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& Cloud
Sunshine

by B. A. RAMSBOTTOM

THROUGH CLOUD AND SUNSHINE

*Four generations of faithful witness—the story
of the Stennett family*

BY

B. A. Ramsbottom, B.A.

I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

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When Benjamin Keach lay dying in London (many years after his Winslow days), he sent for his friend Joseph Stennett—one of the remarkable Stennett family. When Joseph Stennett came, Keach said to him, ‘I want you to preach my memorial sermon’, and Stennett asked, ‘What shall I speak about?’ Keach said, ‘I want you to preach my memorial sermon on this text [and you can see just how typical it was of Benjamin Keach]: “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.”’ As it happened in God’s providence, when Keach died Joseph Stennett was ill, but sometime later he did preach the memorial sermon on that text, though he never would agree to many entreaties to have that sermon printed.

Who, then, were the Stennetts? The Stennetts were a very remarkable Particular Baptist family. There were four generations of eminent ministers, their witness to the truth extending over a period of about a hundred and fifty years. They were all gracious, very learned, well known, influential in the country. They were all faithful to the doctrines of grace, commonly called Calvinism. A most remarkable witness, a most remarkable family!

Now, my intention is to take you one by one through the four generations of the Stennetts: the great-grandfather, the grandfather, the father, and then the son.

Edward Stennett (d. 1691)

First of all then, Edward Stennett; he being the father of the Joseph Stennett who preached Keach’s memorial sermon.

Edward Stennett had been a chaplain in the Parliamentary army during the Civil War, and because he took the side of Parliament against the King, his relations separated from him. This meant that though a talented man, he was left without any means of support; so he took up medicine. Remarkably, he not only became a doctor, but a doctor both famous and

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prosperous; so much so that when he settled in Wallingford (Berkshire) he made his home in the castle there. And inside that castle he had a Particular Baptist congregation to whom he preached. You think of it: a Particular Baptist pastor living in a castle, a Particular Baptist church and congregation meeting in a castle! And because it was a castle, there was a wonderful advantage. This castle had once been a royal residence, and because of that it was exempt from search. Now Edward Stennett was preaching to his Particular Baptist congregation in days when there was no toleration, when the Particular Baptists were not permitted to meet. But this congregation was free to worship because no search warrant could be taken out to enter the castle to see what was taking place.

During this time Edward Stennett was favoured of God with a very remarkable deliverance. Close to the castle in Wallingford lived a gentleman who was a Justice of the Peace. He was a very strong churchman and bitterly hated Edward Stennett and his ministry, even though Stennett had showed him the greatest of kindness and been a great help to him as a doctor. Nevertheless, because of his hatred to the truth, this Justice of the Peace determined to overthrow Stennett and his ministry, and as there could be no search of the castle, he devised a very wicked plan. He gathered a few people together and the plot was that the case should be taken to Newbury Assizes where they would all swear on oath that they had been present in the castle when a Nonconformist service had taken place— so that Edward Stennett would be arrested and imprisoned. So great was their hatred of the truth, they were willing to descend to perjury. Even the local vicar joined this little group.

Soon the time came when Edward Stennett was summoned to appear before the Assizes at Newbury. Now this was the remarkable deliverance. Just before the appointed day the Justice of the Peace's son, who was at Oxford, disappeared with a travelling actress, and the Justice had to go after him and

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so was not available on the day. The vicar suddenly died. Another who was going to be a perjured witness was taken seriously ill so that he could not attend (and later died). A fourth fell down and broke his leg so that he was unable to travel there. Eventually, out of the seven or eight, there was only one left, Edward Stennett's gardener, and he was so overcome with shame to think of what he was doing that he refused to appear. So when Edward Stennett eventually appeared at Newbury Assizes, there was not a single person there to witness against him.

An interesting thing about Edward Stennett (and all the four generations of Stennetts) was that they were all Seventh Day Baptists. They believed the doctrines of grace, they practised believers' baptism, but they kept Saturday as the Sabbath. Of course, being gracious men, walking in the fear of God, they also kept Sunday so that they would not cause any difficulty or concern for their brethren.

In those days there were a number of Seventh Day Baptists. Generally speaking they died out many years ago, though just after the end of the last War there was still one congregation of Seventh Day Baptists in London, though meeting in a private house.

About the year 1686 Edward Stennett came up to London to preach to a wealthy Particular Baptist congregation that met in Pinners' Hall. Very interesting are these old Particular Baptist meetings in London. Many of them met in the old halls that belonged to the various trade guilds. This was the Pinners' Hall. It had once been an Augustinian monastery and was a vast building with six galleries; here a Particular Baptist church worshipped. It would appear that Edward Stennett still lived down at Wallingford, and travelled up to London from time to time to preach.

The testimony of Edward Stennett's contemporaries is that he was a very worthy man. It is recorded of him that he knew

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what it was both to be severely persecuted and also to be imprisoned for Jesus' sake. When he died the epitaph for him and his wife was written by his son Joseph and appeared upon their grave:

Here lies an holy and a happy pair;
As once in grace, they now in glory share.
They dared to suffer, but they feared to sin,
And meekly bore the cross the crown to win:
So lived, as not to be afraid to die;
So died, as heirs of immortality.

Joseph Stennett (1663-1713)

We now come to his son, the second of this remarkable family. This was the member of the family who was specially connected with Benjamin Keach.

Because of his father's position and influence, Joseph had an excellent education at the Grammar School at Wallingford, and in his very early days was called by God's grace. At the age of 22 Joseph moved up to London, where, first of all, he made his living as a schoolmaster (or private tutor) and became connected with his father's congregation in Pinners' Hall. At the age of 25 he married a French Huguenot lady. (This was three years after the Huguenots were expelled from France by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV, when many of them fled to this country.) At the age of 27 he succeeded his father, becoming the pastor at Pinners' Hall. His ordination service was taken by the venerable Hansard Knollys (1599-1691), one of the 'founders' of the Particular Baptist denomination in this country.

There is here just a little connection again with Benjamin Keach. Fifteen years before he died Keach was so ill that it was feared that he was a dying man; it was not possible for him to live. Hansard Knollys came along and pleaded with God to save such a life; he said such a life could not be spared. He pleaded that God would add fifteen years to Benjamin Keach's

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life, and the prayer was answered to the letter. Knollys himself died not long afterwards but Benjamin Keach lived on for another fifteen years, dying in 1704.

The days of Joseph Stennett's pastorate at Pinners' Hall were days of great spiritual prosperity.

Joseph Stennett, as a Seventh Day Baptist being free on the Lord's day, also preached each Lord's day to a well-known congregation of Baptists meeting at the Barbican. However, after some years, he was suspended from this office at the Barbican, the reason being given that he was 'far too Calvinistic'.

Now, what of the man? He was very highly esteemed, earnest, godly, a fluent preacher. He was also a man of eminent literary ability, speaking French, Italian, Hebrew, and various Oriental languages. He published a translation of Plato. Also he was a writer on religious subjects. He wrote on baptism, opposing the claims of those who contended for infant baptism. He also wrote controversial works, defending the truth against the Roman Catholics, against the Unitarians, and against the Quakers. Because of his abilities it was said that he could have had the most exalted positions in the Church of England. There was great pressure on him to cease his Nonconformity and to conform to the Church of England, and many honours were promised him. Yet in later years Joseph Stennett said this was not even a temptation to him! He never even considered it.

Joseph Stennett's influence was great. Amongst his Christian friends he was continually sought for for advice. In the political world he was often consulted by the great Whig lords in Parliament. On the other hand, the Tory party tried to win him over to their side, feeling that if they had him, they would gain the support of most of the English Dissenters. In fact a number of the well-known political pamphlets of the day ('squibs', as they were known) are reputed to have been written by Joseph Stennett.

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It was during Joseph Stennett's ministry in London that England gained one of its most famous victories at the battle of Blenheim under the great Duke of Marlborough. On that occasion Joseph Stennett preached a thanksgiving sermon in which he compared the French soldiers falling into the River Danube to Pharaoh's troops being swallowed up in the Red Sea. Very remarkably Queen Anne was so pleased to receive a copy of this sermon that she sent a grant of money to Joseph Stennett; remarkably, because she was always a rigid opponent of all those who dissented from the Church of England. Again a little connection with Keach: the battle of Blenheim was fought in the year when Benjamin Keach died (1704).

A special point of interest concerning Joseph Stennett and his connection with Benjamin Keach. Joseph Stennett was a hymn-writer of quality: in fact, the earliest Baptist hymn-writer whose hymns ever appeared in hymn-books and were in common use. Most of the hymns he wrote were on Baptism and the Lord's Supper. His friend and associate Nahum Tate, the poet laureate (he was the author of 'While shepherds watched'), described his contemporary Joseph Stennett as being a 'good poet'; while the great Dr Watts was not ashamed to confess that he borrowed some of his lines from Stennett's hymns, saying that he greatly admired the beautiful language.

Humanly speaking, Joseph Stennett's hymns are the reason why hymn-singing did not sink into oblivion. Let me explain. At first there was no hymn-singing. Then Benjamin Keach introduced hymn-singing into his congregation and at first there was tremendous controversy about the congregational singing of hymns. Sad to say, Keach's own hymns were of rather a poor quality of poetry. Just one example:

The antiquity of scripture show
That they are most divine,
For no writings did the world know
As soon as they did shine.

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That was typical of Keach's hymns. They were sound doctrinally, but most unpoetical. And so really they did not take on, and there was the danger that hymns would just fall into disrepute.

Then Joseph Stennett appeared, and some of his hymns are very beautiful. Strangely, none of Joseph Stennett's hymns seem to be sung today, but the old Particular Baptists (using Rippon's Collection) sang many of them. (I wonder why William Gadsby never incorporated any of Joseph Stennett's hymns in his collection?) Here is just one verse of one of Joseph Stennett's hymns, the opening verse of one of his hymns on the Lord's Supper:

Lord, at Thy table I behold
The wonders of Thy grace:
But most of all admire that I
Should find a welcome place.

There is no need to comment on the contrast between Joseph Stennett's poetry and the poetry of Benjamin Keach.

At the age of 49 Joseph Stennett's health broke down. He came into Buckinghamshire to live with one of his daughters, and there he died. Concerning Joseph Stennett's end, the Baptist historian Crosby recalls that those who were present spoke of the pleasant smile on his countenance. He signified in a calm manner a firm and well-grounded hope of a blessed condition in an eternal world. One of his friends asked him: being so weak in body, how did he feel in his soul? His answer was: 'I rejoice in the God of my salvation, who is my Strength, and my God.' So died Joseph Stennett in the year 1713.

Joseph Stennett the Younger (1692-1758)

Now, the third of this interesting family, another Joseph Stennett: if you will, Joseph Stennett junior, or, as later he was known, Dr Joseph Stennett.

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Joseph Stennett the younger was at first a Particular Baptist minister at Abergavenny, and then at Exeter. Then in 1737 he became the Particular Baptist pastor of a congregation meeting in Little Wild Street, London. This was a church which always met on Sunday, though Joseph Stennett the younger, like all his family, still kept the Saturday strictly as the Sabbath. His ordination service was taken by the renowned Dr Gill.

Joseph Stennett the younger was noted as being one of the most eloquent preachers of his day. Also, he was a true patriot. A most interesting event is recorded of his ministry in the year 1745, the year of the rising of 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', when he sought to win back the British throne to the Stuart house. 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' gathered an army in Scotland and began to march south, seeking to reach London and to overthrow the Protestant house of Hanover. As history tells us, eventually he was turned back when he reached the city of Derby; but there were awful fears that there might be the re-establishment of Roman Catholicism in this country and the loss of Protestant privileges. We read of Dr Doddridge in Northampton helping to gather together men to fight, and the British Dissenters generally were seized with feelings of great patriotism.

It was at this time Joseph Stennett the younger preached a remarkable sermon, during which great enthusiasm was felt by his congregation. So strangely were their hearts moved that many of the gentlemen in the congregation rose from their seats during the sermon, drew their swords from their scabbards, waved them above their heads and cried out aloud that they would die holding allegiance to the Protestant faith and to the house of Hanover. Perhaps, then, it is not too surprising to find that Joseph Stennett the younger was well known by the King, George II, and esteemed by him. He was very friendly with various of the most eminent persons in England in his day.

Joseph Stennett's fame and learning being heard of in Scotland, the University of Edinburgh granted him the degree

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of Doctor of Divinity, this being recommended by their Chancellor, the Duke of Cumberland. (In those days no Dissenter had the privilege of entering either of the Universities of Cambridge or Oxford.)

In 1758, this eloquent preacher died. This was his dying testimony: 'It is my great comfort, in view of eternity, that I have been led in these changeable, sad times steadily and constantly to maintain those doctrines, which I find are able to support me at such a season as this. I always thought the great design of the gospel was to lay the creature in the dust, and exalt the great Redeemer.'

So died Joseph Stennett the younger. His funeral sermon was preached by Dr Gill from the text: 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.'

Samuel Stennett (1727-95)

This brings us to the fourth generation, the fourth in this remarkable family, Joseph Stennett junior's son, Samuel Stennett. His is the name that is most familiar because of his hymns, which are still sung.

Samuel Stennett, great-grandson of the original Edward, was called by grace early in life and was baptized by his father. In one of his hymns (Rippon's 437) he gives his testimony of how the Lord called him by grace. In that hymn he says this (among other things):

Darkness, and pain, and grief,
Oppressed my gloomy mind;
I looked around me for relief,
But no relief could find.

At length to God I cried;
He heard my plaintive sigh;
He heard, and instantly he sent
Salvation from on high.

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My drooping head he raised;
My bleeding wounds He healed;
Pardoned my sins, and with a smile
The gracious pardon sealed.

At the age of 21 Samuel Stennett was appointed assistant pastor to his father, this being a practice that was quite common in the eighteenth century. Then, ten years later, upon his father's death he succeeded him as sole pastor. The Baptist historian Cramp says: 'Few men have risen so high in general esteem.' He was esteemed both as a preacher and a writer, and for his learning, his kindness, his wisdom, his zeal and his holy life.

In Stennett's congregation at Little Wild Street could be seen one of the well-known figures of the eighteenth century, John Howard (1726-90), the prison reformer. Whenever John Howard was in London he worshipped with Stennett, though his membership stood with the Independent church at Bedford. When John Howard died, Stennett preached and published a sermon on the text: 'He went about doing good.' Howard testified of how much he missed Stennett's ministry when he was absent—and often he was absent, travelling not only through Britain but throughout Europe gathering together information to help him in his campaign for the improvement of prison conditions. He wrote a letter to Samuel Stennett from Smyrna on 11 August, 1786, which included this:

With unabated pleasure I have attended your ministry. No man ever entered more into my religious sentiments, or more happily expressed them. O sir, how many Sabbaths have I ardently longed to spend in Wild Street! If at sea, I keep retired in my cabin. It is you that preach [meaning that he was reading Stennett's printed sermons], and I bless God that I attend with renewed pleasure. God in Christ is my Rock, the portion of my soul. I have little more to add, but accept my renewed thanks. I bless God for your ministry.

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Samuel Stennett is described as a man of great refinement and polished manners, so that he moved very easily in high society and thus warmly recommended the cause of the Nonconformists and religious freedom amongst the nobility. Like his father, he too was given a Doctorate in Divinity, this time from the University of Aberdeen. Again, like his honoured grandfather, he could have had many honours in the Church of England but he continually refused them.

Today Samuel Stennett is best known as a hymn-writer. Many of his hymns appeared in Dr Rippon's selection. Dr Julian, in the standard work on hymnology (1891), said that at that time there were twenty-eight of Samuel Stennett's hymns in current use. We think of hymns like:

'How charming is the place!'

'How soft the words my Saviour speaks!'

'Let avarice from shore to shore,
Her favourite God pursue.'

'What wisdom, majesty and grace
Through all the gospel shine!'

'Where two or three with sweet accord.'

'My Captain sounds the alarm of war.'

'Come, every gracious heart
That loves the Saviour's name.'

This last one seems to be perhaps the best known; you find it in most hymn-books (from *Gadsby's* to *Golden Bells*), though with a slight variety in the first line.

In the last days of his life Samuel Stennett lost his wife, and from that time he lost interest in everything here below. Yet his preaching became more fervent. The two last sermons he ever preached were marked by a very peculiar and special savour of

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Christ, as the dying man spoke very sweetly of Jesus as his great High Priest, 'touched with the feeling of our infirmities'. This had followed a sleepless night when he had been awake, feeling very ill, and yet led to feel the sympathy of the Lord Jesus. He spoke of this as one of the happiest nights of all his life.

His last days were days of much blessing. On his death-bed, in great weakness, he was given vinegar with which to gargle. He replied, 'In *His* thirst, they gave Him vinegar to drink. O when I reflect on the sufferings of Christ, I am ready to say, "What have I been thinking of all my life?" What He did and suffered are *now* my only support.' Also he feelingly repeated a verse from one of his own hymns:

Father, at Thy call I come,
In Thy bosom there is room
For a guilty soul to hide,
Pressed with grief on every side.

Among his last utterances was: 'Christ is to me the chiefest among ten thousand, and the altogether lovely.' So died Samuel Stennett in 1795.

A touching little story is told concerning a verse of one of Samuel Stennett's hymns in more recent times. On one occasion a well-known minister was staying at a home where the bedroom was in poor condition, and there was even a hole in the roof. Now that night was very wet, and throughout the night the rain could be heard falling in the bedroom where the minister was sleeping; yet that particular night he was wonderfully favoured in his soul. The next morning, when his host apologized for the state of the room and especially the leak in the roof, the minister, feeling the blessing of the Lord in his soul, very graciously replied in the language of Samuel Stennett:

Not the fair palaces
To which the great resort,

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Are once to be compared with this,
Where Jesus holds His court.

* * *

So we give thanks to God for the Stennetts, especially because of their faithful witness to the truth. They never deviated, they never compromised. Some of them were called to suffer, some of them had the greatest allurements to draw them aside, but they never deviated from the truth.

Their witness stretches over a period of a hundred and fifty years: first, the Civil War; then Commonwealth times, the times of the Puritans; then days of persecution; then times of toleration; then the Age of Reason, in which there was awful spiritual decline in this country; finally the Evangelical Revival, and afterwards. Their witness stretched over all those times—a period of a hundred and fifty years. Learned, refined, honourable, above everything else godly, they were faithful to the truth as in Jesus. They never deviated, they never compromised.

‘Of whom the world was not worthy.’

‘Whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.’