

Adoniram Judson, “Father of American Missions”

by Pastor Scott Estell

This is the story of the first and perhaps most famous American foreign missionary, Adoniram Judson. It is a story that I have thoroughly enjoyed reading,¹ and the one of which I now write.

Judson’s Life

His Birth

Adoniram Judson, Jr. was born on Saturday, August 9, 1788 in Malden, Massachusetts (five miles north of Boston), the eldest child² of Adoniram Judson, Sr. and Abigail Judson. Adoniram, Sr. was the pastor of a Congregational church in Malden when Adoniram, Jr. was born.

His Childhood

The Judson family lived in Malden until moving to Wenham, Massachusetts in early 1793, after Adoniram, Sr. had accepted the call to pastor a Congregational church there. In 1800, the family moved to Braintree, Massachusetts, living there for two years while Adoniram, Sr. was between pastorates. In 1802, the Judsons moved to Plymouth, Massachusetts, after Adoniram, Sr. accepted the call to pastor a Congregational church there.

His Education

God gave Adoniram, Jr. an exceptional mind, evidenced early on when he learned to read at the age of three. By the age of ten, he had attained a degree of mastery in Greek, Latin, mathematics, and navigation. He entered college (at what was then Rhode Island College, but soon thereafter became Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island) as a sophomore at the age of sixteen³, graduating as class valedictorian at the age of nineteen in 1807. Soon after graduation, he wrote both a mathematics book and an English grammar book.

His Conversion

Like so many of the most monumental men in church history, Adoniram was saved during his young adult years. Though he was raised in a Christian home, he was not a Christian. Due especially to the influence of an unbelieving classmate at Brown, named Jacob Eames, Adoniram rebelled against his parents and left home, informing them on

¹I have researched numerous sources on Judson’s story, the most extensive being the biography on Judson by Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: the Life of Adoniram Judson*.

²Adoniram’s parents would go on to have three other children, thus giving Adoniram three younger siblings: a sister, Abigail (almost three years younger); a brother, Elnathan (almost six years younger); and a sister, Mary (almost eight years younger, but who died when seventh months old).

³This in spite of the fact that a year-long, near-fatal illness caused him to miss a year of his schooling when he was in his early teens.

this twentieth birthday that he was an unbeliever and that he was determined to make a name for himself in the theaters of New York City. After spending some disillusioning days there⁴, he started to make his way elsewhere. On the way to nowhere in particular, he stayed one night at an inn in Connecticut. The only room available was one next to the room in which a dying man was staying. Due to the disturbance made by this dying man, Adoniram did not sleep well that night. When Adoniram checked out of the inn the next morning, he asked the innkeeper about the dying man. The innkeeper informed him that, sadly, the man had died during the night and that his name was ... Jacob Eames. This remarkable providence was a turning point for Judson. He returned home, then enrolled as a special student (special because he was an unbeliever) at Andover Theological Seminary in Andover, Massachusetts in the fall of 1808. Shortly thereafter, on December 2, 1808, at the age of twenty, he made a definitive commitment of his life to Christ.⁵

His Missions-Mindedness

Judson's conversion came at a time when the modern foreign missions movement was being birthed. The early 19th century in America was the time of the Second Great Awakening. One of the most monumental moments during this monumental movement was the "Haystack Prayer Meeting," which took place in August of 1806 when five students from Williams College (in Williamston, Massachusetts), who had gathered for an outdoor prayer meeting, took refuge near a haystack during a thunderstorm in western Massachusetts.⁶ The commitment to missions they made that day, along with Judson's eventual help, led to the formation in 1810 of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the first mission board in American history. It was under the sponsorship of this board that Judson would set sail to the Far East in a few years.

Adoniram surrendered to the call to the foreign mission field in February of 1810.⁷ Though he was offered the opportunity to become the assistant pastor of the largest church in Boston upon graduation from seminary, he remained resolute in his determination to be a foreign missionary, telling his sister, Abigail: "I shall never live in Boston. I have much farther to go" (Anderson, *To the Golden Shore*, p. 59).

⁴While in New York City, Judson regularly failed to pay his lodging bills. When passing through that area three years later, now as a Christian, he returned to the places he had stayed to pay his debts.

⁵"He underwent no sudden conversion, felt no blinding flash of insight. But he was able to note that he 'began to entertain a hope of having received the regenerating influences of the Holy Spirit.' On the second day of December—a day he never forgot—he 'made a solemn dedication of himself to God'" (Anderson, *To the Golden Shore*, p. 50).

⁶Four of these five young men ended up speaking at Andover Theological Seminary while Judson was a student there, undoubtedly influencing him for the cause of foreign missions.

⁷"It was during a solitary walk in the woods behind the college [Andover Seminary], while meditating and praying on the subject, and feeling half inclined to give it up, that the command of Christ, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," was presented to my mind with such clearness and power, that I came to a full decision, and though great difficulties appeared in my way, resolved to obey the command at all events'" (Anderson, *To the Golden Shore*, pp. 56-57).

His Marriage

Adoniram met Ann “Nancy” Hasseltine, daughter of a Congregational church deacon, in the summer of 1809. They would marry on February 5, 1812, he being twenty-three, she being twenty-two. When asking Mr. Hasseltine for his daughter’s hand in marriage, Adoniram wrote: “I have now to ask, whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of a missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all this, for the sake of him who left his heavenly home, and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion; and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with the crown of righteousness, brightened with the acclamations of praise which shall redound to her Saviour from heathens saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?”

To the Mission Field

The day after Adoniram and Nancy were married, Adoniram was ordained by the Congregational church. Two weeks later, the Judsons, along with another missionary couple, Samuel and Harriet Newell, boarded *The Caravan* and set sail for India. During the four-month voyage, a significant change took place in the Judsons’ position regarding baptism. Knowing that, upon their arrival in India, they would meet up with Baptist missionary, William Carey and his associates, Adoniram embarked on an in-depth study of baptism, coming to the conclusion that the Baptist position of believer’s baptism by immersion was what the Bible taught.⁸ Nancy also came to the same conclusion. Consequently, upon their arrival in India, they were baptized by Carey’s associate, William Ward, on September 6, 1812.

To Burma

While the Judsons initially thought that God was leading them to the mission field of India, it became apparent once they arrived there that India was a closed door to them. After a time of uncertainty as to where to go for the gospel, they walked through the door that God opened to the Buddhist-dominated land of Burma (today known as Myanmar), a country with a population at the time of some fifteen million, few, if any, of which were Christian. They arrived there on July 13, 1813, settling in Rangoon, a city with a population of approximately 10,000.

Ministry with Nancy

The first decade of the Judsons’ ministry in Burma was spent in Rangoon. One of the first tasks was learning one of the most difficult languages in the world, Burmese. Aided by the linguistic ability that God had given him, and after years of painstaking study (up to twelve hours a day), Adoniram mastered Burmese. This enabled him to be used of God in a peculiar way. As Judson himself once put it: “I am almost the only person on earth who has attained their language to such a degree as to be able to communicate the

⁸The fruit of his study may be found in his book, *Adoniram Judson on Christian Baptism*.

way of salvation.” After faithfully communicating the way of salvation for nearly six years, the Judsons saw their first convert, a man who was saved in May of 1819 and baptized in June.

These early years in Burma were very trying ones. After losing their first child to stillbirth while on the way to Burma, the Judsons saw their second child, Roger die of disease in Burma when eight months old. Then, Nancy came down with liver problems, eventually forcing her to sail back to the States for treatment, resulting in husband and wife being separated for over two years. After they were reunited back in Burma, they relocated from Rangoon to the capital city of Ava. Soon thereafter, they found out that Nancy was pregnant with their third child, but when war broke out between England and Burma (the Anglo-Burmese War), Adoniram was wrongly accused of being a spy, arrested, and imprisoned for a year and a half (for eleven months in Ava at a place called the “death prison,” then the remainder of the time in a prison in Amarapura). Conditions in the “death prison” were horrific. The prisoners were hung upside down each night, with only their heads and shoulders touching the ground. The cell in which they were held was exceedingly unsanitary, which the “neat freak” Adoniram found most trying. The pregnant Nancy regularly and heroically visited Adoniram in prison. While Adoniram was in prison, their daughter, Maria was born. After being released from prison, however, Adoniram’s trials continued. While he was away helping the British negotiate a trade treaty with the Burmese, he received a letter, informing him that his wife of fourteen years, Nancy, had died of fever a month earlier (in October of 1826), at the age of thirty-six.

Ministry After Nancy

In spite of his great grief, Adoniram resumed his mission to the Burmese, this time in the newly-formed city of Amherst. Six months after the death of Nancy, however, he would face another severe trial, as his dear daughter, Mariah died of disease at the age of two in the spring of 1827.⁹ A few months after the death of his daughter, Judson moved from Amherst to the city of Moulmein to minister there for a few years. Then, he ministered in Rangoon for a few months in the spring of 1830. There was then a ministry for a few months in the city of Prone, then back for a time in Rangoon. In 1831, he went back to Moulmein. During the years 1832 and 1833, he dedicated himself to translation work in Moulmein.

Ministry with Sarah

Nearly eight years after Nancy had died, Adoniram, now forty-six, proposed to and married thirty-year old Sarah Hall Boardman, a missionary widow. They were married on April 10, 1834 and ministered together in Moulmein. They would have eight children, one of whom was stillborn, another who died at nineteen months old, and another who died at about the same age. When Sarah’s health began to fail, the Judsons took a voyage back to the States, only to see Sarah pass away at sea in 1845. Before her death, she wrote these words to her husband: “Then gird thine armor on, love, Nor faint thou by the

⁹Adding to Adoniram’s grief was his receiving word that summer that his father had passed away the previous November. At the end of 1829, he learned that his brother, Elnathan, had passed away the previous spring. Years later (in August of 1842), he would learn that his mother had died in January of that year.

way, Till Buddha shall fall, and Burmah's sons Shall own Messiah's sway" (cited in *Faith of Our Fathers*, edited by Mark Sidwell, p. 78).

Ministry with Emily

After Sarah's death, Adoniram (accompanied by his three oldest children by Sarah) continued on to the United States, arriving home to a hero's welcome.¹⁰ The two-year furlough that ensued, after thirty-three years away, was the only one that Adoniram ever took. While in the States, Adoniram met Emily Chubbock, whom he married on June 2, 1846, he being fifty-seven, she twenty-nine. Adoniram, accompanied by his new wife, left the United States for the final time in the summer of 1846, arriving back in Burma in late 1846. After spending a brief time in Amherst, they spent seven months in Rangoon (during which time Emily finished writing a biography on Adoniram's second wife, Sarah), then settled in Moulmein, where they would spend the next several years. They had two children together, one of whom died at birth.

His Death

In the fall of 1849, Adoniram's health began to deteriorate, forcing him to make a voyage back to the States. While on ship, he passed into eternity on Friday, April 12, 1850 at the age of sixty-one. He was buried at sea, a few hundred miles west of Burma. Emily received the news four months later. She subsequently returned to the United States, where she passed away in 1854.

Judson's Legacy

When Adoniram Judson's nearly forty years of labor for the Lord in Burma was complete, he had reached 7,000 souls and planted sixty-three churches. He had also translated the entire Bible into Burmese¹¹ (a task that took him twenty-four years to complete), as well as produced an English-Burmese dictionary. His name is one that is remembered and revered to this day, several centuries after his life and labors. While Myanmar (Burma in Judson's day) continues to be predominantly Buddhist, there is a significant Baptist presence there today (far greater than any other Christian group). As of 2000, the Baptist Burma Convention included 3,700 churches and two million

¹⁰Anderson (*To the Golden Shore*, p. 446) writes: "Scarcely any celebrity, any public figure, any hero, could hope to rival the interest aroused by the visit of Adoniram Judson to the United States."

¹¹The preservation of Adoniram's Burmese translation of the New Testament is a story in itself. Shortly after Adoniram was arrested and imprisoned during the Anglo-Burmese War, Nancy wrapped it and buried it in their yard. Fearing it would deteriorate in the Burmese climate, she dug it up, then sewed it into a pillow, which she delivered to Adoniram in prison. After Adoniram was moved to a different prison, the pillow was stolen by a jailer. Finding the pillow to be unbearably hard, the jailor threw it away. Judson's first convert, Mounng Ing, found the pillow and returned it to the Judson home, knowing it was Adoniram's, but not knowing about the priceless treasure within it. When Adoniram was released from prison many months later and returned home, he found his pillow waiting for him and within it his Burmese translation of the New Testament. Commenting on the importance of the Burmese having a Bible in their own language, Anderson (*To the Golden Shore*, p. 418) writes: "... [E]very Bible that found its way into a Burmese village was a missionary in itself, one that needed no pay, no support, and never grew tired or fell sick."

individuals. As of 2002, Baptist World Mission supported a seminary in Yangon, Burma. Today, in the northeastern Burma state of Kachin, the overwhelming majority of the population is comprised of Baptist believers, who are being persecuted by the government and are seeking to break from Burma to form a new nation.

Lessons to be Learned from Judson's Life

Courage to Change One's Conviction

Judson was raised in the Congregational church. His father pastored several Congregational churches. He married a girl whose father was a deacon in a Congregational church. He was ordained by the Congregational church. Adoniram and Nancy were sent to the mission field under the patronage of the Congregational church. Yet, when his personal study of Scripture led him to the Baptist position on baptism, Adoniram courageously changed his conviction on this issue and, consequently, paid a great price. His change was met with much opposition back in the States. It left the Judsons without financial support and no easy way of raising new support.¹² Here is what Adoniram wrote about this (on page 107 of his *Adoniram Judson on Christian Baptism*): "... [A]nd it follows inevitably, that I, who was christened in infancy, on the faith of my parents, have never yet received Christian baptism. Must I, then, forsake my parents, the church with which I stand connected, the society under whose patronage I have come out, the companions of my missionary undertaking? Must I forfeit the good opinion of all my friends in my native land, occasioning grief to some, and provoking others to anger, and be regarded henceforth, by all my former dear acquaintance, as a weak, despicable Baptist, who has not sense enough to comprehend the connection between the Abrahamic and the Christian systems? All this was mortifying; it was hard to flesh and blood. But I thought again—It is better to be guided by the opinion of Christ, who is the truth, than by the opinion of men, however good, whom I know to be in an error. The praise of Christ is better than the praise of men. Let me cleave to Christ at all events, and prefer his favor above my chief joy." Nancy likewise wrote: "... [W]e are confirmed Baptists, not because we wanted to be, but because truth compelled us to be. We have endeavored to count the cost, and be prepared for the many severe trials resulting from this change of sentiment. We anticipate the loss of reputation, and of the affection and esteem of many of our American friends" (Anderson, *To the Golden Shore*, p. 146). In time, Adoniram convinced his father of the Baptist position, causing Adoniram, Sr. to resign his Congregational church pastorate, get baptized, and become a Baptist.

Perseverance in Sowing the Seed of the Gospel

As mentioned previously, it took six years of planting and watering the gospel seed before the Judsons reaped their first convert in Burma. Gospel growth continued to be relatively slow in succeeding years. By 1820, there were only ten converts. By 1824, there were eighteen. However, the harvest became plentiful in later years. In one year

¹²God, in keeping with His promise in Philippians 4:19, supplied the need, using a man named Luther Rice. Rice experienced the same change of conviction regarding baptism that the Judsons had and, like the Judsons, made the switch from being a Congregationalist to being a Baptist. Rice headed to the Far East mission field at the same time as the Judsons, but poor health forced him to return to the States. While back in the States, he raised support for the Judsons among Baptist Churches and helped form the Baptist Association for Foreign Missions, under which the Judsons served in Burma. Praise God for such "rope holders" as Luther Rice!

alone (1831), there were 217 converts. The Judsons heeded the prescription of Galatians 6:9a to not be weary in well doing and, as a result, proved the promise of Galatians 6:9b that reaping comes in due season, if we faint not. Because of their pioneering planting of the gospel seed in Burma in the early 19th century, the gospel continues to bear fruit there to this day.

Willingness to Suffer for the Gospel

As mentioned previously, Adoniram suffered greatly for the gospel during his imprisonment in Burma during the Anglo-Burmese War. Besides physical suffering, there was also the emotional toll of losing two of his three wives and seven of his thirteen children to death while on the field. There was also the separation from family that he endured. Not only was he separated from his first wife, Nancy for years at a time (completely when she had to take a voyage back to the U.S. for her health and nearly completely when he was imprisoned)¹³, but he was also separated from his parents and siblings when he left for the mission field. He would never see his father, mother, and brother again, as they passed away before Adoniram returned home to the U.S. after more than thirty years on the field. The opportunity for regular communication with their families back home was another sacrifice that Adoniram and Nancy had to make. It was not until the fall of 1815, more than two years after being in Burma, that they received their first letter from home. When Nancy returned to the States because of her health, Adoniram went ten months without hearing from her, until she arrived back in Burma. In keeping with Christ's words in Mark 8:34-35, the Judsons denied themselves, losing their lives for the gospel. And their loss resulted not only in their gain (Mark 8:35; cf. Mark 10:29-30), but also the gospel's. They were the grain of wheat that died and, thus, brought forth much fruit (John 12:24).

¹³There were other separations of shorter duration, such as a failed, seven-month-long attempt by Adoniram in 1818 to reach Chittagong in Bengal to meet some Baptist believers there and bring them back with him to Rangoon. There was also a two-month-long trip by Adoniram in early 1820 to the capital city of Ava to meet the Burmese emperor.