

The Music Herald

*“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”
Colossians 3:16*

Proper and Beautiful Language

Most men who are famous today were little known or little esteemed by their contemporaries. But with our subject in this newsletter, the case is the opposite. He was admired by his contemporaries and exerted a profound influence upon them, but he himself and his work are unknown today. Instead of inscribing his name in history, his work had a quiet influence upon his generation that was to be felt far into the future, associated with their names, not his own.

His name was Joseph Stennett. He was born into the home of a dissenting pastor in what were difficult days for dissenting preachers and their families, the year 1663. The Restoration had just ended Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, and the restored Stuart, Charles II, had issued decrees forcing preachers to conform to his authority or be turned out of their pulpits. Because Joseph's father would not conform to unbiblical authority, he suffered abuse and harassment and even imprisonment for a time.

The son, not daunted but rather inspired by his father's example, would grow up to follow in his father's steps as a preacher of the Gospel. When he was a youth, his family moved from the town of Abingdon to the town of Wallingford, both in the vicinity of Oxford. Here his father, who was also a medical doctor, both practiced medicine and preached.

It was here in Wallingford that Joseph was brought to converting faith in Jesus Christ as a young boy and began to set his face toward the Gospel ministry. He received a fine education at the local school and from there went on to educate himself in the Hebrew language, philosophy, the sciences, French and Italian, and theology. He became known for his learning, and it was especially a marvel in that, as a Dissenter, he was barred from attending the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Recognized as a scholar in 1685 at the young age of twenty-two, he was asked to come to London as a teacher. Thus London became his home for five years. During those five years, he married Susanna Gill, the daughter of a French Huguenot nobleman whose land had been confiscated at the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and who now served in London on the Privy Chamber of King Charles II.

Also during those five years in London, Stennett took part in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which removed the Stuart kings and set up the house of Orange on the throne of England. Stennett's father, who had suffered so much at the hands of the Stuarts, lived just long enough to see this triumph and died the next year in 1689.

Upon his father's death, Joseph was asked to

become the pastor of one of the churches his father had served, a Sabbatarian Baptist church that would come to be called "Pinner's Hall." Stennett stepped down from teaching to fulfill this higher calling, which he had long ago purposed to do, and he was ordained in 1790. This being a Seventh Day Baptist church, Stennett would preach there every Saturday and often would preach elsewhere on Sundays.



It was in 1697 that Stennett's first written work was published. It was a collection of hymns of his own writing called "Sacramental Hymns," which were written to be used at the Lord's Supper. And it was through this collection that he would influence the generations to come.

Isaac Watts, who was only twenty-three at the time and had not yet published a single hymn, obtained one of these collections, and it became a great influence upon his own hymn writing. Watts was so impressed and influenced by these hymns that he would one day incorporate some of Stennett's words into one of his own hymns. In the blue box on the next page, we give first Stennett's original hymn and then Watts' quotation and incorporation. Three lines are borrowed verbatim and others in thought and substance. Watts said of this hymn with his characteristic humility:

"In this ode, there are three or four lines taken from Mr. Stennett's 'Sacramental Hymns'; for, when I found they expressed my thought and design in proper and beautiful language, I chose rather to borrow, and to acknowledge the debt, than to labor hard for worse lines, that I might have the poor pleasure of calling them my own."

"Proper and beautiful language" is a high compliment from such a poet as we now know Watts to be, but no doubt it was that very language that taught Watts his own poetic skill and that inspired the young Watts to infuse that kind of life and language into the Psalms and hymns of his day.

Not only was Watts an admirer of Stennett's, but Stennett was also admired by another noted poet of his day, the famous Nahum Tate whose name is well known to history as the one who, along with Nicholas Brady, compiled the *New Version* of the Psalter in 1696. Tate was Stennett's senior by eleven years and was even named the "Poet Laureate to His Majesty" in 1692, but he was a personal friend

of the humble preacher, and he recognized in the younger Stennett a quality that drew from him the high compliment: "He has the happiness to be a good poet, without being a slave to the Muses."

Stennett's personal output was not remarkable, the collection of 1697 being his only published work of hymns, but his influence was far-reaching. His works influenced not only Watts but also a host of other young aspiring poets for the next century, all of whom had the benefit to read and learn from his poems. These are names such as Beddome, Doddridge, Newton, Cowper, and Steele, names that are still beloved today for the hymns that still fill our hymnals.

Stennett's best known hymn is "On the Sabbath," which we give on pages 3 and 4 of this newsletter. Today, even this hymn is little known, but at one time it filled a place in almost every collection of English hymns and was known to all.

Stennett remained a faithful preacher of God's Word until his death. Always held out before him was a promise of preferment in the Church of England if he would but cease to be a Dissenter. But truth was dearer to Stennett than any earthly preferment, and he remained at his little church at Pinner's Hall for twenty-three years. In addition to all of his roles as a preacher, a poet, and a scholar, he was also well-known to be, in the words of the historian Edwin Hatfield, "an exceedingly amiable gentleman."

Stennett's life was not long. His health declined severely, and at the age of fifty in 1713 he went to live with his sister whose home it was thought would be a more healthful place for him. But his final summons had come. He lived only a short while there and continued to decline until July 11, 1713, when with clear mind and calm heart, he entered the eternal Sabbath of rest that awaits the believer. His own hymn, "On the Sabbath," testifies of the eternal rest, of which all earthly Sabbaths had been a shadow and pledge:

This heavenly calm within the breast,
Is the dear pledge of glorious rest,
Which for the church of God remains,
The end of care, the end of pains.

At his death, Stennett left his wife and four children, one of whom, named Joseph like himself, was to raise a son, Samuel Stennett, who was to supersede his grandfather Joseph in poetic ability and fame. Samuel would be the author of the beloved hymns "Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned" and "On Jordan's Stormy Banks." Both Joseph's son Joseph and his grandson Samuel were to follow in their fathers' steps as preachers of the Gospel, and thus Joseph Stennett's legacy and that of his father Edward was to continue across the generations, an exceedingly rare quality in families but a precious one where it is found. It would be only fitting that we follow this newsletter with one on the more famous grandson Samuel, and as the Lord allows, we will take that up next month.

Joseph Stennett's "proper and beautiful language," so admired by Watts, exerted a quiet but powerful influence upon a generation of hymn writers. The hymns that still fill our hymnals today owe much of their power and beauty and even their existence to this humble but excellent poet.

J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music, 8th Edition*, New York: Norton, 2010.

www.cyberhymnal.org

Edwin F. Hatfield, *The Poets of the Church*, New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1884.

Guy Johnson, *Treasury of Great Hymns and Their Stories*, Greenville: Bob Jones University Press, 1986.

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.

www.practicapoetica.com

Timothy Roden, Craig Wright, Bryan Simms, *Anthology for Music in Western Civilization, Volume I*, Thomson Schirmer, 2006.

www.traditionalmusic.co.uk

Joseph Stennet

He that distributes crowns and thrones,
Hangs on a tree, and bleeds, and groans:
He on a cross resigns his breath,
Who keeps the keys of hell and death.

Thus sin, death, and the powers of hell,
Conquered, disarmed, and wounded fell:
He mounted then his throne above,
And conquers sinners by his love.

Isaac Watts

He that distributes crowns and thrones
Hangs on a tree, and bleeds, and groans!
The Prince of Life resigns his breath,
The King of Glory bows to death!

Thus were the hosts of death subdued,
And sin was drown'd in Jesus' blood;
Thus he arose, and reigns above,
And conquers sinners by his love.

Stennett's best known hymn, "On the Sabbath," is here given in the final form in which he published it. He had originally written it with only ten stanzas, but this one contains fourteen. All fourteen, however, did not make their way into most hymnals. Most hymnals printed it with only four or five stanzas. Interestingly a stanza was added anonymously in the *Collection of Hymns Adapted to Public Worship* compiled by John Ash and Caleb Evans in 1769. This stanza has become more popular than many of the original ones and is almost always found with the hymn wherever it is printed, usually added as the second stanza. Since it is that altered form that has most often appeared throughout history, we give the hymn that way on the next page.

We have there set the text to the tune "Evening Hymn" by composer Thomas Tallis because this tune is recommended for this text in a hymn collection by James Winchell in 1821 and because this tune would have been in existence in Stennett's own day.

Tallis was the foremost composer in England in the middle of the 1500s, and his work was so valued that he was patronized by the royal court throughout the turbulent changes in Tudor monarchs, Protestant succeeding Catholic. His strength in composing lay in closely tying his melodic lines to natural speech inflections. This is one of his eight Psalm tunes composed for congregational singing. It has a simple beauty that is remarkable for a man who was capable of exceedingly complex composition. For example, he once wrote a piece for five eight-voice choirs, a total of forty separate vocal lines. By contrast, this Psalm tune is a masterpiece of simplicity, while still retaining beauty and complexity.

"On the Sabbath"

Another six days work is done,
Another Sabbath is begun;
Return, my soul, enjoy thy rest,
Revere the day thy God has bless'd.

This grateful soul by thee redeem'd
This holy time by thee esteem'd
And what I am or have beside,
What I can give or thou provide.

But weep that thou hast done no more
In this, and many weeks before,
For him whom thou art bound to praise
On working and on resting days.

I offer all, my God, to thee:
If thou accept both mine and me,
I'll praise thy grace, the name adore,
And wish to offer I had more.

If common actions ought to tend,
To praise him as their common end;
How should his glory be design'd
In every thing of sacred kind.

O that my thoughts and words may rise,
As incense to propitious skies;
And fetch from heaven that sweet repose
Which none but he that feels it knows.

For servile work six days are given;
For sacred use but one in seven:
When for my work God gives such time,
Shall I begrudge a day to him.

This heavenly calm, within the breast,
Is the dear pledge of glorious rest,
Which for the church of God remains,
The end of cares, the end of pains.

Lord, one in seven's too much for me;
And six too little seems for thee:
My time, my all besides, is thine;
Nothing, no not myself, is mine.

With joy God's wondrous works I view,
In various scenes both old and new:
With praise I think on mercies past;
With hope, of future pleasures taste.

Nothing I properly could claim,
As truly mine, but sin and shame:
This guilt thou hast remov'd; and given
Thyself, thy son, thy grace, thy heaven.

In holy duties, let the day,
In holy pleasures pass away;
How sweet a Sabbath thus to spend,
In hope of one that ne'er shall end!

My soul with grateful ardor burns,
My God, to make thee some returns:
Well may I render thee thy own;
Well mayst thou reap where thou hast sown.

Till I am so divinely blest
I'll love this weekly day of rest;
And still when days of work begin
Remember there's no time for sin.

Another Six Days Work Is Done

Joseph Stennett

EVENING HYMN. L. M.

Altered from Tallis

Treble

1. A - no - ther - six days work is done, A - no - ther sab - bath is be - gun;
 2. Come, bless the Lord, whose love as - signs So sweet a rest to wear - ied minds;
 3. O that our thoughts and thanks may rise, As grate - ful in - cense, to the skies;

Air (Melody)

4. This heaven - ly calm with - in the breast, Is the dear pledge of glo - rious rest,
 5. With joy, great God, thy works we view, In var - ious scenes both old and new;
 6. In ho - ly du - ties let the day, In ho - ly plea - sures pass a - way;

Bass

Re - turn, my soul, en - joy thy rest, Im - prove the day thy God has bless'd.
 Pro - vides an an - te - past of heaven, And gives this day the food of seven.
 And draw from heaven that sweet re - pose, Which none, but he that feels it, knows.

Which for the church of God re - mains, The end of cares, the end of pains.
 With praise, we think on mer - cies past, With hope, we fu - ture plea - sures taste.
 How sweet, a sab - bath thus to spend, In hope of one that ne'er shall end!

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