

Adoniram Judson: From the Bay State to Burma

Adoniram Judson was born on August 9, 1788, in Malden, MA. His father, also named Adoniram, was a devout Congregationalist minister who had been born in Woodbury, CT, and had moved to Malden soon after his marriage in 1759. In the year 1800 the family moved to Braintree, and two years later, when Adoniram was fourteen years old, they relocated in Plymouth. In 1804 he entered Providence College—subsequently called Brown University—one year in advance. During his college course he was a hard-working student; in 1807, at the age of nineteen, he graduated valedictorian of his class.

It was while he was in Providence that he came under the influence of the French skepticism that was sweeping through American universities. In Yale, Dr. Timothy Dwight, a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, had confronted this heresy and with razor-sharp logic and powerful Biblical messages had systematically dismantled this error. Hundreds of Yale students were convinced of the reliability of the Gospel, convicted of their sin, and converted to Christ. But there was no Timothy Dwight at Providence. The young, inexperienced Judson was swept off his feet by what he heard and by “friends” who mocked the scriptures. It was, of course, the death of his best friend – or, more precisely, the horrific way his friend faced that death – that awakened Judson to his danger. Aware for the first time in his life that he was spiritually lost, he returned home seeking Christ and salvation.

Although still in his sins, he was allowed to enroll in Andover Theological Seminary, in the hopes that this would help him find salvation. As he read a book by the Puritan writer Thomas Boston, Gospel light pierced his darkness. Almost immediately he wished to dedicate his life to the Lord. He marked that resolve on his calendar under December 2, 1808.

Judson’s desire to please the Lord soon created a deep exercise in his heart to carry the Gospel to lands where it was not known. Around 1811, he wrote the following in a magazine article: *“How do Christians discharge this 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.”*

Thankfully, the Lord brought to Adoniram a wife who shared his concern for the lost: Ann Hasseltine, (who was affectionately called Nancy by her friends). It was a good thing that Ann felt this way, because Adoniram’s letter to her father, asking for his daughter’s hand in marriage, pulled no punches: *“I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next Spring, to see her no more in this world; whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the 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?”*

On February 5, 1812, Adoniram and Ann were married; the next day, the newlyweds sailed from Salem, Massachusetts, for Calcutta, India. Eventually they settled in Burma. The hardships,



imprisonments, beatings, and deprivations they faced for the sake of Christ and the Gospel would have overwhelmed less devoted believers. During his imprisonment by hostile authorities, it was only his wife’s faithful care, visiting him daily with supplies, that kept him and the other prisoners alive. During this time, Ann gave birth to a daughter and would then

visit Adoniram carrying the baby in her arms. A few months after Adoniram was freed, his dear wife died on October 24th, 1826, to be followed by their daughter Maria in 1827. Adoniram sank into a deep depression, moving to a solitary jungle hut in his grief. Recovering somewhat, he plunged into his work with renewed vigor and by 1829 recorded 47 conversions and baptisms. During 1832 there were 217 who came to Christ and 1144 baptisms in 1836.



Eight years after Ann's death, Adoniram married the widow of a fellow missionary, Sarah Boardman. None of Ann's children survived, but Adoniram and Sarah would have six children who survived. Together, he and Sarah continued to translate scripture and preach the Gospel. In 1840, he finished his great translation of the Burmese Bible. Nearly eight years later, Sarah died during a trip to America.

Arriving in America, now missing his second wife, Judson was unprepared for the reception he received. It had been 38 years since he last set foot on American soil and his name had become a household word. As one writer put it, *"For 19th-century Christians, Adoniram Judson was the first American idol."* His first wife's written accounts of their mission to Burma had captivated American readers. The deliverance they had experienced had "burst like a shock of electricity upon all the American churches." So when he returned to America and spoke at Brown University in the fall of 1845 there was an atmosphere of awe. Professor William Gammell wrote, *"Thousands were gazing for the first time upon one whose name they had been accustomed to utter with reverence and affection as that of the pioneer and father of American missions to the heathen."* Everywhere he went, people wanted Judson to speak of the

work of God in Burma. While in America, Judson married for a third time. Emily proved a faithful companion for the remaining years of Judson's life when they returned to Burma. Finally, having laid down his all for Christ, Judson died in April of 1850 and was buried at sea.

At the time of his death there were over 7000 baptized Christians in Burma along with 63 churches and 123 missionaries and pastors. His influence was felt far and wide. Through the mission societies Judson helped establish there were over 2700 missionaries around the world. Judson's greatest legacy was his undying love for Christ. While in America someone complained that Judson didn't tell more thrilling stories of adventure and intrigue. In reply to that Judson said that he was glad that he *"had nothing better to tell than the wondrous story of Jesus' dying love. My business is to preach the gospel of Christ; and when I can speak at all, I dare not trifle with my commission."*

This plaque is in the Judson Chapel in Malden, Massachusetts:

**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.**