

## Expect Great Things From God; Attempt Great Things for God – The Missionary Life of William Carey

Isaiah 54:1-5

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"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married," says the Lord. 2 "Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. 3 For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities. 4 "Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. 5 For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called" (Isa 54:1-5).

In 1792 a thirty-one year old English pastor stood to preach before a gathering of local pastors. His text was Isaiah 54:2-3

"2 Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes; 3 For thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited."

The title of his message was "**Expect Great Things from God; Attempt Great Things for God**". It was a revolutionary call for the church to see the vision of reaching beyond its national borders and into the "heathen lands" all around the world.

The "heathen" as they were called were the passion of this young man named William Carey. He would eventually be called the father of modern missions, but during his day he was viewed with contempt and as a young upstart with grandiose plans.

Only one year earlier, he had stood to his feet in similar gathering and zealously suggested that they discuss the spreading of the gospel in the unreached heathen lands. To which a long time friend and mentor replied, "Young man sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!"<sup>1</sup>

But God was pleased to convert the heathen, and God providentially ordained Carey to blaze the trail of modern missions. He was a man who expected great things from God and attempted great things for God, and he became the father of modern-day missions.

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<sup>1</sup> E.A. Annett, William Carey – Pioneer Missionary. (Greenville, South Carolina: Ambassador Publications, 2000), p. 21

What we see in William Carey's life is a beautiful tapestry of one man's life, struggle, pain and triumph. And woven into this fabric of missionary zeal is the gracious providence of God. History provides a clear vision of the hand of God in Carey's life. Our aim today is to rekindle our passion and vision for missions at College Park by seeing the Biblical concept of providence illustrated in the life of William Carey.

## **The Life of William Carey<sup>2</sup>**

On August 17, 1761, William Carey was born to Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Carey. His father was a weaver and the father of four other children after the birth of William. At age six, his father was given the post of a parish clerk and village school master. The school was very primitive and so was Carey's education.

His father was a man of strict integrity, and there was the presence of the Word of God in the Carey home. However, it appears that William's father had no relationship with Christ and church was a mere formality.

At age twelve, Carey was following the path of most at his age. With a nominal education, he was destined to work the fields. However, a disease affected his hands and face whenever he would be long exposed to the sun. For two years he attempted to endure this agony, and was graciously given an apprenticeship to a shoemaker in a neighboring village. The rumblings of God's movements had begun.

## **The Spiritual Cradle of Olney**

Carey the cobbler now found himself in the company of some very worldly men. It wasn't long until he had drunk the full cup of the village culture. At the end of Carey's second year, his cobbler-boss died, and he transferred to another cobbler in the same village named Mr. Old.

In Mr. Old's workshop there was another apprentice who was a part of the "dissenter" movement, which had left the established church. There were many discussions and even arguments in their workshop, but the consistent life of the elder apprentice slowly won Carey over. Carey eventually began to accompany his workmate to a weekly prayer meeting.

Carey found himself unusually attracted to the passion for godliness in this new association. He became a regular at the dissenting church and sought out times for personal heart searching. At the end of that two-year spiritual journey, he received Christ. The final decision actually came about through the reading of a tract. God had clearly drawn Carey to Himself.

Carey found his spiritual home among the Baptists of England, and became a budding preacher in the surrounding villages. He continued to work as a cobbler while learning Greek, Latin and Hebrew from any minister in the area who could spare him some time.

Just before he was twenty years old, he married Dorothy Plackett and took control of the cobbler business after the death of his employer. Not long afterwards there was depression in the trade, and he lost the business. As well, his first infant child died, and he was tormented with an illness that left him prematurely bald and unable to work for nearly a year.

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<sup>2</sup> Nearly all information regarding the life of William Carey has been gathered from E.A. Annett's book entitled, William Carey – Pioneer Missionary. Specific quotations will be noted with page numbers in the footnotes

The village that Carey lived in was called Hackleton. It is no coincidence that the nearby village of Olney contained a treasure of people. William Cowper the poet lived there and the pastor of the church had been John Newton. There were three Baptist pastors who all had great influence on Him: Sutcliff, Ryland and Fuller.

Carey joined Sutcliff's church after being baptized in 1783. One evening a month Sutcliff set aside time for interdenominational prayer meeting, and he republished a work on prayer and evangelism by Jonathan Edwards. This prayer meeting and pamphlet were by divine design. They would both supply the environment for the first Missionary Society.

"Nowhere in England...could there have been found a more favorable spot for Carey's peculiar character and mission...Olney was created by God {as} a cradle for the mighty enterprise of foreign missions."<sup>3</sup>

In 1786 Carey was called to his first church in Moulton. He went there because he could still teach school (which he hated) while providing the supplemental means of income for his family.

### **Birth of a Global Vision**

His favorite subject to teach was geography, and he taught it from a leather globe that he made. It became increasingly painful to Carey how vast portion of the world was in spiritual darkness. In his workshop at home, he constructed a huge map made of many pieces of paper all pasted together. He would gather information on each country, researching the population, religion, government and customs. God was igniting a burning passion in his heart.

Soon after this Carey attended a meeting of Baptist pastors where he stood to unleash his vision and burden, but was sternly rejected. This rejection was difficult, but Carey returned home and wrote a pamphlet entitled "An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen"<sup>4</sup>. It was the first missionary treatise in the English language. The treatise detailed the biblical obligation to reach unreached people groups, rebuffed the common excuses used, and called the church to personal sacrifice to reach them.

Carey believed that the unconverted state of the world demanded the church's attention:

"After all, the uncivilized state of the heathen, instead of affording an objection against preaching the gospel to them, ought to furnish an argument for it. Can we as men, or as Christians, hear that a great part of our fellow creatures, whose souls are as immortal as ours, and who are as capable as ourselves, of adorning the gospel and contributing by their preaching, writings, or practices to the glory of our Redeemer's name, and the good of his church, are enveloped in ignorance and barbarism? Can we hear that they are without the gospel, without government, without laws, and without arts, and sciences; and not exert ourselves to introduce amongst them the sentiments of men, and of Christians? Would not the spread of the gospel be the most effectual mean of their civilization?"

He was not afraid to call the church to sacrifice:

A Christian minister is a person who in a peculiar sense is not his own; he is the servant of God, and therefore ought to be wholly devoted to him. By entering on that sacred office he solemnly

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<sup>3</sup> Annett, 16

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/carey/an\\_enquiry\\_into\\_the\\_obligation\\_o.htm](http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/carey/an_enquiry_into_the_obligation_o.htm)

undertakes to be always engaged, as much as possible, in the Lord's work, and not to choose his own pleasure, or employment, or pursue the ministry as a something that is to subserve his own ends, or interests, or as a kind of bye-work. He engages to go where God pleases, and to do, or endure what he sees fit to command, or call him to, in the exercise of his function. He virtually bids farewell to friends, pleasures, and comforts, and stands in readiness to endure the greatest sufferings in the work of his Lord, and Master.

He had a vision of heaven filled with the glory of God through a global effort:

What a heaven will it be to see the many myriads of poor heathens, of Britons amongst the rest, who by their labours have been brought to the knowledge of God. Surely a crown of rejoicing like this is worth aspiring to. Surely it is worthwhile to lay ourselves out with all our might, in promoting the cause, and kingdom of Christ.

Missions became his unrelenting passion. One person at a time, Carey began to unload his burden. His friends and even his wife all told him that it was a waste of time, but persistence paid off.

In 1792 he was asked to be the speaker at the annual Baptist association meeting in Nottingham. Carey preached from Isaiah 54:2-3 drawing out two famous points: Expect great things from God; Attempt great things for God. He earnestly pleaded for the salvation of the heathen and rebuked the church for its indifference. By the end of the message, the pastors were deeply affected.

They called for a meeting in October of the same year and the Baptist Missionary Society was formed whose mission was to "carry the gospel to some portion of the heathen world". At the end of the meeting, Cary rose to his feet and formally offered himself for the pioneering work. He was ready to go at once for any part of the world that they might decide upon.

And so, God raised up this ignorant, cobbler as a pioneer to awaken the church for global missions. God providentially orchestrated the events of Carey's life and placed within him an incredible burden that would not go away.

### **Making Vision a Reality**

Having finally convinced the Association in 1792 that it was time to reach the "heathen lands", Carey had to turn the corner from dreams to reality. It would prove quite difficult and painful.

His father, upon hearing of Carey's plans said, "Is William mad?" His wife, who was timid by nature and unappreciative of her husband's passion, was not inclined to go with him. Carey decided that he would take his oldest son Felix with him and send for the family after a suitable home was found. Eventually Dorothy reluctantly agreed to go.

Amazingly, the decision regarding where Carey was to go was not even made yet! The world was before them, but there were no clear open doors. As the new missionary society discussed their options, a letter was presented to the society from a surgeon named Thomas who was a Baptist layman who had served as a freelance missionary and doctor Bengal (modern day India). He had written to Carey, having heard about his passion. After reading the letter, the decision was made to send Carey to Bengal.

It was determined that they would go in the Spring, but there were two problems: money and the East India Company. The East India Trading Company controlled all passage rights to Bengal or India as a monopoly. The company was not favorable toward Christianity and would have never granted them license to come. However the society was able to find a way to get them into a part of India that was beyond the control of the dreaded East India Company. On June 13, 1793, the Careys with three children one on the way left for India. They would never see England again.

### **The Hard Work Begins**

In November, 1793 (5 months later), they arrived in India. God had put Carey into the most strategic of all fields, but Carey had a vision for missions even beyond India. On his journey he wrote, "I hope the Society will go on and increase and that the multitude of heathen in the world may hear the glorious words of truth. Africa is but a little way from England, Madagascar a bit further....a large field opens on every side"<sup>5</sup>

The environment of India was less than hospitable. The East India Company held a monopoly on the land and forbade any attempts to evangelize. As well the mission society had incorrectly figured the cost of living in Calcutta and money became very sparse. Additionally, his children suffered from dysentery, and the weather was miserable. Carey described it as "baking for four months, boiling for four more and four trying to get cool....only the insects and undertakers enjoy the climate."<sup>6</sup>

The cost on his family was great, and it showed particularly in the case of Mrs. Carey. They were barely out to sea when she began her "ceaseless reproaches". She complained bitterly about their poverty and their difficult existence. Additionally, the children suffered from dysentery after they landed in Calcutta.

While in Calcutta, Carey began learning the language and translation work. The environment of Calcutta was literally killing his family, so he moved them south of Calcutta down river into the wilderness. Life south of Calcutta was more agrarian and he hoped to live off of the land, but this was equally as difficult. His great missions zeal had found him a lonely vagrant, living on the land and trying to build a house for his family in the middle of the wilderness.

But God had not forgotten Him. Years earlier, Thomas had met a man named Udny who was now in charge of East India's commercial factory at Malda (400 miles north of Calcutta). He offered Thomas a position in this indigo factory. Thomas seized the opportunity and sought employment for Carey as well. This new position saved the Careys from starvation and also freed him up from governmental suspicion.

Using the position at the Indigo factory, Carey was able to travel, preach and dialogue with anyone he could find who would listen. He organized worship services at the factory and worked on the translation of the Bengali New Testament. It was a four-year project, and he attempted to find a way to have it printed. The cost was enormous to have it printed in

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<sup>5</sup> Annett, 30

<sup>6</sup> Annett, 43

Calcutta. Amazingly, Carey heard of a wooden printer for sale and was able to buy his own printer for one tenth of the cost!

This was a rare bright spot for Carey. The first seven years were incredibly costly to him personally. He was constantly sick. His little son Peter died of fever, and it sent his wife over the edge. She began losing touch with reality. She was confined to her room and restrained for twelve years until her death in 1807. He would marry two other times. In 1808 he married Charlotte Rumohr who became the love of his life. She was somewhat handicapped from a fire as a child, but she was very godly, supportive and a beloved partner in the work.

### **The Serampore Years**

Unfortunately, the indigo factory was not profitable, and it was forced to close. Gratefully, some additional missionary help arrived, and the decision was made to relocate the work to Serampore where he would spend the next 34 years of his life. Serampore was in Danish controlled land and they were invited to come by the Colonel who governed the land. He encouraged them to come and build churches, open schools, start a press and preach all around the country under the protection of the Danish government.

Thus, the trio of Serampore was formed: Carey, Marshman and Ward. Ward was in charge of printing and Marshman opened numerous boarding schools which became very profitable. After a few months into the settlement of Serampore and Ward handed Carey the first printed copy of the Bengali New Testament.

Life at Serampore began to hum with evangelistic activity. Six years into the work a letter to the Society recorded six stations in Bengal with full time missionaries; four other occupied by natives; eight other stations in surrounding regions. They had recorded 765 baptisms. The New Testament had been printed in a dozen languages in India along with grammar books. There were ten plus elementary schools and a seminary. In 1803, Carey's sons started the first Sunday School. "The day of grace had begun in Bengal."<sup>7</sup>

Carey had become a master of the language. In 1800, Fort William College in Calcutta was formed and Carey was asked to become a professor of Bengali. He used the position of professor to reach the metropolis of Calcutta. Every Monday he would board a boat to Calcutta 18 miles away. After four days, he would return to the work at Serampore.

Translation work took off at Serampore. With their vision of the Bengali Bible complete, they set their sights on translations for all the languages in the East. A huge hall was set up with multiple translators, and an entire process of printing the Bible was perfected.

### **The Lord Has Laid Me Low**

In March of 1812, a horrible fire hit the printing warehouse. The huge fire consumed all of Carey's manuscripts, his dictionaries, fourteen sets of type for Eastern languages. Carey was obvious crushed, yet he trusted in the providence of God. He said to the chaplain at Fort Williams:

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<sup>7</sup> Annett, 89

“In one short evening the labor of years are consumed. How unsearchable are the ways of God. I had lately brought something to the utmost perfection of which they seemed capable, and contemplated the missionary establishment with perhaps too much self-congratulation. The Lord has laid me low that I may look more simply to him.”<sup>8</sup>

But it was this fire that made the work in India famous and world renown. Word of the fire spread all over Europe and America. Within 50 days 10,000 pounds in England and Scotland poured into the mission society. One member of the missionary Society said, “We must tell people to stop giving!”

The work continued on at Serampore through numerous trials and victories including: the establishment of Serampore College in 1818, a horrible flood that nearly destroyed their compound, friction amongst new missionaries, a changing missions agency that was too distant from the work, financial difficulties and the death of his colleague of 23 years – Mr. Ward. In 1822, he married again to Grace Hughes a 43 year old widow. They spent the last 10 years of Carey’s life together immersed in the work of Serampore.

### **Lessons from Carey’s Legacy**

William Carey’s influence on missions and on the history of India cannot be overstated. He was a famous missionary, translator and educator. He introduced the steam engine to India and perfected printing. He fought for social justice, especially the rights of women and children. He was God’s appointed man for the hour.

In light of the imprint of his life, let us draw some spiritual lessons or applications:

#### **1. God is pleased to glorify himself through unlikely people**

One author says this about Carey and his influence: “He was a pioneer of the modern Western Christian missionary movement, reaching out to all parts of the world; a pioneer of the protestant church in India and the translator and publisher of the Bible in 40 different Indian languages. Carey was an evangelist who used every available medium to illumine every dark facet of Indian life...He is the central character in the story of India’s modernization.”<sup>9</sup>

Here is a simply shoe cobbler in the hands of God! It reminds me of 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

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<sup>8</sup> Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi, The Legacy of William Carey – A Model for the Transformation of a Culture, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1999), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Mangalwadi, 25

## **2. God's undergirding providence is both traumatic and comforting**

By providence I mean God's control of all events, and it is clear the William Carey's life was governed by the clear command of a gracious heavenly father. Missions work was filled with difficulty and hardship, but when you can survey the totality of a person's life you see the beauty of God's provision.

8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 10 He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again (2 Cor 1:8-10).

Don't diminish the circumstances, opportunities, and challenges in your life. You never know how God might use you to advance his kingdom, and you never know how a hardship is just the beginning of a great movement of God.

## **3. Reaching the unreached is worth unconventional sacrifice**

Carey's life was radical for his day and age. He carried a lonely burden, but it was a worthy one. It was a God-birthed vision to make personal and corporate sacrifices in order to reach people that the church had neglected. Unreached people are unreached for a reason, and Carey's life is a shining example of a man who refused to allow the status quo to remain the norm.

We too should have a vision informed by the beautiful scene in Revelation 7:9-10.

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9-10).

And this vision should motivate us to expect great things from God while attempting great things for God.

During a visit to the ailing Carey a friend and he spent some time visiting and in prayer. As his friend left he heard his named feebly called, "Mr. Duff, he whispered, "you have been speaking about Dr. Carey, Dr. Carey; when I am gone say nothing about Dr. Carey – speak about Dr. Carey's Savior."

On June 9, 1834, William Carey quietly passed away in the presence of his beloved laborers. The next morning he was buried on the mission grounds. Carey chose this simple inscription: "A wretched, poor and helpless worm. On thy kind arms I fall".

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