

The Music Herald

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

Colossians 3:16

Gentle Strokes of God’s Chastising Hand

Fifteen miles from the birthplace of the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts, in England’s far southern county of Hampshire, a girl named Anne Steele (1717-1778) was born in 1717 who was destined to follow in his footsteps. Watts’ first collection of hymns had been published ten years before her birth, and his book of hymns for children just two years before her birth. No doubt little Anne often sang these children’s hymns as she grew up. In 1720, when Anne was only three, Watts’ most important work was published, *The Psalms of David Imitated*.

But also in 1720, tragedy struck Anne’s happy home. Her dear mother died bearing a son, and the newborn son, Thomas, died only a month later. This was to be only the first of many trials that Anne would face, and she learned early to trust the Lord’s sovereignty and providence in such difficult times. Her father, William Steele, was a Particular Baptist pastor and a Godly man, and his example and influence taught Anne and her five-year-old brother William much about God’s sovereignty during this time. Anne Steele’s best known hymn testifies of her faith even when denied “earthly bliss”:

Father, whate’er of earthly bliss
Thy sovereign will denies,
Accepted at thy Throne of grace,
Let this petition rise:

Give me a calm, a thankful heart,
From ev’ry murmur free;
The blessings of thy grace impart,
And make me live to thee.

Three years later, in 1723, Anne’s father remarried. This stepmother was to take a deep interest in Anne, and her motherly influence upon her would be profound.

Anne’s home was situated near the River Wallop, a place that proved unhealthy for the young girl. At an early age, she was stricken with malaria, which severely weakened her and left lingering consequences that plagued her throughout the rest of her life, like Watts who was also troubled by ill health.

When Anne was fourteen, it was evident that the Lord was beginning to draw her to Himself, and at the same time, her body was in a particularly weak condition. Her concerned stepmother wrote in her diary during that time, “[I] cry earnestly on Anne’s account that as God has been pleased to make her sensible of the want and worth of a Saviour, so he would also give her a well-grounded hope that she have an interest in that Saviour that so she might be happy here and forever. . . . I beg the affliction may be sanctified to her and that her life may be spared.”

These earnest prayers were answered, and the next year, Anne’s stepmother could joyfully record in her diary, “Anne’s long illness in the previous autumn had been used for her soul’s good and . . . the great issues of eternity had weighed in her soul as her strength appeared to be ebbing away.” In God’s goodness, young Anne’s strength was restored, and at the age of fifteen, she made a public confession of Jesus Christ and was baptized.

William Steele saw to it that, as his daughter matured, her mind and heart were channeled into profitable

pursuits. Under his direction, she read the writings of learned and Godly men including John Gill, and she eventually inherited all of her father’s books. Her father also cultivated friendships with the best men of his generation, which allowed Anne frequent intercourse and discussion with them. Caleb Evans, a Particular Baptist pastor in London who was a personal friend of the Steeles, wrote of Anne that she had a “capacious soaring mind.”

Anne avoided the frivolous pursuits of other young ladies in her day, devoting herself to a higher purpose. She wrote to her half-sister Mary after they were both grown, “I think I have heretofore found as much pleasure scribbling in my lonely retirement as a fine Lady could do at a Ball, glittering among a crowd of Belles and Beaus. — poor comparison — ’Tis true I can have no notion of the high delight those gay flutterers taste, but as I imagine they are generally strangers to serious reflection, I think their entertainments deserve not to be named with the pleasure enjoy’d by a contemplative mind.”

Like Watts, Anne Steele was to remain unmarried. The story has often been told that she was once engaged to a young man named James Elsombe but that he tragically drowned in the river the day before their wedding. While it is historical fact that Elsombe drowned, it is unclear whether Anne was ever engaged to him.

What is known is that the great Baptist hymn-writer, author of over 800 hymns, Benjamin Beddome, did ask Anne Steele to become his wife in 1742. Yet for reasons perhaps known only to herself and the Lord, Anne declined this proposal. Beddome went on to marry another in 1749, and his marriage was happy and his life fruitful.

As for Anne Steele, she devoted herself to her own family and to the writing of hymns and poems, following the example of Watts whom she admired. Her first collection was published in two volumes in 1760 under the title *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional*. She wrote under the pseudonym Theodosia, which means “gift of God,” whereby she acknowledged that her writing was a gift from God and not her own innate talent. It was no doubt a great joy to Anne that her father made use of her hymns to accompany his sermons in his church.

It is remarkable that, living contemporaneous with Watts, Beddome, Doddridge, Newton, Cowper, and Wesley, all renowned hymn-writers both then and now, Anne Steele should achieve a place of prominence with her hymn-writing. Yet the record of history makes clear that she did. John Rippon, for his *Selection* of 1787, selected fifty-three of Steele’s hymns, almost ten percent of his total of 588 hymns.

Among all these hymn-writers, Anne Steele was recognized as a “unique voice.” Though she followed the example of Watts and was greatly influenced by him, she wrote in a way that was uniquely her own. She wrote with a tone of humility and with a distinct consciousness of man’s utter sinfulness and helplessness. Though many of these other hymn-writers, like her, believed in man’s total depravity, it was not to the forefront in their hymns like it was in Anne Steele’s. In Anne Steele’s hymns, the reader is made keenly aware of his own sin and his own inability

to remedy his condition. The word “honest” is the word most often used to describe her hymns. The reader is intensely struck by the way that she so frankly confesses her own doubts and fears and struggles, in such clear and honest terms. Anne Steele, whose physical suffering constantly made her aware of her own weakness, was thus used by the Lord to remind others of this truth.

But neither did she leave the reader to despair. Always she points to Christ and His grace and His Word as the answer to all questions, doubts, and fears. For example, consider these lines of hers:

How oft, alas, this wretched heart
Has wandered from the Lord,
How oft my roving thoughts depart,
Forgetful of his word!

Yet sov'reign mercy calls, “Return!”
Dear Lord, and may I come?
My vile ingratitude I mourn;
O take the wand'rer home.

Almighty grace, thy healing pow'r
How glorious, how divine!
That can to life and bliss restore
So vile a heart as mine!

Anne Steele's hymns are not nearly as known today as they were in her day. They are still found abundantly in hymnals that have been continuously published since the 1700s and 1800s but only there, for most of her hymns are not to modern taste. In 1884, Edwin Hatfield wrote *The Poets of the Church* which gives a brief biographical sketch of various hymn writers. At this time, he could still write, “Nearly all her hymns . . . have been appropriated to the service of the sanctuary or the family.” He could also say, “One hundred and more of her productions are found in our modern Compilations.” Since then, many have fallen out of use, not for their lack of worth or usefulness but for our own lack of interest in such honest portrayals of the sinfulness of the human heart. We would do well to revive their use and be reminded of our true condition.

We need not think that Anne Steele lived a morose life, always brooding over her sins. Though she gave herself to serious reflection, she lived an active and apparently joyful life, writing for the benefit of others and also serving her family. She loved her nieces, nephews, and cousins, living an exemplary life before them and seeking to influence them in the way of Godliness. Two whom she had a particular influence on were Jane Attwater, her cousin, and Polly Steele, her niece. When Polly's mother died in 1762, Anne cared for her and educated her like her own child until Polly's father, Anne's brother William, remarried. These were important years in Polly's life, and after Anne's death, Polly described her in these terms: “That maternal friend, whose watchful care, whose fond, assiduous tenderness sustained my helpless childhood.”

All this Anne did in the midst of intense physical suffering and pain. Yet she was not one to complain of her condition. She saw her suffering as coming from the hand of a good God and wrote of it as such: “Even this affliction, may I not call it a blessing from the happy effects which I hope it has produced? May I not esteem it a paternal correction to reprove my ungrateful coldness, to awaken me to a state of sensibility, and renew the relish of

those important blessings which have been almost neglected, or at best too faintly sought? How gentle, O my God, were the strokes of thy chastising hand.”

Perhaps the deepest of these “gentle strokes” was the death of Anne's father in 1769. She attended his bedside to his dying hour. Again family friend Caleb Evans gives us insight: “The death of her honoured father, to whom she was united by the strongest ties of affectionate duty and gratitude, gave such a shock to her feeble frame, that she never entirely recovered it though she survived him some years.” Anne wrote these lines at the time:

Ah! now one tender, one endearing tie
That held me down to earth, death has torn off, . . .
Heal, gracious father, heal my bleeding heart!
Thy healing hand alone can bring relief . . .
How hard the lesson! (yet it must be learn'd)
With full consent to say, ‘Thy will be done.’

As Evans testified, Anne's own death came nine years after, but partially as a result of, this blow. During her final years, Anne was often confined to her bed and in intense pain, yet she remained joyful. It was then that her family could repay to her the love she had shown them. Indeed, Polly literally repaid her dear aunt, living with her and caring for her for the last nine years of her life, just as Anne had cared for her as a child. Jane Attwater also visited often and was present with Anne when she died.

Also present at her deathbed were Caleb Evans and Samuel Stennett (author of “Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned” and “On Jordan's Stormy Banks”). It is testimony to the high regard in which Anne Steele was held that these two Particular Baptist pastors would come from London and Bristol to be with her as she departed this life.

Jane wrote that, in these last hours of suffering, Anne's “future prospect administered consolation to her soul,” and thus her last moments were “without a murmur and almost without a sigh,” just as Anne had written years earlier her desire to have a heart “from ev'ry murmur free.” Caleb Evans wrote, “Having been confined to her chamber some years before her death, she had long waited with Christian dignity for the awful hour of her departure. She often spoke, not merely with tranquility but joy of her decease.” As the end drew near, Anne spoke her last words, from Job 19:25, “I know that my redeemer liveth.” Then as a final farewell to those about her, she lifted her hand in a gentle wave and was instantly in the presence of that living Redeemer.

Anne Steele wrote a total of 144 hymns and 34 Psalm versifications, as well as many other poems and prose pieces. These were all published by Caleb Evans two years after her death in 1780. More than any other hymn writer, Anne Steele, who endured many “gentle strokes of chastisement,” has honestly captured the utter depravity of the human heart and mind and shown their only remedy in Jesus Christ and His Word.

Anne Steele's own third and closing stanza to the hymn we began with, “Father, whate'er of earthly bliss,” best sums up her life:

Let the sweet hope that thou art mine
My life and death attend;
Thy presence through my journey shine,
And crown my journey's end.

Father, Whate'er of Earthly Bliss

This hymn by Anne Steele, connected with this tune "Naomi," has long been a favorite. One story from rural Virginia in the 1800s gives us a glimpse of its worth and the comfort and strength that it has brought to many over the years. The story takes place in the countryside surrounding Petersburg, Virginia, where George William White was the pastor of a small Presbyterian congregation. Several miles away, in Lexington, Virginia, George's father William was the pastor of the church that Stonewall Jackson attended. He and his son were both esteemed and Godly men. George, laboring among a rural congregation, gives a touching account of the family of one of the elders in his church, and we will let him tell the story in his own words:

"Thomas Flournoy was a 'man among men,' brave, chivalrous, generous. When a student at Hampden-Sydney and then at Princeton, he was wild and reckless, but always high minded and honorable. He was a leader in whatever he undertook. These natural qualities he carried into his life, and they made him a power in the church.

"He was the happiest man I ever saw. He led our choir, composed largely of his own sons and daughters, all of whom were fine singers. Often in his large old family mansion, I have been wakened out of sleep by some one of them striking up some song, often religious. Soon another one would join this in another part of the house, carrying a different part, and then another with another part, till the house would resound with sweet music. . . . He literally walked with God, his religion permeating all his actions and much given to ejaculatory prayer.

"Mrs. Flournoy was the most queenly woman in her family of ten grown children I ever saw. She was intelligent, sweet and gentle in her manners, never spoke in tones of command, and yet her will was the will of the whole house; all bowed in loving reverence to her. Her death bed was a heavenly scene, late in the evening. I sat holding her hand and speaking some words of cheer. Mr. Flournoy stood at the head of the bed with head bowed over hers. The ten grown children encircled the bed. All was calm and quiet and peaceful. When she breathed her last, the old man raised his eyes to heaven and said, 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' All withdrew quietly and at the usual hour of evening worship gathered in the chamber of death. Mr. Flournoy said, 'Let us sing "Father, whate'er of earthly bliss,"' and himself raised that beautiful tune, Naomi, indissolubly connected with those words; and all the children joined, softly singing all the parts."

Such has been the influence and usefulness of Anne Steele's hymn. Here it is as the Flournoy's sang it.

George William White, *Memoirs*, reprinted by Sprinkle Publications, Harrisonburg, VA, 2007.

Father, Whate'er of Earthly Bliss

NAOMI C.M.

Anne Steele, 1760; alt. by
Augustus M. Toplady, 1776

Arr. from Hans G. Nageli by Lowell Mason, 1836

1. Fa - ther, what - e'er of — earth - ly bliss Thy sov - 'reign will de - nies,
2. Give me a calm, a — thank - ful heart, From ev - 'ry mur - mur free;
3. Let the sweet hope that thou art mine My life and death at - tend;

Ac - cept - ed at thy Throne of grace, Let this pe - ti - tion rise:
The bless - ings of thy grace — im - part, And make me live to thee.
Thy pre - sence through my jour - ney shine, And crown my jour - ney's end.

From *The Good Old Songs*, Thornton, AR: Cayce Publishing Company, 1984.

How Oft, Alas, This Wretched Heart

This hymn, quoted on page 2 of this newsletter, is typical of the honesty with which Anne Steele wrote of human wretchedness and failure. It also ends with her typical restored faith in God's ability to give victory over such failure and defeat. This text is one of the ones that John Rippon chose for inclusion in his *Selection*, and the grand tune "Brighthelmston" is found in his accompanying tunebook as the tune to go with this text. There is a note in the tunebook that the tune is to be sung slowly. When done so, tune and text make a beautiful match and convey the words effectively.

How Oft, Alas, This Wretched Heart

BRIGHTHELMSTON. C. M.

Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings.

Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God.

Jeremiah 3:22

*I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely:
for mine anger is turned away from him.*

Hosea 14:4

Anne Steele, 1760.

Rippon's Tune Book, 1791.

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

 **Mary Huffman: The Music Herald**
423 Lucinda Avenue
Belleville, IL 62221