinity, among the contending parties of Christians, had been true, thou knowest with how much zeal, satisfaction, and joy my unbiased heart would have opened itself to receive and embrace the Divine discovery. Hadst thou told me plainly, in any single text, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three real distinct Persons in thy Divine nature, I had never suffered myself to be bewildered in so many doubts, nor embarrassed with so many strong fears of assenting to the mere inventions of men, instead of Divine doctrine; but I should have humbly and immediately accepted thy words, so far as it was possible for me to understand them, as the only rule of my faith. Or hadst thou been pleased to express and include this proposition in the several scattered parts of thy book, from whence my reason and conscience might with ease find out and with certainty infer this doctrine, I should have joyfully employed all my reasoning powers, with their utmost skill and activity, to have found out this inference, and ingrafted it into my soul.

Comment: The author notices that there is no scripture which teaches that the father son and holy ghost are individual persons.

8 Thou hast taught me, Holy Father, by thy prophets, that the way of holiness in the times of the Gospel, or under the kingdom of the Messiah, shall be a highway, a plain and easy path; so that the wayfaring man, or the stranger, 'though a fool, shall not err therein.' And thou hast called the poor and the ignorant, the mean and the foolish things of this world, to the knowledge of thyself and thy Son, and taught them to receive and partake of the salvation which thou hast provided. But how can such weak creatures ever take in so strange, so difficult, and so abstruse a doctrine as this, in the explication and defense whereof multitudes of men, even men of learning and piety, have lost themselves in infinite subtleties and dispute, and endless mazes of darkness? And can this strange and perplexing notion of three real Persons going to make one true God, be so necessary and so important a part of that Christian doctrine, which, in the Old Testament and the New, is represented as so plain and so easy, even to the meanest understandings?

Comment: He sees that the abstruse doctrine of three-in-one makes impossible the plain way which the scriptures proclaim.

9 O thou Searcher of hearts, who knowest all things, I appeal to thee concerning the sincerity of my inquiries into these discoveries of thy word. Thou knowest me, thou hast seen me, and hast tried my heart toward thee : If there be any lurking hypocrisy in my heart, any secret bias toward anything but truth, uncover it, O Father of lights, and banish it from my soul forever. If thine eye discovers the least spark of any criminal prejudice in any corner of my soul, extinguish it utterly, that I may not be led astray from the truth, in matters of such importance, by the least glance of error or mistake.

Comment: Sir Isaac proclaims his sincerity in his inquiry and asks God to remove any insincerity of which he is not aware.

10 Thou art witness, O my God, with what constancy and care I have read and searched thy holy word, how early and late, by night and by day, I have been making these inquiries; how frequently I have been seeking thee on my bended knees, and directing my humble address to thee, to enlighten my darkness, and to show me the meaning of thy word, that I may learn what I must believe, and what I must practice with regard to this doctrine, in order to please thee, and obtain eternal life.

Comment: Sir Isaac reminds the respondent that he has prayed on bended knees, at all hours to find out what his responsibility is toward the doctrine of the trinity.

11 Great God, who seest all things! thou hast beheld what busy temptations have been often fluttering about my heart, to call it off from these laborious and difficult inquiries, and to give up thy word and thy Gospel as an unintelligible book, and betake myself to the light of nature and reason; but thou hast been pleased by thy Divine Power to scatter these temptations, and fix my heart and hope again upon that Savior and that eternal life which thou hast revealed in thy word, and proposed therein to our knowledge and our acceptance. Blessed be the name of my God, that has not suffered me to abandon the Gospel of his Son Jesus! And blessed be that Holy Spirit that has kept me attentive to the truth delivered in the Gospel, and inclined me to wait longer in my search of these Divine truths, under the hope of thy gracious illumination!

Comment: He relates that the irrationality of the trinity doctrine has at times almost caused him to discard the Bible as the source of truth and to endeavor to find God through some other means.

12 I humbly call thee to witness, O my God, what a holy jealousy I ever wear about my heart, lest I should do the slightest dishonor to thy supreme Majesty, in any of my inquiries or determinations. Thou seest what a religious fear, and what a tender solicitude I maintain on my soul, lest I should think or speak anything to diminish the grandeurs and honors of thy Son Jesus, my dear Mediator, to whom I owe my everlasting hopes. Thou knowest how much afraid I am of speaking one word, which may be construed into a neglect of thy blessed Spirit, from whom I hope I am daily receiving happy influences of light and strength. Guard all the motions of my mind, O Almighty God, against everything that borders upon these dangers. Forbid my thoughts to indulge and forbid my pen to write one word, that should sink those grand ideas which belong to thyself, or thy Son, or thy Spirit. Forbid it, O my God, that I should ever be so happy as to unglorify my Father, my Savior, or my Sanctifier, in any of my sentiments or expressions concerning them.

Comment: He states that his inquiry does not arise from any disrespect for the son or the spirit, and asks to be prevented from saying or thinking anything offensive to God.

13 Blessed and faithful God, hast thou not promised that the meek thou wilt guide in judgment, the meek thou wilt teach thy way? Hast thou not told us by Isaiah thy prophet, that thou wilt bring the blind by a way which they knew not, and wilt lead them in paths which they have not known? Hast thou not informed us by thy prophet Hosea, that if we follow on to know the Lord, then we shall know him? Hath not thy Son, our Savior, assured us, that our heavenly Father will give his Holy Spirit to them who ask him? And is he not appointed to guide us into all truth? Have I not sought the gracious guidance of thy good Spirit continually? Am I not truly sensible of my own darkness and weakness, my dangerous prejudices on every side, and my utter insufficiency for my own conduct? Wilt thou leave such a poor creature bewildered among a thousand perplexities, which are raised by the various opinions and contrivances of men to explain thy Divine truth?

Comment: He again declares that he believes God's word to be plain. He acknowledges his prejudices but implores not to be left "in the dark," accompanied only by the vagaries of men's explanations.

14 Help me, heavenly Father, for I am quite tired and weary of these human explainings, so various and uncertain. When wilt thou explain it to me thyself, O my God, by the secret and certain dictates of thy Spirit according to the intimations of thy word? Nor let any pride of reason, nor any affectation of novelty, nor any criminal bias whatsoever, turn my heart aside from hearkening to these Divine dictates of thy word and thy Spirit. Suffer not any of my native corruptions, nor the vanity of my imagination, to cast a mist over my eyes, while I am searching after the knowledge of thy mind and will, for my eternal salvation.

Comment: He is weary of the explanations of men, he wishes to know the truth about the matter to make certain his eternal salvation.

15 I entreat, O most merciful Father, that thou wilt not suffer the remnant of my short life to be wasted in such endless wanderings, in quest of thee and thy Son Jesus, as a great part of my past days have been; but let my sincere endeavors to know thee, in all the ways whereby thou hast discovered thyself in thy word, be crowned with such abundant success, that my soul being established in every needful truth by thy Holy Spirit, I may spend my remaining life according to the rules of thy Gospel, and may, with all the holy and happy creations, ascribe glory and honor, wisdom and power to Thee, who sittest upon the throne, and to the Lamb

forever and ever.

Comment: He wishes not to spend the remainder of his days in the misery of uncertainty, trying to know that which is irrational and unbelievable.

Since Sir Isaac's piety was above suspicion, some of his friends ascribed his change of views in regard to the holy trinity to insanity or imbecility. They burned all the copies of this address which they could obtain.

Comments by Robert A. Sabin