

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Twenty Nine

Robert Morrison: A Publisher of Glad Tidings

First Steps

A famous hymn of the 19th century expresses the feeling and burden of the Great Century of Gospel Missions. It enjoins: *Publish glad tidings, tidings of peace, Tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.* This truly was the commission of that time—to go forth in oneness with the Lord to all the nations to tell them of the Savior’s dying for them and of the life He wants to give. But as the hymn relates, for this great commission to be realized some must bear the message glorious, others must give of their wealth to speed them on their way, and still others must pour out in prayer.

*Give of your sons to bear
the message glorious;
Give of your wealth to speed them
on their way;
Pour out your soul for them
in prayer victorious,
And all you spend our Savior will repay.*

Robert Morrison was one who responded to this high commission. In September 1807 he arrived at Macao, on the coast of China. The Lord had preserved him for more than eight months on a turbulent sea. During this trip he had to continually depend on the Lord for his safety.

Upon his arrival, some Englishmen who were doing business in that vast land were quick to inform him that “The people of Europe have no idea of the difficulty of residing here or of obtaining Masters (Chinese language tutors) to teach.” Although he realized the risk, Morrison knew that in order to accomplish anything for the Lord in China, he must take the first step of learning the Chinese language. He was constrained to live not to himself but to the Lord. He said, “We shall not have to reproach ourselves for having published the truth of the Gospel amongst ignorant, deluded, guilty men.”

Because the Chinese were “prohibited from teaching the language to foreigners under the penalty of death,”

instructors came at a risk and a great expense.

However, Morrison was able to find two to assist him.

These men helped him learn the language, yet they were often moody, illogical and full of ill-temper. Morrison bore with them and prayed for their salvation.



Difficult Days

The high cost of his tutors and other expenses, the uncertainty of whether he would be allowed to stay in the country, and his being isolated from others, made his beginning days difficult. He found himself also the victim of fraud and deceit from even his helpers, which gave him no trust in the local people. His environment was trying, and he also soon became familiar with the superstition and idolatry of the Chinese people. His heart was grieved, especially since he was not able to preach the gospel much because he just didn’t know the words to use. He said, “I find much difficulty in speaking for God, for the Chinese have no proper idea of one living and true God, and consequently, have no words to express such an idea.”

Morrison’s initial place of lodging and study was no more than some old warehouse rooms. The rent was high and at one point the roof fell in. In the beginning days he attempted to dress, eat, and move about as the local natives. But he eventually gave this up as he

felt that it was not that profitable in his present situation.

His poor living situation, the stressful challenges facing him, and his zealous diligence to master the Chinese language, all took a toll on his health. He was also lonely, and especially felt the lack of Christian fellowship. This was somewhat remedied when he married Miss Morton. Morrison was the one who led her to salvation and to give herself in service with him to God.

Just at the time when pressures were mounting for him to leave China, he was offered a position with the East India Company as their official translator. Apparently his progress in the Chinese language in just two years had advanced to the point whereby the Lord was able to bless him with employment to meet his needs at that time. This new position enabled him to remain in the country and secure a little better place to live. He was peaceful taking this job because he knew he would no longer be a burden to the missionary society that sent him out. He had diligently used his time to prepare a Chinese vocabulary and was making progress to complete an Anglo-Chinese Grammar and Dictionary. His main attention, however, was given to the translating of the New Testament into Chinese.

Suffering for the Gospel's Sake

Morrison's life became one of suffering. In all his cares and pressures of his work, he developed terrible headaches and other illnesses. His wife's health began to decline shortly after they were married to the point that she became an invalid. Adding to this sorrow, their first child died at birth. He wrote to a friend back home, "Affliction in a foreign land lies doubly heavy, no kind relatives to assist, no Christian friend to cheer." His brother-in-law, who had aspirations of working together with Morrison as a missionary, also became ill and had to leave the country for a better climate. Morrison was also tried by the misunderstandings of those back home in the missionary society. Some felt that he should not be entering into employment with the East India Company since it was outside of the realm of his original calling as a missionary. Most did not realize the complexity of his

situation. His position enabled him to stay in China under the umbrella of the East India Company. As well, it shielded him from attacks of local trouble-makers and jealous religious people. He still was able to devote the majority of his time to his life's work of translating the Bible into Chinese. Writing home he said, "I know that the labours of God's servants in the gloom of the dungeon have illumined succeeding ages, and I am cheered with the hope that my labours in my present confinement will be of some service in the diffusion of Divine Truth amongst the millions of China." He therefore persevered in grace.

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Desirous to Bear Fruit

Although he was limited in his freedom to circulate the gospel among the local people, he did begin to speak to his instructors and servants. He sometimes would gather up to ten local Chinese in a locked room to proclaim the message of Christ. But for a long time he did not see any fruit borne from his labor. He was able, however, to prepare some literature, such as tracts on redemption and the way of salvation, and a booklet on the Gospel of Luke. He was encouraged upon hearing of one who was affected by reading one of his tracts on the way of salvation. But as of yet, still no one had come to salvation.

At this time the Chinese authorities issued an edict prohibiting the dissemination of religious teachings, especially those of Christianity. This edict, which made it a capital crime to print Christian books in Chinese, did not stop Morrison in his work, but it did make him more cautious as he proceeded. In a letter to saints back home he wrote, "I must go forward, however, trusting in the Lord. We will scrupulously obey governments so far as their decrees do not oppose what is required by the Almighty." Besides the threat of government

authorities, Morrison was also persecuted by the Roman Catholic bishop. The bishop condemned any who would have conversations with Morrison or who would receive any of his literature.

Morrison continued to work diligently on the Anglo-Chinese dictionary, and on the translation of the Bible which was his main burden. When he completed the Book of Acts, he sent it back to the directors of the Missionary Society. At this time, the British and Foreign Bible Society donated money for the eventual printing of the whole Bible in Chinese when it would be completed.

Strength for the Labor

In July of 1813, Morrison was given a helper, William Milne, to assist him in the work. Milne and his wife arrived to the great delight of Morrison and his wife. William Milne seemed to be the fellow-laborer that Morrison had hoped for. He was saved at a young age after the death of his father and a period of running in sin. As he later put it, "Surely the Lord hath magnified His grace to me above any of the fallen race." Following his salvation he enjoyed sweet fellowship both vertically with the Lord through the Word, and also horizontally with other believers. Through this he was led to spend hours in prayer for the conversion of the world.

At the age of twenty he consecrated himself to the Lord for mission work. But because of the needs in his family he had to spend the next five years working. When he eventually applied to the Missionary Society, the directors questioned his qualifications. They asked him if he would be willing to go to the mission field as a servant to a missionary. To this Milne humbly replied, "Yes, sir, most certainly; I am willing to be anything, so that I am in the work. To be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water is too great an honour for me when the Lord's house is building." Upon receiving him in Macao, Robert Morrison offered this prayer for his new fellow-laborer, "Oh, that the Lord's servant may



be spared in health, may soon acquire the language of the heathen, and be a faithful missionary of Jesus Christ."

The excitement of the welcome for the new couple did not last long. Just as in the days of the Lord's earthly ministry, the main opponents of God's move were the religious people. The Roman Catholics appealed to the Chinese authorities to deport this new family. The issue was forced and Morrison's appeal to the governor was rejected. The Milnes were allowed to stay for only eighteen days. Morrison himself was pressured to give up his mission and simply attend to the affairs of the company. But his opposers did not realize that he was first a missionary, and only worked with the East India Company for the sake of convenience.

Opposition continued even after the Milnes left Macao for Canton. The governing authorities pressed their case against Morrison for translating official documents between the English and the Chinese. They denounced any who helped him in any way with the Chinese language. This put more fear in Morrison's assistants, who ended up fleeing. But it was too late; the New Testament had already been translated and printed and was ready for circulation. Eventually both Milne and Morrison had to leave Canton. Milne began to travel about Chinese settlements in the islands of southeast Asia seeking a place where they could work peacefully without continual persecution. As he traveled, he distributed the newly produced New Testaments and thousands of tracts.

While Milnes were away on this trip, Morrison continued to labor. He published a selection of hymns, an outline of Old Testament history, and finished translating the book of Genesis. He also completed his work on the Anglo-Chinese dictionary.

Upon the Milnes' return, in fellowship with Morrison, they decided upon Malacca, a small state of Malaysia in southeast Asia, as a new base for their work. This appeared to be a peaceful place for training, printing books, and gave them access to many areas where the Chinese lived.

A Firstfruit at Last

Although the prospects for raising up believers did not appear bright in China, finally in the year 1814, after seven years of faithful sowing of the good seed of the kingdom, Morrison saw the firstfruit of his gospel labor. One of his original Chinese tutors called upon God for the remission of his sins and received the Holy Spirit. When Morrison first came to China he had shared with this man concerning Christ, but he could not understand his words. After a few years Morrison's Chinese improved and the Lord opened the heart of this teacher, who could now understand the message. Morrison testified that this newly saved one "began to see that the merits of Jesus were able to save all men in all ages and nations, and hence he listened to and believed in Him." Morrison took Philip, who told the eunuch that if he believed with all his heart, he could be baptized, as a pattern. Thus, this new brother was baptized at a spring of water by the seaside, in a place away from others eyes. As he baptized him, Morrison prayed, "May he be the firstfruit of a great harvest—one of millions who shall come and be saved." This one died five years later, but was faithful to the Lord to the end.

Morrison's prayer has surely been heard and answered. This one was only the first of the millions in China who have believed in the wonderful Savior since.

Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

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