

The Music Herald

“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

Colossians 3:16

A Tongue to Spread His Praise

In 1787, these words appeared in John Rippon's *Selection* of hymns:

O! may I ne'er forget
The mercy of my God;
Nor ever want a tongue to spread
His loudest praise abroad.

Perhaps the author little knew, when these words were published, how fully that prayer was being answered. Samuel Stennett penned these words as the last stanza of a hymn which he called "Praise for Conversion." In this hymn, he recounted the way that the Lord had brought him to saving faith, and then he closed with this prayer that he might never "want a tongue" to spread abroad the praise of such a Redeemer. Indeed, at that time and still to this day, his tongue has never been found "wanting" in the praise of his Lord.

Samuel was born in 1727 in Exeter, an important wool-manufacturing town in southwestern England. His grandfather Joseph Stennett, whom we looked at last month, had died fourteen years earlier. He had left behind a worthy legacy for his grandson, and both Samuel's father and now Samuel were to follow in his steps as preachers of the Gospel. While still under the age of ten, Samuel was brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Like his grandfather Joseph Stennett, he early began to manifest a dedication to the Gospel ministry and an eagerness to learn and to equip himself for it.

When Samuel was ten, he and his family moved to London where his father became pastor of a church called Little Wild Street Baptist Church. Here in London, Samuel began to study theology, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and sacred literature. No doubt this early training was greatly used of the Lord, not only to give him a love for and knowledge of the Bible, but also to equip Samuel's tongue to speak His truth eloquently, clearly, and beautifully in the coming years. He gained a large vocabulary, which it is said enabled him later always to "clothe his ideas in the most appropriate terms."

In 1748, twenty-one-year-old Samuel became the assistant to his father. For ten years, he humbly and faithfully carried out this role. Also during this time, he married a wife, who became an ornament and great help to her husband. She was, in the words of William Jones, who knew the Stennetts and wrote an account of Samuel's life, a lady of "unaffected piety and good nature."

So well did Samuel fulfill his duties as his father's assistant during these years that, upon his father's death in 1758, the church asked him to take his father's place as pastor. This Samuel did willingly, there to remain for the rest of his life.

It was in this capacity that his early training began to bear fruit and he became noted for the excellence of his preaching. First of all, his preaching was noted for its close adherence to Scripture. It was said that he had a "large acquaintance" with the Bible and "had skill to derive from that hallowed source whatever could inform, awaken, comfort, and invigorate."

Further, he was able to convey that Scripture to his people with a remarkable and rare clarity. William Jones again, in his account of Stennett's life, said this of him:

"He was a perfect master of the English language, and from his earliest appearance as an author, had accustomed himself to such accuracy both in preaching and writing, that he rarely allowed a careless, inelegant, or negligent expression to escape him on any occasion. . . . not only can his meaning be understood, but it is so happily expressed upon every occasion, that it would need some pains to misunderstand him."



By 1767, the praises of Stennett's preaching had reached Pinner's Hall, the seventh day Baptist church that his grandfather had pastored, which we looked at last month, and they asked him to become their pastor in addition to his duties at Little Wild Street. Stennett did not formally accept the position as pastor, but he did graciously assume the duties of it, and he preached for them every Saturday for the next twenty years.

Over these years, Stennett published many writings, all of which have proven useful to the church in many areas, correcting errors, teaching practical obedience, defending Biblical doctrines, and all exhibiting that clarity and beauty of language for which he was noted.

It was not until relatively late in his life that Stennett's hymns were published, in 1787 when Stennett himself was sixty years old. These were published in John Rippon's *Selection*, the great hymn collection that has given to us many of the hymns we love and know best today. And not the least of these are those by Stennett.

Stennett contributed a total of thirty-nine hymns to this *Selection*, many of which became popular in his day, and several continue to be sung today. One of them, "To God the Universal King," John Rippon chose to be the first hymn in his *Selection*, and we have put it in the blue box on the next page. It is fitting for the opening of a hymn collection, charging man, above the rest of creation, with the duty to praise the Lord with "tuneful tongue." Two of Stennett's hymns primarily have endured to this day, "Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned" and "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." We will look at both of these in more detail over the next few pages. In both of them, the remarkable skill of Stennett's tongue can be seen in the beauty of his phrases, the exactness of his vocabulary, the clarity of his meaning, and the endurance of these hymns through the years.

With his advanced learning and large vocabulary, Samuel Stennett could easily have written and preached beyond the understanding of the common people. But as we have seen in so many of the best hymn writers, Stennett deliberately chose language that all could understand. William Jones again says of him:

“His language is as remarkable for a chastened simplicity as it is for any other property. . . . there is no affected strut, no deep imposing sound, no great swelling words of vanity introduced into his periods for the sake of display. . . . while it is level to the capacity of the unlettered reader, it is never slovenly or inelegant.”

Indeed, we will find this to be exactly the case as we look at his two most enduring hymns and some of their fascinating history on the next few pages.

For now, we close the life of Stennett. It was not long after this publication that Stennett passed from this earth. When his beloved wife died on March 16, 1795, the blow was such a severe one to him that he survived her by only a few months and joined her in “Canaan’s fair and happy land” on August 25th of the same year.

He left behind a rich legacy. Not only in his writing, but also in many other qualities, he was exemplary. He personally acquainted himself with each person in his congregation, sharing genuinely in both their joys and their sorrows, laboring for their salvation, exhorting them to more obedient lives. He was very tender to the sick and dying. He took the dissolute and solitary into his home and set them on a course of righteousness. He educated many in his own home who later became useful in the public sphere. He was a friend of many in the higher classes, even of King George III, but he never once used this for his own advancement. He was a generous and wise counselor for young preachers, even those of other denominations. He remained steadfast as a Dissenter, refusing offers of preferment in the established church. In a word, he was a sincere, humble Christian gentleman.

At his death, he left behind a son who followed in his steps as a preacher, the fifth generation in a row to fill this role, and also a fine daughter who walked “in the ways of God.” Samuel Stennett said of both of his children that he had in them “inexpressible satisfaction.”

Samuel Stennett and his wife were laid to rest in Bunhill Fields, the hallowed burying ground where so many of God’s choicest servants await the resurrection.

1. To God the universal king
Let all mankind their tribute bring:
All that have breath, your voices raise,
In songs of never-ceasing praise.
2. The spacious earth on which we tread,
And wider heavens stretch’d o’er our head,
A large and solemn temple frame,
To celebrate its builder’s fame.
3. Here the bright sun that rules the day,
As thro’ the sky he makes his way,
To all the world proclaims aloud
The boundless sov’reignty of God.
4. When from his courts the sun retires,
And with the day his voice expires,
The moon and stars adopt the song,
And thro’ the night the praise prolong.
5. The list’ning earth with rapture hears
Th’ harmonious music of the spheres;
And all her tribes the notes repeat,
That God is wise, and good, and great.
6. But man endow’d with nobler pow’rs,
His God in nobler strains adores:
His is the gift to know the song,
As well as sing with tuneful tongue.

Though Stennett’s body has been laid in the earth and though his earthly life has closed, yet Stennett’s tongue still remains “not wanting” in praise to his God. His hymns, which his tongue left to us, still sound forth that praise in beautiful, clear language as they continue to be sung across the English-speaking world. And thus, his tongue still today, as he prayed long ago, “spreads abroad” the praise of his Lord.

- Edwin F. Hatfield, *The Poets of the Church*, New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1884.
 William Jones, *The Works of Samuel Stennett, D. D.*, London: Thomas Tegg, 1824.
 Kenneth Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1982.
 Kenneth Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1985.

On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand

The song that has become so well known and loved today, “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand,” first appeared in Rippon’s *Selection*, contributed by the remarkable tongue and pen of Samuel Stennett. It appeared with the hopeful title “Heaven Anticipated.” Originally, it had the 7 stanzas we give on the next page, 3 of which are often omitted in hymnals today. But when they are all sung together, they form a complete whole that is a masterpiece of expression. Stanzas 2 and 3, often omitted, form a more complete picture of the joys of Heaven and give context to stanza 4. Stanza 7, also often omitted, ties all together with a final burst of joy and eagerness for that desired land.

In Rippon’s *Selection*, it is suggested that this text be sung to the stately and beautiful tune “Cambridge New,” which is the first tune we give on the next page. It is a serious, thoughtful tune that encourages us truly to ponder the delights of Heaven that await the believer. The lack of a refrain makes the stanzas hang together better and allows for a more connected flow of thought. No doubt this is the tune to which Stennett himself sang this text.

The second tune on the next page is the first appearance of the tune to which this text is most commonly sung today. It appeared in a shape-note tunebook called *The Southern Harmony* in 1835. Unlike today’s version, the tune is here in a minor key, again giving a serious tone to the song. This is how it was sung for many years. The tune was later transposed to a major key by Rigdon M. McIntosh and first appeared in its present form in 1895.

A familiar and beloved hymn in its form today, it takes on even more beauty and depth in its former dress, and we gain a fresh understanding of its beautiful text by singing it as it was sung of old and in its entirety.

Heaven Anticipated

Samuel Stennett, 1787.

CAMBRIDGE NEW. C. M.

John Randall, Rippon's Tune Book, 1791.

Treble

1. On Jor-dan's storm - y banks I stand, And cast a wish - ful eye, To Ca-naan's fair and hap - py land,

Alto

1. On Jor-dan's storm - y banks I stand, And cast a wish - ful eye, To Ca-naan's fair and hap - py land,

Air (Melody)

1. On Jor-dan's storm - y banks I stand, And cast a wish - ful eye, To Ca-naan's fair and hap - py land,

Bass

Where my pos - ses - sions lie.

Where my pos - ses - sions lie, Where my pos - ses - sions lie.

Where my pos - ses - sions lie, Where my pos - ses - sions lie.

Where my pos - ses - sions lie, _____ Where my pos - ses - sions lie.

[From *Rippon's Selection of Psalm and Hymn Tunes*, Performer's Reprints, www.performersedition.com]

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|---|---|--|
| 2. O the transporting, rapturous scene,
That rises to my sight!
Sweet fields array'd in living green,
And rivers of delight! | 4. All o'er those wide extended plains
Shines one eternal day:
There God the Sun for ever reigns,
And scatters night away. | 6. When shall I reach that happy place,
And be for ever blest?
When shall I see my Father's face,
And in his bosom rest? |
| 3. There generous fruits that never fail,
On trees immortal grow:
There rocks and hills, and brooks and vales,
With milk and honey flow. | 5. No chilling winds, or poisonous breath
Can reach that healthful shore:
Sickness, and sorrow, pain, and death
Are felt and fear'd no more. | 7. Fill'd with delight, my raptur'd soul
Can here no longer stay:
Tho' Jordan's waves around me roll,
Fearless I'd launch away. |

THE PROMISED LAND. C.M.

F# Minor Samuel Stennett, 1787.

The Southern Harmony, 1835.

Treble

Tenor (Melody)

Bass

On Jor - dan's storm-y banks I stand, And cast a wish-ful eye, To Ca - naan's fair and hap-py land, Where my pos-ses-sions lie. I am

bound for the pro-mised land, _____ I'm bound for the pro-mised land, O, _____ who will come and go with me? I am bound for the pro-mised land.

[From *The Southern Harmony*, William Walker, 1854, reprinted in 1987 by The University Press of Kentucky]

Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned

Most people today know this hymn by the title above, but when it was first written and published in Rippon's *Selection*, this phrase was but the beginning of the third stanza, not of the whole hymn. The hymn instead had a choice of two different titles, "Chief Among Ten Thousand" or "The Excellencies of Christ." It was written based upon the Scripture text of Song of Solomon 5:10-16, which extols the beauties of Christ in His entire being:

"My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand. His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven. His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires. His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem."

As you read through this hymn, consider the striking phrases in it that express its concepts in beautifully appropriate terms, with neither ostentation nor carelessness. Christ is described as "the subject of the song," "fairer than all the fair," "crowned with radiant glories." The great phrase that all recognize today, "Majestic sweetness sits enthroned," shines even more beautifully against the backdrop of the first two stanzas. Thought-provoking paradoxes are also found in "majestic sweetness" sitting on his "awful brow," in his hand pouring "a thousand blessings" on "my guilty head," and in his presence "gilding" my "darkest hours." In another masterful stroke, the "thousand blessings" are re-echoed in the last stanza when "a thousand hearts" are given back to the Lord in return.

At one time, this was the best known of all Stennett's hymns, even better known than "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." As we read this hymn in its entirety, let us ponder afresh the Jesus Christ whom it extols in such fitting and beautiful language.

1. To Christ, the Lord, let every tongue
Its noblest tribute bring:
When he's the subject of the song,
Who can refuse to sing?

2. Survey the beauties of his face,
And on his glories dwell;
Think of the wonders of his grace,
And all his triumphs tell.

3. Majestic sweetness sits enthron'd
Upon his awful brow;
His head with radiant glories crown'd,
His lips with grace o'erflow.

4. No mortal can with him compare,
Among the sons of men:
Fairer he is than all the fair
That fill the heavenly train.

5. He saw me plung'd in deep distress,
He fled to my relief;

For me he bore the shameful cross,
And carried all my grief.

6. His hand a thousand blessings pours
Upon my guilty head:
His presence gilds my darkest hours,
And guards my sleeping bed.

7. To him I owe my life and breath,
And all the joys I have:
He makes me triumph over death,
And saves me from the grave.

8. To heaven the place of his abode
He brings my weary feet!
Shews me the glories of my God,
And makes my joys complete.

9. Since from his bounty I receive,
Such proofs of love divine,
Had I a thousand hearts to give,
Lord, they should all be thine.



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