

Adoniram Judson – Missionary to Burma

His Early Years and Conversion:

- 1) Adoniram Judson was born in Malden, Massachusetts on August 9, 1788. His father's name also was Adoniram, a man of strong character who was a Congregationalist pastor. His mother's name was Abigail, a gentle, loving and godly woman. His mother taught him to read at the age of three and after returning from a long absence, his father was pleased to hear his son read a chapter from the Scriptures. As a four year old, his favorite activity was "playing church" with his friends. He was always the one responsible for preaching and he always chose the hymn "Go preach my Gospel, saith the Lord" for them to sing.
- 2) At the age of 16 Adoniram entered the Rhode Island College at Providence (Brown University) where he stood out as an exemplary student. Soon after admission to the college, the President of the University wrote the following words to Adoniram's father concerning his son: "A uniform propriety of conduct, as well as an intense application to study, distinguishes his character. Your expectations of him, however sanguine, must certainly be gratified. I most heartily congratulate you, my dear sir, on that charming prospect which you have exhibited in this very amiable and promising son; and I most heartily pray that the Father of mercies may make him now, while a youth, a son in his spiritual family and give him an earnest of the inheritance of the saints in light."
- 3) It was not long, however, that Adoniram came under the influence of "free thinkers and atheists" at the University, led by a young man named Jacob Eames, who was a fellow student and possessed a strong personality. Eames, a Deist, rejected all revealed religion, deriding faith and openly mocking and ridiculing the gospel message. It was not long before Judson converted to this way of thinking, and upon graduation when he was 19 years old, he openly professed to his parents that he was a Deist, that he believed that the Scriptures were merely the work of men (as were the Koran or the writings of Buddha), and that Jesus, though the son of man, was not the Son of God. His father was astonished and outraged at what his son now professed to believe and despite his rebuke and attempt to reason with him, and the tears of his mother as she faced the reality that her boy had deliberately chosen the way to hell instead of heaven, Adoniram left home again, six days after arriving from college, and went to New York City hoping to make a name for himself in the theatre. When this did not work out, he left New York riding on his horse, wandering ever further from his parent's home, looking for something that would bring him fulfillment.
- 3) Adoniram would not get much further in his journey to the far country before God would stop him in his tracks, and reveal to him the foolishness of his heart. One evening, as night drew near he turned into a local inn and requested a room for the night. The innkeeper apologized and told him that the inn was full except for a room that was next to the room of a young man who was critically ill, and dying. Being tired and desiring a good night's sleep, Adoniram dismissed the innkeepers concern and agreed to take the available room. He got into bed and tried to fall asleep, but he could not. On the other side of the wall, in the room next to him, he could hear the sound of footsteps coming and going; voices speaking softly; and the groans of the dying man. This went on for hours until finally he fell asleep. When he woke the next morning, he found the innkeeper, and after paying the bill, he inquired how the man in the room next to him was doing. The innkeeper replied by telling him that the young man had died during the night. Taken back by the news, Adoniram then asked him if he knew who the man was. The innkeeper responded by saying, "Oh yes. A young man from the college in Providence. Name was Eames, Jacob Eames." Courtney Anderson in his biography on the life of Adoniram Judson entitled "To the Golden Shore" recounts Judson's response to the news that his friend and mentor had died in the room next to him during the night. "One word was tolling in his mind like a bell: the word "Lost!" In death, Jacob Eames was lost – utterly, irrevocably lost. Lost to his friends, to the world, to the future. Lost as a puff of smoke is lost in the infinity of air. If Eames own views were true, neither his life nor his death had any meaning. The coincidence of his dying on the other side of a partition from Adoniram, in a remote country inn, was simply a meaningless incident, in a plan too huge and impersonal to take account of individuals. But suppose Eames had been mistaken? Suppose the Scriptures were literally true and a personal God real? Then Jacob Eames was already lost in a most desperate sense. For already, this moment, Eames knew his error – too late for repentance. Knowing his mistake, regretting it with a bitterness which no living human could ever possibly imagine, he was experiencing already the unimaginable torments of the flames of hell – any chance of remedy, of going back, of correcting, lost, eternally lost ... That hell should open in that country inn and snatch Jacob Eames, his dearest friend and guide, from the next bed – this could not, simply could not, be pure

coincidence.” With that, after only a five week journey, Adoniram saddled his horse, and returned home to Plymouth.

4) Judson arrived home on September 22, 1808 and on October 12th he entered the Andover Theological Seminary and was enrolled as a special student due to the fact that, as of yet, he made no profession of faith. He continued to struggle in his own soul for several more weeks until he testified that in the month of November he “began to entertain a hope of having received the regenerating influences of the Holy Spirit.” On the second day of December – a day that he never forgot – he “made a solemn dedication of himself to God.” Having now found peace with God, he devoted himself to his studies. He joined the church in Plymouth the following summer, much to the joy of his father and mother. Judson, by the grace of God had become a new man. “He banished forever, those dreams of literary and political ambition in which he had formerly indulged, and simply asked himself, How shall I order my future being as best to please God?”

His Life’s Ministry:

1) In February of 1810 Adoniram had resolved to become a missionary. He eagerly read all that he could lay his hands on dealing with India, China and what was then known as the “Golden Kingdom”, Burma. Judson became increasingly concerned over the seeming complacency of so many Christians in America. He wrote in a magazine article, “How do Christians discharge the trust committed to them? They let three fourths of the world sleep the sleep of death, ignorant of the simple truth that a Savior died for them. Content if they can be useful in the little circle of their acquaintances, they quietly sit and see whole nations perish for lack of knowledge.” He found some friends from Williams College with the same desire for missions and often met with them at a haystack on the college grounds to pray earnestly for the salvation of the heathen and that the Lord would open up doors to them that they might take the gospel to foreign lands. This spot has been marked as the birthplace of American foreign missions. This group persistently lobbied the Congregationalists to establish an agency for overseas missions. As a result, the General Association of Congregational Ministers gave approval for the funding of the missionary endeavors.

2) On February 5, 1812, Judson married Ann Hassletine and fourteen days later set sail aboard the “Caravan” from America to Calcutta, India, supported by the First American Board of Foreign Missions. They did not go with a return ticket as they never expected to return to America again.

3) During their voyage, among other things, Judson studied the subject of baptism and became convinced that immersion as a believer was what the Scriptures taught. Soon after their arrival in India, Judson and his wife were baptized. Because of this, their support was cut off by the Congregationalists. However the Baptists, upon hearing of this change, formed the American Baptist Missionary Union and took over their support.

4) Being forced out of India by the East India Company, the Judson’s settled in Rangoon, Burma on July 13, 1813. The first ten years in Burma they spent mastering the Burmese language. Three years after their arrival, Judson completed a grammar for the Burmese language. On May 20, 1817 he finished the translation of Matthew and then began work on a Burmese dictionary. He wrote and prayerfully gave out tracts, catechisms and copies of the Gospel of Matthew to those who inquired. On April 4, 1819, he preached his first public sermon to fifteen adults and several children and on June 27th of that same year, baptized his first Burmese convert, Moug Hau. Upon Moug’s baptism, others began to inquire seriously about Christianity as a faith for themselves.

5) As the mission began to see fruit from their labors, their purpose became more widely known which increased the likelihood of persecution. The Viceroy of Rangoon began to harass Judson which resulted in an appeal to the Emperor in Ava requesting protection. His first appeal was to no avail, but his second one was received favorably and he was asked to relocate to Ava. With a church membership of eighteen natives, a chapel, printing press, a school and two missionary couples who had arrived from America to look after the work in Rangoon, the Judsons moved to Ava on January 23, 1824. The Emperor gave them a plot of ground for a mission and assured them royal protection. Things looked very promising until war broke out between Burma and the English government of India. As a result the Judsons were viewed as spies for the English and on June 8, 1824, Judson was committed to prison and for 21 months endured horrible conditions. While incarcerated, his wife brought food to her husband and other prisoners, she gave birth to a baby girl on January 26, 1825 and brought it to the prison to show Adoniram, and both she and the child contracted small pox followed by yellow fever and were brought to the brink of death. In March of 1826, Judson was released from prison to translate and mediate the terms of peace with the English government. After six weeks of service he was again cast into prison as the English continued their advance. Soon the English achieved victory and Judson was released,

returning to Rangoon on March 21, 1826 to rebuild the mission work and resume translation of the Burmese Bible.

6) Within a year of his return his wife and child died and he was left to continue the work without them. Throughout his 38 years of missionary work over 7000 Burmese had come to know the Lord and been baptized, 63 congregations were established under the direction of 163 missionaries, native pastors and assistants. He completed the translation of the Burmese Scriptures on January 31, 1834. Through his desire to reach the nations with the Gospel, the Congregational Mission Board and the Baptist Missionary Union was established. His influence led the Methodists and Presbyterians to organize as well. Shortly after his death, a government survey revealed there to be over 210,000 believers in Burma, close to two percent of the Burmese population. What he witnessed in his lifetime was only a partial fulfillment of the words that he uttered before the Buddhist temple after first arriving in Ava, "A voice mightier than mine, a still small voice, will ere long sweep away every vestige of thy dominion. The churches of Jesus Christ will soon supplant these idolatrous monuments and the chanting devotees of Buddha will die away before the Christian's hymns of praise."

7) In the autumn of 1849, Judson's strength began to fail and in April of 1850 his physician recommended that he take a sea voyage in the hope that it would aid in his recovery. Thus Judson set sail for the Isle of France but during the voyage he only became weaker and on April 12, 1850 he died and his body was buried at sea. In a Baptist meeting house in Malden, Massachusetts is a marble tablet, and on it is inscribed the following:

IN MEMORIAM

**REV. ADONIRAM JUDSON
BORN AUG. 9, 1788
DIED APRIL 12, 1850
MALDEN, HIS BIRTHPLACE
THE OCEAN, HIS SEPULCHRE
CONVERTED BURMANS AND
THE BURMAN BIBLE
HIS MONUMENT.
HIS RECORD IS ON HIGH.**