

# GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Twenty Seven

## A Strong Wind Blowing at Williams College

### Introduction

Williamstown, Massachusetts: It was a hot and stormy afternoon on the campus of Williams College in the summer of 1806. Five young men – college students – gathered together regarding the Lord’s interests. Their practice was to meet every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon to fellowship and pray for their school and classmates. They also prayed for matters beyond their known world: they entered into the Lord’s burden that the gospel would reach other peoples in other nations.



### A Strong Wind

Sometimes they joined with believers in town who had a mutual desire to pursue the Lord. An older sister who lived about a mile from the college opened her home regularly, especially in the colder months, so the students would have a place to pray. In the warmer months the group would gather along the Hoosack River in a meadow near their campus. On this particular Saturday a great thunderstorm blew into the area. The students quickly ran to take shelter from the lightning and rain; all they could find was a partially protected space near a haystack in a nearby field. There they huddled, waiting out the storm, . . . and continued to pray. But there was something more brewing than just the visible storm that afternoon. At this period in time (the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century), the Holy Spirit had been “blowing,” in America, causing many to be reborn and stirring those who were already believers to seek something more from the

Lord. There began to be in these young men, as well as in others, a yearning that the gospel would go out to other lands. Many had heard of the Englishman, William Carey, and how he forsook all to take the gospel to India. Believers in New England had also heard the stories of John Eliot and David Brainerd, both of whom were used by the Lord to hold forth the word of life to American Indians. No doubt, some had also heard of the Moravian missionaries who had persistently labored among the Indians in Pennsylvania.

As this little group continued to pray, they again asked the Lord to awaken a concern in them and their fellow students to the pressing need of the gospel to go forth to foreign lands, especially to Asia. Touching this matter, one brother declared, “We can do it, if we will.” This active resolve became the watchword of this little group and the impetus of future consecrations of young American men and women who also were moved by the breath of the Spirit.

This prayer meeting, small and largely unnoticed at that time, became a landmark event in the history of the spread of the gospel. Today some consider the “Haystack Prayer Meeting” the birth place of American foreign missions.

What occurred that day at the haystack was simply an expression of what had been stirring in many leading up to this time. The prayers of these five students at Williams College crystalized the zealous feelings of prior generations. The students were entering in and reaping what had been sown and labored upon by their forefathers (John 4:38). They were being handed



the baton from those who had run before them. For these young men, it was now their time to rise up and respond to the Lord's commission to go and disciple all the nations (Matt. 28:19).

In Acts 2, when the disciples had gathered together in prayer, a strong wind blew. This invisible blowing of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples filled and empowered them to cooperate with the Lord for His move. As Witness Lee pointed out in his footnote of Acts 2:2, "In the Lord's ascension the Spirit of ascension power, poured upon the disciples, is symbolized here by the wind and is for the disciples' ministry and move economically. . . for them to carry out His commission." Similarly, the Holy Spirit was moving among these young believers, burdening them to take the gospel to the nations. The Haystack prayer was at least partially the origin of the great mission work of American believers in the years to come.

### **Pioneering a New Way**

Although some students were being moved by the Spirit, this was not the general condition of the students at Williams College, or elsewhere in America. The philosophies and ideals which issued in the social and political upheaval in France were popular among college students at that time. An attitude of skepticism and ridicule regarding the things of the Lord was common among students as they pursued secular reforms. This made the believers in Christ stand out as "serious."

Among the "serious" were the five who gathered that day near the haystack. Two years later these brothers and others formed a little group they called, "the Brethren." Their stated purpose was "to effect in the persons of its members a mission or missions to the heathen." One of their goals was "to be in readiness to go on a mission when and where duty would call." Although they did not all end up going to foreign fields, all five did get involved in preaching the gospel,



teaching the truth, distributing Bibles and tracts, and ministering Christ to others. It was said about them that "These men reached out to lives in which Christ was foreign, and not simply to lives dwelling in foreign lands." Some

took the gospel to the destitute in this country, others to soldiers, prisoners and slaves. One of the five was instrumental in the founding of the American Bible Society. One of the brothers did go to Ceylon, an island off the coast of India, known today as Sri Lanka. When he was heading out he said, "I have been waiting with anxiety for almost eight years for an opportunity to go and preach Christ among the heathen. I have often wept at the long delay. But the day in which I now bid farewell to my native land, is the happiest day of my life."

Looking back at this time, it is hard not to be impressed with the large hearts, broad view and willingness of these brothers and sisters to go forth in a spirit of love to propagate the gospel. They were inspired with a vision to conquer the world for Christ. Surely the memorial set at the spot in the meadow where the haystack prayer meeting took place is fitting. On the top of the monument sits a round ball engraved with the countries of the world as a globe for which their enlarged view caused them to pray.

### **Samuel Mills**

Who was the leader of this small group? The answer would be that the Holy Spirit was the One leading and guiding, and all the rest were followers of the Lamb. As one considers the story of the Haystack Prayer Meeting, you cannot help but to be impressed with the expression of Christ in these young believers. It was not just good Christian principles or ideals being exhibited, but it was the love of Christ issuing forth from these young brothers.

Samuel Mills was one of the five prayer companions. He was only a freshman at Williams, yet was full of zeal and burden for the

**These men reached out to lives in which Christ was foreign, and not simply to lives dwelling in foreign lands.**

lost in foreign lands. Where did this originate? Mills was born in April of 1783, the seventh child of believing parents. His father was a pastor of a congregation in Torrington, Connecticut, and his mother was a good pattern to her children. She dedicated Samuel to the Lord even before his birth, and afterward frequently prayed that he would be used by the Lord. She was assured within that her prayers were being heard. She believed the Scripture which encouraged parents to train up their children in the way they should go so that when they are older they would not depart from the Lord's way (Prov. 22:6). She was once overheard by Samuel saying, "I have consecrated this child to the service of God as a missionary."

Samuel received much religious instruction while young and was sensitive to his sinful condition before God. At the age of fifteen, he was jealous when he saw his siblings and friends being touched by the Lord. He became somewhat bitter toward God and rebellious toward his family. He later testified that during the two years of revival in his hometown, he was still "cursing the day he had been born." However, even then the Spirit was doing a sanctifying work upon him through the prayers of his family members.

In November of 1801 his mother became anxious for her son and attempted to get him to open up to reveal his inward feelings to her. Being somewhat shy, Samuel initially kept silent, but eventually the tears came and he wept. He declared "Oh that I had never been born! Oh that I had never been born! For two years I have been sorry God ever made me." To this, his mother replied, "My son, you *are* born, and you can never throw off your existence, nor your everlasting accountability for all your conduct." Then she spoke more words of conviction, telling him that he had never thoroughly seen the evil of his own heart. Samuel resisted these words, declaring that he had seen to the very bottom of hell. Then he left his parents' home for the winter.

Samuel's departure caused his mother to urgently plead his case before God on her knees. She continued in prayer until she was assured that her prayers were heard and that her son was released from the chains of bondage.

In the meantime, Samuel had taken a walk in the forest. During his walk the Lord came to him and subdued him. Mysteriously, his heart was softened and his rebellion evaporated. God's new mercies reached him and were beginning to save him from his previous concepts. Out of his touch with the Lord, he found new peace and hope in Christ and praised God for His sovereignty in His divine plan. The Lord had made him a new creation in Christ.

Soon after the time of his salvation, the thought of mission work came to Samuel's mind. When he returned home, he told his father that he "could not conceive of any course of life in which to pass the rest of his days, that would prove so pleasant, as to go and communicate the gospel of salvation to the poor heathen." Samuel jumped into the work of revival that was happening in his town. He decided to let others take care of a farm he inherited, and he enrolled in Williams College. His goal was to be educated for future missionary work. He entered Williams in April of 1806, a few months prior to the haystack prayer meeting where he proved to be instrumental in taking the lead to pray for the perishing world.

### Conclusion

Mills graduated from Williams College in 1809 and went to further his education at Andover Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts, where the Brethren group was extended. From this small band of students, prayer and fellowship continued regarding mission work. These brothers and others formed America's first foreign mission society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1812 the ABCFM began to

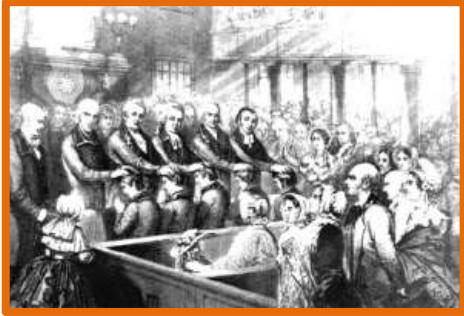


send missionaries to various countries around the world. One notable young man among those who went out was Adoniram Judson, an 1810 Andover alumnus, who labored for the Lord in Burma (now Myanmar). He translated the

Bible into Burmese and produced the first Burmese-English dictionary.

The ABCFM also promoted home missions, especially among the American Indians. They purposed “to diffuse the knowledge of the Gospel among the heathen as well as other people in the remote parts of the earth where Christ is seldom or never preached.” Many young

men and women were prayed over and sent forth to foreign fields.



Missionary magazines began to spring up to inform believers what was happening around the world in these different countries.

Samuel Mills was used by the Lord over the next few years to remind and rouse young people regarding their gospel responsibilities. Mills, his companions, and other men of God incited many young men and women to pursue education and training at Yale and Princeton and other schools in order to take the gospel to Africa, India, China, and elsewhere.

Samuel Mills continued to serve the Lord in the U. S. for several years. He was active distributing the Scriptures and tracts, and labored among different groups of peoples, including slaves from the southern states. While returning from a two-month trip to Africa to find a settlement for former slaves, he became ill at sea and died at the age of 35.

The Lord graciously answered Samuel Mills’ prayers and those of that small band that gathered that stormy afternoon at Williams College. Many have gone forth since that time bearing precious seed to be scattered all over the earth. These obeyed the Lord’s speaking in Matthew 28:18-19: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and disciple all the nations.” An entry in Samuel Mills’ diary reflects the sentiment of many at that time. “O how unworthy we are at this institution to partake of the crumbs that fall from our Master’s table! Blessed be God, He has, as I trust, wrought a good work upon the hearts of some, and is forcing conviction and

light upon the mind of others. I hope nothing may retard the progress of this most glorious work.”

The Haystack Prayer meeting still speaks to this generation. From looking at this little gathering and considering its significance, we can realize three things: 1) The Lord often calls young people to initiate His move. It is a lie of the enemy to consider that you are too young to be of value to the Lord and to His purpose. 2) We should not despise a small gathering. Look what the Lord initiated through a group of just five students. 3) We also can learn from this event that the Lord waits for some to agree with Him in prayer in order to further His move. This is similar to the record in Acts 1:14 where the disciples gathered in one accord to pray regarding the outpouring of the Spirit and their commission. As Witness Lee states, “God wanted to pour out His Spirit for the carrying out of His New

Testament economy and had promised to do it. Yet He still needed His chosen people to pray for this. As God in heaven, He needs men on earth to cooperate with Him for the carrying out of His plan.”

**As God in heaven, He needs men on earth to cooperate with Him for the carrying out of His plan.**  
W. Lee

May the Lord continue to blow upon us as the Spirit and move in us until we cooperate with Him in prayer for His interests in the whole earth.

Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

## REFERENCES

Capen, Edward Warren. *The Haystack Prayer Meeting*. Boston: The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1906.

Nee, Watchman. *Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Set Two, Vol. 30. (The Normal Christian Church Life)*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1993

Richards, Thomas Cole. *The Haystack Prayer Meeting: A Brief Account of Its Origin and Spirit* (1906). Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2010.

Spring, Gardiner. *Memoir of Samuel John Mills*. New York: Saxton and Miles Publishers, 1842.