

From Henry's Desk:

Our God Our Help in Ages Past

On the morning of Sunday, August 10, 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt met for a combined religious service on the afterdeck of the British ship HMS Prince of Wales. England had been at war with Germany for two years and the English people had endured considerable bombing of their cities. The United States would not enter World War II until the Pearl Harbor attack four months later. However, Roosevelt and Churchill had been in correspondence for some time and England greatly depended on Roosevelt and the USA for supplies and weapons with the likelihood of the USA becoming an ally of Great Britain.

This secret conference between Churchill and Roosevelt occurred off the coast of Newfoundland in Placentia Bay at Argentia Harbor. Roosevelt arrived on the USS Augusta on August 8 and the two men met on Saturday, August 9 on the Augusta. Their meetings over the next few days brought about what later was called the "Atlantic Charter." The sea voyage had involved some risk for both men, especially Churchill. German submarines were active in the North Atlantic, but both men made their respective trips safely to this first summit meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt. The Prince of Wales and many of its crew would perish on December 10, 1941. The Prince of Wales was sunk by Japanese bombers near Singapore with a loss of 325 men who had been among the ship's crew on August 10, 1941.

Photo # NH 67209 Leaders on board HMS Prince of Wales during Atlantic Charter conference, 1941



The events of Sunday, August 10, 1941 deserve closer attention. A religious service combining the crews of the Prince of Wales and the Augusta was held with Churchill and Roosevelt present. Roosevelt had to make the transfer from the Augusta to the Prince of Wales and then walk a considerable distance to the afterdeck of the Prince of Wales. Roosevelt, the polio survivor, walked in his braces

awkwardly, but with great dignity using his son's arm to maintain his balance. The two men sat side by side under a quadruple turret of fourteen inch guns.

There were three hymns sung during the service. Churchill selected "Our God Our Help in Ages Past" and "Onward Christian Soldiers." Roosevelt selected the Navy Hymn, "Eternal Father, Strong to Save." Neither man knew exactly what the future might be for the free world. However, both men sought the inspiration of God. Roosevelt was an Episcopalian and Churchill referred to himself as a "buttress" rather than a "pillar" of the Church of England. Years later Churchill stated regarding this service, "Every word seemed to stir the heart. It was a great hour to live."

After the service Roosevelt was given a tour of the Prince of Wales "in his chair" and he also presented each sailor of the Prince of Wales with a personal gift of fruit, cheese, cigarettes and other items that were scarce in Great Britain. Both men would carry on a close relationship throughout the war until Roosevelt's death in 1945.

Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748) was the writer of many hymns including "Our God Our Help in Ages Past." He was the oldest of nine children and the son of a school master. He had rather delicate health most of his life and was considered an invalid by his mid thirties. He was a clergyman as long as his health permitted, but early in his adult life he began writing poetry and hymns. Any older or even modern day hymn book includes several of his hymns. His hymns have been a lasting gift to the church for over three centuries.

"Our God Our Help in Ages Past" is a paraphrase of Psalm 90. Watts studied the Psalms and was a great admirer of the Psalms. We are approaching the Christmas season once again. Sometime during this season many of us will sing the hymn "Joy to the World," which is a Watts hymn.

For many of us who have lived with the residual effects of polio and now for those of us who are living with Post-Polio Syndrome, medical science and even alternative health care approaches have limitations in improving our quality of life. We have learned a lot about what we should not do to avoid an intensification of the symptoms of PPS and many of us have found compensatory ways to improve our quality of life.

Beyond the knowledge of medical science and the support of our wonderful support group, I search for "our help in ages past." Many of you may also search for meaning in realms beyond polio and the struggles of daily living. A hymn that has inspired many of our ancestors and has as much meaning for us as anyone is "Our God Our Help in Ages Past. There are six verses to this hymn. I will end this short missive with the words of three of those verses:

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone,
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home.

References

1. Black, Conrad: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Champion of Freedom: published by Public Affairs in the United States, 2003, pp 650 - 653.
2. <http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/biorpwatts.html>