

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM CAREY

(1761 – 1834)



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INTRODUCTION.

It is amazing to see how often these personality traits regarded by man as being unexceptional, if not mundane, are when dedicated to God's service that factor which determines failure or success. With Martin Luther it was stubbornness and with William Carey it was the ability to "plod"

This aptitude for perseverance, while admirable in most men, was in William Carey of a higher order, making him one of the most exceptional of all our modern missionaries,

England of the late 18th Century, was subdued and quiet. Gone were the days of pageantry and romance enjoyed by the nobility, whilst for the peasants the simple hard life they had known for the last hundred years continued to drag on.

It was an age on the brink of mechanization and industrialization, yet the people lived blissfully unaware of the coming turmoil. The needs of the people were provided by the various home industries, each isolated village being fairly self sufficient. Communication between villages and from the cities was scarce, the newspapers having to be hand written. Education beyond the elementary was the privilege of the wealthy and a large proportion of the population was barely literate.

HIS EARLY LIFE

Into this England on August 17, 1761, William Carey was born. His parents, Edmund and Elizabeth, were weavers in the small village of Paulerspury in Northamptonshire. Their income was meagre and life was hard but not cruel.

When William was six, his father was appointed master of the village school, a post previously held by his father. With his father as schoolmaster, William had opportunities that would otherwise not have been his and he used these opportunities to the full. From writings of his father and his sister we learn that William was a keen student who exhibited a remarkable talent for perseverance, in those tasks that he set his heart on. William's interests were many and varied, during his school years he was fascinated by nature and kept a veritable museum of creatures and plants both live and dead in his room. His passion for Botany in particular was stimulated when his Uncle Peter, a gardener, came to live in Paulerspury. Peter spent many hours teaching and inspiring the young William

Another particular interest that William developed was a fascination for foreign lands and their people. England was at that time involved in the race to colonise the "undiscovered" lands of the world and so news from the colonies was always given priority. In 1771 Lieutenant James Cook returned from his first adventurous voyage to the South Seas. The story of his voyage was later published and no doubt Carey became familiar with it.

At 12 William began to learn Latin and in a year he learnt all his father could teach. William was also particularly fond of reading and read all that could be found in the village, particularly those books on science, history and travel.

William had a perfectly normal upbringing, even going through typical teenage rebelliousness when at fourteen he reacted his pious upbringing and made friends with boys addicted to lying swearing and unchaste conversation. For a while he kept company with them but after a short while he deliberately turned away from it forever.

At fourteen William was at the end of his village schooling career and began to work for a living. First he became an agricultural labourer, but as a result of a skin disease aggravated by the sun he quit.

At sixteen Carey was apprenticed to a shoemaker, Clarke Nichols, of Piddington, some nine miles northeast of Paulerspury. While apprenticed as a shoemaker it became obvious that William was being prepared unconsciously yet deliberately by God for the work he was to do later.

Among the books at Nichols, William found a Commentary in Greek of the New Testament. He was fascinated by the strange letters and became determined to learn the language even if it meant journeying to Paulerspury during off days to learn from Thomas Jones, the only man he knew who knew some Greek. It soon became the second foreign language Carey mastered

Although William Carey and Clarke Nichols were Church going men, for both religion meant no more than the observance of tradition. William became increasingly aware particularly whilst engaged in often heated debate with the other young apprentice William Warr. Although a master at debate, being able to defeat Warr with mere words, he began to realize the lack in his own relationship with God. The topic was always mainline church formalism verses, the experience of a personal relationship with God. Warr belonged to a group known as the dissenters, a group of men and women who understood the significance of Christ's death on the cross, and that it is by faith that men are saved.

William's soul began to thirst for God, and to ease his mind he resolved to go to church three times on a Sunday, and to attend the dissenter prayer meeting in the evening. He also resolved to leave off swearing, lying and other sins which had been plaguing his conscience.

1779 was a turning point in Carey's life. Early in the year the King proclaimed a day of fasting and prayer, the reason being that the American war had dragged on, the French and the Spaniards had declared war on England, and in India the English were fighting the Marathas. For some reason Carey decided to spend this day with the dissenters, probably because of his political feelings concerning the colonies. Mr. Thomas Chater was the guest speaker at this special service and during the service a pointed exposition of Hebrews 13:12 ("Let us therefore go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing the reproach") really moved Carey. He later wrote that it was then that the desire to follow Christ first came to him. He saw the Church of England as that camp which he must leave because they protected everyone from the scandal of the cross. From then he worshipped with Warr.

The dissenters were of a fairly nebulous character without connections with any recognized church. Carey evidently did not find among them all the answers that he was looking for so after a while he sought help elsewhere and found it in the form of Dr

Ryland, a well known town preacher in Northampton, and Rev. Thomas Scott, the curate of Ravenstone.

Carey's beliefs were at this stage far from clear, he could not agree with either the hyper-calvinists or the Arminians, and so he set about to do an independent study of scripture, a habit that became a characteristic of his life

In 1782 he joined the Association of Fellowship and Christian Service which was started by a group of Baptist ministers in Northamptonshire. Men in the group who became influential in Carey's life were John Sutcliffe, John Ryland, and Andrew Fuller. At the same time as joining this group Carey began to preach at Barton every fortnight.

Preaching meant to Carey continual study, he took his task seriously and strove always to be fresh and well prepared. Being poor he had to rely on those books he could borrow or else he often went without food in order to buy a book he wanted. At this time Carey began to study Hebrew and was soon proficient. . He considered Hebrew essential for understanding the Old Testament. Having learnt Latin, Greek and Hebrew

Carey later turned his attention to Italian, Dutch and French. Carey's talent as a linguist was now established and unbeknown to him prepared him excellently for his life's work.

Soon after his preaching began in Barton, Carey was invited to preach at his home town Paulerspury once a month. He undertook the task with enthusiasm and some embarrassment.

In 1783 Carey was Baptised but did not yet throw in his lot with the Baptists, as he was still uncertain as to his doctrine.

In the meantime significant events had been happening in Carey's personal life. In 1779 Mr. Nichols died before Carey could finish his apprenticeship. He found work with another shoemaker a Mr. Thomas Old, but on very low wages because of his inexperience.

In 1781 Carey married Dorothy Placket, although they must have been in love Dorothy appears to have been an unwise match for Carey. She was illiterate and incapable of understanding Carey's thirst for knowledge and later unable to share in his vision.

In 1783 Thomas Old died and Carey took over the business. In his private life Carey was unfortunate, he had serious losses in business, lost his first child to fever and succumbed himself for a while to the disease, resulting in the loss of all his hair. He moved to a house in Piddington but unfortunately it was situated in an area of damp mist which proved extremely unhealthy. He had to supplement his minimal income from shoemaking by opening a night school for village children but still found time every night for his own study.

In 1785 Carey accepted a position as schoolmaster at Moulton (five miles north of Barton) . The environment was healthier and Carey was able to maintain the school as well as opening a shoemaking shop.

At this time Carey decided to cast his lot with the Baptists and in 1785 he presented himself as a candidate for membership. Although being accepted as a member his

application to become a minister was deferred. In August 1786 he was accepted as minister and a year later he was ordained. In the meantime he became the minister of a small Baptist community at Moulton.

He remained in Moulton for four years and it was here that he first heard the missionary call. It came while he was reading the Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage (his childhood hero), Hardly a missionary textbook, as Captain Cook was never particularly interested in religion, but for Carey it was a revelation of human need. He thought "those South Sea Islanders need the gospel".

The idea became his passion and he began to read fanatically and extensively all he could on foreign lands and their people. As he read the idea became clearer in his mind and he decided firmly that the peoples of the world need the Christ.

With thoroughness characteristic of Cary he took extensive notes on all he had read. The map of the world that he had made to stimulate interest in Geography at school began to serve a new purpose as he annotated it with all he learnt.

A few weeks after his ordination, after nearly a year of study, at a gathering of Baptist ministers in Northamptonshire, Carey hesitantly spoke of what was on his heart. He asked whether "the command given to the Apostles to teach all nations was not obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent"

The response he received was violently negative, the ministers holding to the belief that if God wanted to convert the heathen then He would do it without their aid. Although disappointed Carey was not discouraged because of the clear conviction in his own heart. He saw now that his task was to get the others to share in his vision.

Slowly, yet with absolute determination Carey began to affect those around him. His ability to persevere proved to be invaluable and without such determination the Baptist missionary effort would never have organized itself when it did.

In addition to preaching about, and debating his idea whenever he could, he also set about to write a book. It was to be a gathering together of all he had learnt and recorded laboriously on his map. A stunning piece of literature not only because of the incredible zeal and passion with which it presents his missionary vision, but also because of its contribution to the statistics and Geography of the world at that time.

Although the book was received enthusiastically by his supporters, Carey was advised to delay publication, they felt that the time was not right. This delay tactic became the standard response of the Baptist ministers.

At the Annual meeting of the Minister's Association at Nottingham in 1784, most of the ministers had been won over, but all they resolved to do was establish regular prayer meetings for "the revival of our churches and spread of the Gospel" Always they came up with excuses as to how they could put the vision Carey had into effect. They knew Carey was willing to go anywhere but the financial difficulties always kept them from any positive action.

In 1791, when Carey had been living for two years in Leicester, Fuller gave a stirring sermon using Haggai 1:2 as his text. He warned of the dangerous tendency to delay in all matters of religion. The sermon stirred the hearts of the ministers, yet still they delayed, but Carey knew the time had come to organize. Within a year his book was published.

In 1792 at the next Annual Meeting of the Baptist ministers, Carey was invited knowing full well what his topic would be. During this epoch making sermon Carey made two memorable exhortations:

**EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM GOD
ATTEMPT GREAT THINGS FOR GOD**

After some debate and difficulty Carey finally saw the establishment of "The Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen". In October 2, 1792, thirteen of the ministers jointed and wrote down the amount they were prepared to subscribe every year. Because of near poverty, Carey was unable to be written onto the role

PLANNING THE CAMPAIGN

By 1793 it was decided that India would be the first country to send missionaries to. Those that would go were Carey and John Thomas, a man who had spent some time in Bengal on a similar missionary effort. The date set and the Society to raise the money required to send them over in three months. Carey gave up his pastoral work to tour the surrounding areas asking for donations. The money was raised.

However the time was also a difficult one for Carey, because no matter what he did he could not persuade his wife to come with him, yet he know it was God's will that he go. He was saddened at the thought of leaving her and his family behind. The other problem was, how were they to get to India. The East India

Company at the time controlled all passages going to India and they were strongly opposed to missionary work .

Through contacts of John Thomas they managed to secure a passage on board a ship heading for India, the Captain would risk the chance of taking them to India without permission. However on leaving London the ship was forced to land at the Isle of Wight by French Privateers. It was a bad time for Carey, he discovered that debtors were after John Thomas for the sum of Five Hundred Pounds, and they were forced to leave the ship. Although the outlook was gloomy, Carey's faith did not waver. Providentially the Captain of another vessel offered to take them to India, albeit for a fairly exorbitant price. Carey was overjoyed and agreed to the terms. He also used the delay to go home and once again pleaded with his wife to go with him. This time she agreed on condition that her sister came with her. Carey was ecstatic, he had found a vessel; and would now be taking his whole Family. On June 13, 1793 they left Dover

The journey took five months and was uneventful. Carey, however, used the time to learn what Bengali he could from Mr. Thomas. On November 11 Carey landed in Calcutta.

INDIA

Carey's early days in India are marked with constant moving about, a main reason being that Thomas spent their money too quickly, leaving them desperately looking for some way in which they could support themselves. They moved from Calcutta to Bandel, back to Calcutta, to Manicktilla in a matter of a few months. This moving was for Carey a severe trial because he longed for nothing more than to be able to settle and establish a ministry. But, God obviously had other plans for Carey and was instead training him.

In January 1794 Carey and his family moved to Dehatra, having to borrow money now to do so. Dehatra was about three days journey from Calcutta and a piece of land had been offered to Carey, rent free for three years. On arriving they set up a temporary house with the assistance of Mr. Short. However, this was not to be their home. On March 1st Carey received a letter from Thomas telling him of a position that he had secured for Carey as supervisor for a factory at Malda. On May 23 Carey and his family once again moved house, leaving Dorothy's sister behind to marry Mr. Short.

The situation at Malda was much improved, there was a small European community to which Carey could preach and fellowship with, and the environment wasn't as wild. Carey was to remain here for six years. During this time he became fluent in Bengali and learnt much about the religion of the people. He began to understand why the people accepted the Word with such apparent eagerness and yet he had not had one single convert. He understood the rigid caste system and that those of a higher caste had everything to lose by converting to Christianity.

The time was also hard for Carey. He lost one of his sons and his wife became slowly more useless. She had never taken to the climate or way of life in India, and had complained since they arrived, she didn't share in Carey's enthusiasm and vision and so life was nothing more than a bitter struggle. She suffered from the fever that came every year, and slowly began to lose her mind.

During his time here Carey began to set out a plan for the future. He wrote to Fuller outlining his idea. He saw the potential to establish a colony of seven or eight missionaries with their wives and families. Concerning the women he wrote "it is absolutely necessary for the wives of missionaries to be as hearty in the work as their husbands". He outlined the incredible potential there was for women to work amongst the Indian women.

The plans were large but Carey was also a realist, he wrote that not all the missionaries should be sent out at once, but rather two at a time. He also suggested that they should be prepared to work in some field in order to be able to support themselves while they were there.

In October 1796 John Fountain arrived at Carey's doorstep, a missionary sent from the committee. Although totally unexpected Carey welcomed him enthusiastically. A month later Carey got news that four new missionaries with their wives had landed in India.

As before these missionaries had trouble with the East India Company and eventually landed up in Serampore, a settlement owned by the Danes. The Danish authorities

welcomed the missionaries and invited them to establish themselves in Serampore. At first they were determined to reach Carey at Malda but when circumstances proved too difficult they invited Carey to join them. He agreed and so the Carey family made their final move on January 10 1800

HIS SUCCESS

Up until this time Carey had not had a single convert. It appears that God's plan had been rather to concentrate on training Carey for the work ahead. When he arrived in Serampore his final apprenticeship was over. Carey was ready to see the fruits of his labour.

Of these missionaries that joined him at Serampore two stand above the rest. They were William Ward, a Derby printer, and Joshua Marshman, a linguist and preacher. Both became close and invaluable friends of Carey's. They were exceptional in their work, in their dedication to the missionary effort, in their passion for God's work, and in their perseverance against any opposition

On arriving in Serampore Carey bought a large well built house. Gone were the days of living in poverty. Carey was ready to attempt great things for God, his vision was great.

Work began immediately, Ward set up the printing press and began to print scripture in Bengali, Carey and Marshman went out preaching during the day and translating in the evening. In the same year Carey set up a school at the house, the main subject it seems was to gain money for carrying on the work of the mission. This endeavour proved extremely successful

The end of 1800 saw the first Indian convert of the mission who was baptized along with Carey's son Felix on December 28th 1800.

.During his 27 years at Serampore Carey achieved much, he was able to translate the scripture into forty of the native languages, he began many schools and eventually even a college (the only college in India to confer degrees) He became Professor at a College in Calcutta and through this position was able to have abolished the religious practice of child sacrifices and widow burning. All the time Carey preached and studied the many Indian Languages, constantly revising his translations. He also spent time training up Indian converts to be able to get out and preach. He had a firm philosophy that India would only really be reached by the Indians.

Carey's years at Serampore weren't trouble free on a number of occasions he came against the hostility of the East India Company, particularly when he wanted to expand the mission into English owned territory. The times of conflict were tense and yet Carey always remained calm and quietly determined. It was his gentle, sane and determined character that never failed to impress his opposition and in the end Carey won. On March 11, 1812 the original mission house burnt down resulting in a great loss of laborious work. Although saddened Carey and the others never for a second wallowed in self pity, instead they saw it as an opportunity to improve on all that was lost, maintaining the road is always easier the second time.

In his personal life Carey also experienced tragedy. In 1807 his wife died and later his eldest son Felix. Carey married again twice.

A truly great man, whose ability to “plod” made him one of the most successful and leading missionaries of modern times. A man who was never restricted in his work for God because of a small vision of Him. Carey knew His God was great and expected great things.