

ALAS! AND DID MY SAVIOR BLEED

based on two folk hymn tunes

*“Morning Song”, attributed to Elkanah Kelsay Dare, 1782-1826
and “Martrydom”, adapted by Hugh Wilson, 1766-1824*

arranged by Douglas Mears

text by Isaac Watts

Instrumentation

Flute

English Horn

Clarinets in A

Bassoon

Horn in F

Timpani

Percussion

suspended cymbal, bass drum, chimes

Harp

SATB Choir

Violin I

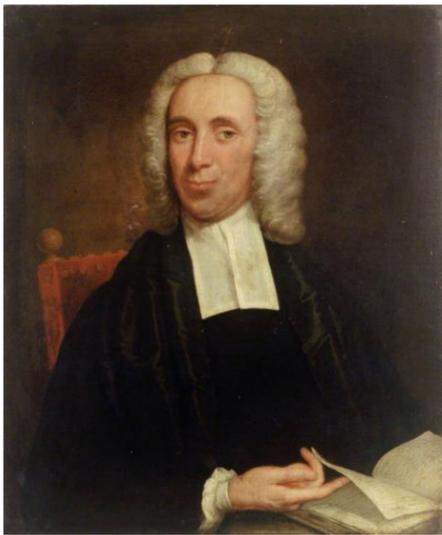
Violin II

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

Notes on the Text



Isaac Watts (17 July 1674 – 25 November 1748) was an English Christian minister, theologian, and logician. He was also a prolific and popular hymn writer credited with writing over 750 hymns. Watts is now recognized as the “Godfather of English Hymnody,” and many of his hymns remain in use today, having been translated into numerous languages.

Watts was a brilliant linguist, learning Latin at 4, Greek at 9, French at 11, and Hebrew at 13. In his mid-twenties he became the pastor at Mark Lane Independent Church in London. He began to suffer from several periods of illness, which over time led him to relinquish his duties there. However, he continued to write hymns, and, at the end of his life, looking back over his vast contribution to Christian hymnody, he humbly wrote, “I have made no pretense to be a poet. But to the Lamb that was slain, and now lives, I have addressed many a song, to be sung by the penitent and believing heart.”

Watts is also credited with writing many scholarly papers used in institutions of higher learning, but unquestionably, the most memorable pieces from his pen were simple hymns like “Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed,” written for a collection entitled “Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Book II, ‘Composed on Divine Subjects’.”

Watts wanted to imbue his hymn texts with an immediacy and emotional expressiveness not readily available in the stilted, unrhymed, unmetred Psalms being sung in his time. Within the very first stanza of “Alas! and Did my Savior Bleed” the clarity of Watts’ anguish is unmistakable. The Savior had bled and died for such a horrible sinner as himself. Was it his very own sins which put him on the cross? So shameful then that he must hide his face when he sees the cross, as his heart breaks in thankfulness, and he cry tears of grief. But even these tears cannot begin to repay his debt of love, so all he can do is give himself away.

This powerful and inspired text has had great influence since it first appeared in 1707. In 1850, at the age of 30, Fanny Crosby, blind from birth, was at the altar of the Thirteenth Street Methodist Church looking for a peace to come to her heart. She had come to the altar on two previous occasions but with no peace or pardon to be found. According to her testimony:

...it seemed to me that the light must indeed come then or never; and so, I arose and went to the altar alone. After a prayer was offered, they began to sing ‘Alas, and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die?’ And when they reached the third line of the fourth stanza, ‘Here Lord, I give myself away,’ my very soul was flooded with a celestial light. I sprang to my feet, shouting ‘hallelujah,’ and then for the first time I realized that I had been trying to hold the world in one hand and the Lord in the other.

On another occasion, the lay preacher and missionary John Vassar was going from house to house distributing tracts and speaking with people about their faith. One woman who heard about this man and what he was doing said, “If he comes to my house, he will get the door slammed in his face.” Without knowing that this woman had made such a statement, Mr. Vassar rang her doorbell the next day. When she saw that he was the man who had been described to her, she indeed slammed the door shut. John Vassar sat down on her doorstep and began to sing:

*But drops of grief can ne’er repay
The debt of love I owe,
Here, Lord, I give myself away;
Tis all that I can do.*

The woman heard the earnest verse as he sang and was convicted a sinner. She opened the door and invited Mr. Vassar in, who led her to Christ.