

David Livingstone--Missionary to Africa

Perhaps the greatest missionary of the last 500 years--undoubtedly the best known--is a man who has been known as the "apostle of Africa," David Livingstone. What was the secret of his strength and perseverance amidst unbearable trials? Let's look at his life. He had just returned to Great Britain for the first time after sixteen years in Africa. No white man had ever penetrated the interior of Africa before.

He was invited to speak at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, his native land. Livingstone walked out onto the platform with the tread of a man who had already walked 11,000 miles. His left arm hung almost uselessly at his side as the result of his shoulder having been crushed by a huge lion. His body was emaciated. His skin was a dark brown from sixteen years in the African sun. His face bore innumerable wrinkles from the ravages of African fevers that had racked his body. He was half deaf from rheumatic fever. He was half blind from a branch that had slapped him in the eye. He was, as he described himself, a "ruckle of bones."

The students stared. They were stunned. They *knew* that here was a life that was being literally burned out for God and fellow man. They listened in rapt attention while Livingstone told them about his incredible adventures into the center of that continent which had never been seen by a white man before. He told them about the unbelievable needs of the natives of Africa.

He said to them, "Shall I tell you what sustained me in the midst of all of those toils hardships and incredible loneliness? It was the promise of a Gentleman of the most sacred honor--'Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world'" ([Matthew 28:20](#)). That was the promise, that was his text, that was the secret of Livingstone's commitment. It was the presence of Jesus Christ with him everywhere, all of the time. That promise grasped the heart and mind of Livingstone and transformed his life.

As a young man he wrote an incredible prayer in his diary:

"Lord, send me anywhere, only go with me.

Lay any burden on me, only sustain me.

Sever any ties but the tie that binds me to Thy service and to Thy heart."

Let's consider his threefold prayer. First **"Send me anywhere, only go with me."** Secret of commitment? You see it here so clearly in the life of this young Scotsman who was born in 1813 in Blantyre, Scotland, to godly parents, into a very poor home. His father, a Sunday school teacher, loved missionaries and mission stories. Every week he would sit young David down on a large hassock in front of his easy chair in the living room and tell him wonderful stories about pioneer missionaries who had gone to exotic places to share the Gospel.

David loved those stories. His favorite was about Dr. Charles Gutzlaff, a missionary to China who became David's boyhood hero. As he grew older, he discovered that Gutzlaff, himself, had a hero and that hero was the Son of God, the divine Redeemer. So Livingstone trusted the Saviour for himself and his life was changed. He felt the Lord's call to the mission field.

The family was so poor that when Livingstone was ten years old, he went to work in a cotton mill where he worked from six o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night, six days a week. He learned how to study and worked arduously to gain an education. He determined he would learn medicine so that he might be able to help people physically, as well as spiritually. He graduated from Glasgow University with a degree in medicine.

He started to set sail for the mission field but the door slammed closed in his face. "Lord, what has happened? You said You would be with me." The field was closed. The Opium War had broken out and Livingstone couldn't go. God seemed to be saying, "David, I have not sent you to China," which is where Livingstone was planning to go. God, in His great providence used even the wrath and rage of men to accomplish His own purpose and send David Livingstone to Africa.

How did that come about? No white man had yet entered the interior of Africa, but some were ministering on the coast. One of those was Robert Moffat, who came to Blantyre, Scotland on furlough and told about his experiences in Africa. He said one sentence that grasped the heart of Livingstone and never let him go for the rest of his life. Moffat said "Often, as I have looked to the vast plains of the north [of the southern tip of Africa] I have sometimes in the morning sun seen the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary has ever been."

"A thousand villages!" thought Livingstone. "No missionary! No Gospel! No Christ! No salvation! No life! No light! Nothing but sin and death and darkness! I will go to Africa."

"Lay any burden on me," he had said, **"only sustain me."** Livingstone was to face many burdens, but he was also to discover the sustaining power of Christ. After a huge lion leaped upon him and clamped his teeth into his shoulder and crushed it, Livingstone was taken back to the coast to Robert Moffat's mission station to be nursed back to health. Moffat's young daughter, Mary, was there, and for David and Mary, it was love at first sight. Soon they married. She shared his zeal to take the gospel to Africa. So they set out. Years passed and children were born.

In crossing one of the vast plains of Africa, one of the children died. The others were now old enough, and had to be taken back to England. The most difficult decision of his life, he says was to send his wife and his children back to Scotland to be educated. For five years Livingstone saw not the face of his wife or his children. The burden of loneliness weighed upon him. But Livingstone continued on, deeper and deeper into Africa, all alone.

Thirdly, he had prayed, "**Sever any ties but the tie that binds me to Thy service and to Thy heart.**" The day finally came that Livingstone was going home. How he rejoiced in anticipation. He would see his beloved wife Mary and his children and his mother and his father. At length he burst into his old home in Blantyre, Scotland, and found it empty. They had just buried his father. "Sever any ties...." He fell on his knees and wept.

While home, his dreams were haunted by the specter of a thousand villages in the morning sun. At length, he told his wife he had to return. So, they parted again, and Livingstone sailed back to Africa. More years passed, and finally he received a letter that caused his heart to leap. Mary was coming to Africa! The children were old enough now that she could leave them. She was coming to join him, to spend the rest of her life in reaching the lost natives of that dark continent.

For months she traveled across the oceans and up steamy African streams and rivers, until finally she was in the arms of her husband. But hardly had she gotten there than she was struck down by one of the savage African fevers. Dr. David Livingstone set everything aside and day and night poured every ounce of his medical skill into her care, but finally, she breathed her last. "Sever any ties..." And through it all, those incredibly sustaining words, "Lo, I am with you always."

Deeper into the jungle he went until natives stole all of his food, his goats, but most of all, his chest of medicines used to fight off the terrible African fevers. For Livingstone, this was nothing less than a death sentence and he fell to his knees and said, "O God, I can't go on without the medicine."

Livingstone hadn't seen a white man in five years, but now in the middle of Africa he lifted up his eyes and looked into the face of a white man walking down the trail toward him. An instant answer to his prayers! Behind this white man was a huge caravan, and above them all was an American flag flying in the breeze. The man approached Livingstone and uttered those unforgettable words, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume."

It was, of course, Henry M. Stanley, a reporter for the *New York Herald*, whose publisher had said to him, "Stanley, they say that Livingstone is dead. I don't believe it. I believe he is there in the midst of Africa. Go find him. Bring him back to civilization."

The reporter went and searched until he found him. Stanley described himself as the biggest swaggering atheist that ever lived. After living in the same little hut with Livingstone for four months, he said that he could find no fault in his life. His compassion, his earnestness, the quietness with which he went about his work, the sympathy he showed to all about him, spoke to his own heart and he said, "Finally, after these months, Livingstone converted even me to Christ."

But, Livingstone would not return to civilization with Stanley, but rather he plunged deeper into Africa. He came to the place, at last, where he had taken up his belt three notches to ease the pangs of hunger when he had nothing to eat for months but maize-- dried corn. Gradually all his teeth fell out as he tried to chew it. He had boils and lacerations all over his feet. He could no longer even walk. Was he through? Not David Livingstone. His followers, and there were only three left now, made a stretcher and carried him onward. He had them prop him up in front of a tree in the villages and he preached the Gospel to all.

But at last there came the day when he could not walk, stand, or even be moved. A hut was hastily prepared for him in a little village in the midst of Africa. It was pouring rain. Livingstone went to sleep on his cot. One of his African boys, Chumah, lay across the doorway to keep out wild beasts. In the middle of the night Chumah was awakened by a sound. Livingstone, with great agony, had moved himself and rolled off of his cot onto his knees, as was his custom and folded his hands in prayer. At length, Chumah became disturbed and he went to the door of the hut and said, "Bwana. " No response. He crept closer and said, " Bwana . " No response. Then he reached out his hand and touched an icy cheek. David Livingstone was dead.

It has been said that nothing so became him in his life as the leaving of it. He is the only man I know who died on his knees in prayer. He left his life as he had lived his life--in the presence of Christ, who had said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end."

Livingstone tramped across Africa for thirty-three years--the same length of time that Jesus Christ lived. He traveled twenty-nine thousand miles-- the equivalent to walking across America almost ten times. Two million people heard the Gospel, and the light of Christ came into that dark continent. In the midst of all of those incredible hardships and toils, there was not only the word, but there was the reality and the strength of that divine promise: "**Lo, I am with you always.**"