

Christian Experience In The Hymns Of Anne Steele (1716-1778)

I am dependent on the excellent recent biography of Anne Steele by Sharon James found in her book “In Trouble And In Sorrow” (Evangelical Press 2003). I have also used “The Works Of Anne Steele in 2 Volumes” (Boston ed. 1808) for this lecture. There has been a renewed interest in Anne Steele lately. Well worth reading are the full biography of her by J.R. Broome “A Bruised Reed: The Life and Times of Anne Steele” and the study of her hymns by Cynthia Aalders “To Express The Ineffable: The Hymns and Spirituality Of Anne Steele.”

For further study: Look for the article “A ‘Veil Of Interposing Night’: The Hymns Of Anne Steele (1717-1778)” by Richard Arnold that was published in the Christian Scholars Review. And there was an article about her hymns in the Summer 1991 issue of “Encounter” by David N. Duke entitled “Giving Voice To Suffering In Worship: A Study In The Theodicies Of Hymnody”

I. A Brief Sketch Of Her Life

She was born in Broughton, England where her father, who was a fairly well-off timber merchant, preached at the Particular Baptist church for 60 years. She actually lived only 15 miles from the great Isaac Watts. Although it is unlikely that they ever met, she mentions his work with fondness in one of her hymns. Her mother died when she was 3 years old, and by 14 it seems she was bothered by chronic recurring malaria which took a progressive toll on her health. She also had painful stomach problems and severe teeth pain and her health was never very good. She received her education through being sent to boarding schools, even though the local pastor condemned her stepmother for doing this. Her home was one in which reading literature and poems was one of the fondest activities.

She was thrown from a horse and injured when she was 19, but makes no mention of this later in her diary and it is not true (as some have reported) that she was an invalid for life from this injury. It has been widely reported that when she was 21, she was engaged to Robert Elcomb, but that the day before the wedding he was drowned while bathing in a river! However, while he may have been courting her, they were not a day from their wedding when this tragedy occurred. In fact, she had numerous wedding proposals after this (including one from Baptist pastor and hymnwriter Benjamin Beddome) but she chose a life of singleness. Her stepsister had a difficult marriage and this may have influenced Anne’s decision, but she also felt that singleness provided her the opportunity to serve the Lord in other ways. Had she chosen to become a busy pastor’s wife she may not have been able to write so many poems and hymns. So, she lived with her father and stepmother, who cared for her health problems, and who fixed her an elegant room with a fireplace to write her poems. She assisted her father in his pastoral labors, although for the last 9 years of her life, she was never able to leave her bed.

Still in spite of all of this her disposition was described as “cheerful and helpful” and her life as one of “unaffected humility, warm benevolence, sincere friendship, and genuine devotion.” In reading Sharon James’ account of her home-life I am reminded of the settings in some of Jane Austen’s novels. She was a bright and cheerful woman, but one who suffered greatly from her ongoing health problems. Her hymns reveal that her health problems provoked great spiritual struggles as well and she is often wrestling with doubts and assurance of salvation.

Caleb Evans describes her death,

Having been confined to her chamber for some nine years, she had long waited with Christian dignity for the hour of her departure. And when the time came, she welcomed its arrival; and though her feeble body was excruciated with pain, her mind was perfectly serene. She took a most affectionate leave of her weeping friends around her, and at length, the happy moment of her dismissal arriving, she closed her eyes, and with these words upon her dying lips, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth’ gently fell asleep in Jesus.

II. Her Poems And Hymns

John Gadsby says that,

From early life she was exceedingly fond of poetry, but was very unwilling for her productions to be submitted to the public eye. When at last she gave her consent, she would not have her own name attached to the volumes, but published them under the signature of Theodosia, and gave all the profits to charity.” Her father wrote in his diary, “Today Nanny sent part of her composition to London to be printed. I entreat a gracious God, who enabled and stirred her up to such a work, to direct in it and bless it for the good of many. I pray God to make it useful, and keep her humble.

In total 3 volumes of her poems were published. The first two in 1760 as Poems, On Subjects Chiefly Devotional by Theodosia – she oversaw the editing of these 2 volumes herself. The third volume was published after her death. (In 1967 The Gospel Standard Baptist Trust published an edition of her hymns, without the poems or Psalms, but even this is long out of print.) She wrote 144 hymns, as well as 48 psalms in verse (she does not “Christianize the Psalms like Watts does by the way), and her works also contain a number of miscellaneous poems, prose writings, and letters. Amos Wells (writing in 1914) says she was “*the first woman writer whose hymns came to be largely used in hymn-books, and she is the greatest Baptist hymn-writer.*” He describes her hymns as “very simple, clear, and beautiful, breathing a spirit of Christian faith and resignation.”

200 years ago her hymns were very popular – in 1808, an Episcopal church in Boston published its own hymnal, and out of the 152 hymns in the volume, 59 were by Anne Steele! (To recognize the significance of this fact you need to realize that at this period Baptists and Episcopalians were pretty far removed from each other and the fact that a Baptist would compose 1/3 of the hymns in an Episcopalian hymnal is truly remarkable!) Henry Burrage in Baptist Hymn Writers And Their Hymns (1888) says that over 100 of her hymns can be found in “modern” hymnals – more than any other Baptist hymn writer! He says that “*her hymns, written to lighten her own burdens, give beautiful expression to the sweetness of her Christian character, and the depth of her Christian experience.*” I must concur! I find her hymns so rich, and yet easily understood even by those living 250 years after her death.

III. Things To Note About Her Hymns

As Watson states in “The English Hymn”, she has excellent craft in her hymnwriting.

1. **She is the 1st significant female hymnwriter and paves the way for so many others!** Though she had a few contemporaries such as Anne Dutton, Steele’s hymns are far superior. (But Anne Dutton’s letters are superb!)
2. **An intensity of feeling and language:** Watson says her hymns are to be noted for the intensity of language and feeling, often using sudden exclamations in parentheses. “*Arraigned at Pilate’s impious bar, (Unparalleled disgrace!), See spotless innocence appear In guilt’s detested place!*” (Hymn 4) Watson compares as well her take on Watts’ ideas in these lines: “*Can I survey this scene of woe, Where mingling grief and wonder flow, And yet my heart unmoved remain, Insensible to love or pain?*” Watts seems to suggest a more serene setting in which to survey the wondrous cross, but for Anne such a sight can never be serene!
3. **A powerful use of oxymorons and paradoxical statements (Watson).** We see this in the above example, as well as a later verse from the same hymn: “*’Tis finished’, now aloud He cries, ‘No more the law requires.’ And now, (amazing sacrifice!) The Lord of life expires.*” (Hymn 4)
4. **A frequent use of questions to probe more deeply than statements can (Watson).** “*And can the ear of Sovereign grace, be deaf I complain?*”(Hymn 80) and again: “*What less than thy almighty Word Can raise my heart from earth and dust And bid me cleave to thee, my Lord, My life, my treasure, and my trust?*” (Hymn 27)

5. **She is also quite free to use love language toward God** (something Watson says had considerable influence of women hymn writers of the next century.) *“I yield to thy dear conquering arms, I yield my captive soul: O let thy all-subduing charms, My inmost powers control!”* (Hymn 4)
6. **She has a strong belief that the longing for Heaven puts all other longings in their place.** (see above) She has many hymns about the conflict between worldly pleasures and real pleasures.
7. **She is honest when it comes to human frailty and weakness.** *“Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul”* is a great example of this honesty. The 1st and last hymns in her works (which she arranged herself and so the placement is significant) dwell on human weakness. The 1st hymn in her collection expresses the inability of human language to adequately praise God.

*Almighty Author of my frame, To Thee my vital powers belong
Thy praise (delightful glorious theme!), Demands my heart, my life, my tongue (vs. 1)*

*Thy glories, the seraphic lyre, On all its strings attempts in vain
Then how shall mortals dare aspire, In thought, to try th' unequal strain? (vs 3)*

*Great God, accept the humble praise, And guide my heart, and guide my tongue
While to thy name I trembling raise, The grateful, though unworthy song. (final vs.)*

8. **She has great creativity in the names by which she addresses God.** A few examples (many of which are the 1st lines of hymns): *My maker and my king, Thou lovely source of true delight, Dear refuge of my weary soul, Almighty author of my frame, Lord of my life, Eternal source of joys divine, Great source of boundless power and grace, Thou only sovereign of my heart, Father of mercies in Thy word, Come thou desire of all thy saints, Dear center of my best desires.* She understands the importance of using different metaphors to lead to deeper reflection on who God is. As Peter Matheson says in “The Imaginative World Of The Reformation” says, when your metaphors change your world changes.
9. **She is a voice of lament teaching us to trust in the midst of real suffering.** It has been pointed out how neither Wesley nor Watts write true laments as Anne does. Probably half of her hymns deal explicitly with suffering and doubts – it is the normal context in which the Christian life is lived. She has hymns arising from war and famine, funerals, an earthquake, and even sorrow at night. *“When I survey life’s varied scene, Amid the darkest hours, Sweet rays of comfort shine between, And thorns are mixed with flowers.”* (Hymn 74) She is brutally honest about her doubts and struggles and her hymns walk us through the struggle rather than just preaching pious platitudes:

*Dear refuge of my weary soul, On Thee, when sorrows rise.
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll, My fainting hope relies*

*While hope revives, though pressed with fears, And I can say, my God,
Beneath Thy feet I spread my cares And pour my woes abroad*

*To Thee I tell each rising grief, For Thou alone canst heal.
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief, For every pain I feel*

*But oh! When gloomy doubts prevail, I fear to call Thee mine.
The springs of comfort seem to fail, And all my hopes decline*

*Yet gracious God, where shall I flee? Thou art my only trust.
And still my soul would cleave to Thee Though prostrate in the dust*

*Hast Thou not bid me seek Thy face, And shall I seek in vain?
And can the ear of sovereign grace, Be deaf when I complain?*

No still the ear of sovereign grace, Attends the mourner’s prayer.

Oh may I ever find access, To breathe my sorrows there

*Thy mercy seat is open still, Here let my soul retreat.
With humble hope attend Thy will, And wait beneath Thy feet,*

- 10. She is a voice crying out for the assurance of her Heavenly Father:** The topic of assurance is an important one, and a vital part of pastoral ministry, yet one which is generally not discussed enough in most seminaries. Anne has many hymns dealing with the struggles to attain assurance.

*Dear Lord and should Thy Spirit rest In such a wretched heart as mine?
Unworthy dwelling! Glorious guest! Favor astonishing divine!*

*When sin prevails and gloomy fear And hope almost expires in night
Lord, can thy Spirit then be here Great spring of comfort, life, and light?*

*Sure the blest Comforter is nigh 'Tis He sustains my fainting heart
Else would my hopes for ever die And every cheering ray depart*

*When some kind promise glads my soul Do I not find his healing voice
The tempest of my fears control And bid my drooping powers rejoice?*

*Whene'er to call the Savior mine With ardent wish my heart aspires
Can it be less than power divine Which animates these strong desires?*

*What less than Thy almighty Word Can raise my heart from earth and dust
And bid me cleave to Thee my Lord My life, my treasure, and my trust?*

*And when my cheerful hope can say I love my God and taste His grace
Lord, is it not Thy blissful ray Which brings this dawn of sacred peace?*

*Let thy kind Spirit in my heart For ever dwell, O God of love
And light and heavenly peace impart Sweet earnest of the joys above.*

- 11. She is a voice longing for a transforming gaze of Christ's beauty.** She well understands what Jonathan Edwards taught well and what Thomas Chalmers (19th century Scottish Presbyterian) called "The Explosive Power of A New Affection" Here is a great example of this:

*Thou lovely source of true delight Whom I unseen adore
Unveil Thy beauties to my sight That I might love Thee more,*

*Thy glory o'er creation shines But in Thy sacred Word
I read in fairer, brighter lines My bleeding, dying Lord,*

*'Tis here, whene'er my comforts droop And sin and sorrow rise
Thy love with cheering beams of hope My fainting heart supplies,*

*But ah! Too soon the pleasing scene Is clouded o'er with pain
My gloomy fears rise dark between And I again complain,*

*Jesus, my Lord, my life, my light Oh come with blissful ray
Break radiant through the shades of night And chase my fears away,*

*Then shall my soul with rapture trace The wonders of Thy love
But the full glories of Thy face, Are only known above.*

- 12. She knows the importance of gazing upon Christ in every station of his life and death!** You might notice that I harvested a few of these verses (and combined them with a couple stanzas by Toplady) to make “O Love Incomprehensible” – don’t be afraid to mix and match stanzas from her hymns in your writing.

HYMN IV. “Redeeming Love” by Anne Steele

1. Come heavenly love, inspire my song With thy immortal flame,
And teach my heart, and teach my tongue The Savior’s lovely name.
2. The Savior! O what endless charms Dwell in the blissful sound!
Its influence every fear disarms, And spreads sweet comfort round.
3. Here pardon, life, and joys divine In rich effusion flow,
For guilty rebels lost in sin, And doomed to endless woe.
4. In our first parent’s crime we fell; Our blood, our vital breath,
Deep tinged with all the seeds of ill, Sad heirs to sin and death.
5. Black o’er our wrath-devoted heads Avenging justice frowned
While hell disclosed her deepest shades And horrors rose around.
6. Wrapt in the gloom of dark despair, We helpless, hopeless lay:
But sovereign mercy reached us there, And smiled despair away.
7. God’s only son, (stupendous grace!) Forsook his throne above;
And swift to save our wretched race, He flew on wings of love.
8. Th’ Almighty former of the skies Stooped to our vile abode;
While angels viewed with wondering eyes, And hailed the incarnate God.
9. The God in heavenly strains they sung, Arrayed in human clay:
Mysterious love ! what angel tongue Thy wonders can display?
10. Mysterious love, in every scene, Through all his life appears:
His spotless life exposed to pain, And miseries and tears.
11. What blessings on a thankless race? His bounteous hand bestowed!
And from his tongue what wondrous grace, What rich instruction flowed!
12. The dumb, the deaf, the lame, the blind Confessed his healing power;
Disease and death their prey resigned, And grief complained no more.
13. Infernal legions trembling fled, Awed by his powerful word;
And winds and seas his voice obeyed, And owned their sovereign Lord.
14. But man, vile man, his love abused Blind to the noblest good
Blasphemed his power, his word refused, And sought his sacred blood.
15. Still his unwearied love pursued Salvation’s glorious plan;
And firm the approaching horrors viewed Deserved by guilty man.
16. What pain, what soul-oppressing pain, The great Redeemer bore;
While bloody sweat, like drops of rain, Distilled from every pore!

17. And ere the dreadful storm descends Full on his guiltless head,
See him by his familiar friends Deserted and betrayed!
18. While ruffian bands the Lord surround, Relentless, murderous foes;
Meek, as a lamb for slaughter bound, The patient sufferer goes
19. Arraigned at Pilate's impious bar, (Unparalleled disgrace!)
See spotless innocence appear In guilt's detested place!
20. When perjury fails to stain his name, The mob's envenomed breath
Extorts his sentence, "Public shame And painful lingering death."
21. Patient, the cruel scourge he bore; The innocent, the kind!
Then to the rabble's lawless power And rudest taunts consigned
22. With thorns they crown that awful brow,
Whose frown can shake the globe;
And on their king in scorn bestow The reed and purple robe.
23. Ah! see the fatal cross appears, Heart-wounding, dreadful scene
His sacred flesh rude iron tears, With agonizing pain.
24. Exposed with thieves, to public view Could nature bear the sight?
The blushing sun his beams withdrew, And wrapped the globe in night!
25. Then, Oh! what loads of wrath unknown The glorious sufferer felt;
For crimes unnumbered to atone, To expiate mortal guilt!
26. The Father's blissful smile withdrawn, In that tremendous hour;
Yet still the God sustained the man With his almighty power,
27. "Tis finished," now aloud he cries, "No more the law requires"
And now, (amazing sacrifice!) The Lord of life expires.
28. Earth's firm foundation felt the shock, With universal dread;
Trembled the mountain, rent the rock, And waked the sleeping dead!
29. Now breathless in the silent tomb, His sacred body lies:
Thither his loved disciples come, With sorrow-streaming eyes.
30. But see the promised morn appear Their joy revives again;
The Savior lives; adieu to fear, To every anxious pain.
31. His kindest words their doubts remove, Confirm their wavering faith;
He bids them teach the world his love, Salvation by his death.
32. Triumphant he ascends on high, The glorious work complete
Sin, death, and hell, low vanquished lie Beneath his awful feet.
33. There, with eternal glory crowned, The Lord, the conqueror, reigns;
His praise the heavenly choirs resound In their immortal strains.
34. Amid the splendors of his throne, Unchanging love appears;
The names he purchased for his own, Still on his heart he bears
35. Still with prevailing power he pleads Their cause for whom he died;

His Spirit's sacred influence sheds, Their comforter and guide.

36. For them, reserves a radiant crown, Bought with his dying blood;
And worlds of light, and joys unknown, For ever near their God.
37. O the rich depths of love divine! Of bliss, a boundless store:
Dear Savior, let me call thee mine; I cannot wish for more.
38. I yield to thy dear conquering arms, I yield my captive soul:
O let thy all-subduing charms My inmost powers control!
39. On thee alone my hope relies: Beneath thy cross I fall,
My Lord, my life, my sacrifice, My Savior and my all