



### Isobel Kuhn (1901-1957): By searching

Isobel Kuhn (née Miller) was born in Canada. As a university student, she embraced agnosticism, and went through a broken engagement to a man who proved unfaithful. For a time she was suicidal, but remembered her father's kindness and a quote from Dante: 'In His will is our peace'. Her Professor of English at the University of British Columbia was especially fond of using what Isobel called 'the pitying sneer' against the Christian faith, rather than trying to dismantle it by using reasoned argument. She was later to describe this time as the 'slippery ways in the darkness' (Jer. 23:12). She remembered: 'My heart was often like lead, even while my lips were chattering merry nonsense.'

However, 'by searching', as she emphasised, she came to saving faith in Christ, and was determined to serve Him. She saw the question raised in Job 11:7, and the Bible's answers given in Jeremiah 29:13 and John 14:6; 5:39; 7:17. Although she didn't immediately go to church, she began to read, underlining the Gospels, and to pray rather immature prayers that God kindly answered. She set about 'extinguishing her tapers', as she put it in dealing with doubtful issues such as playing cards, going to the theatre, reading novels, and dancing.

Isobel heard the tall and self-sacrificing missionary, musician, and science graduate, James O. Fraser, at a conference in Washington in 1924, and was particularly struck when, before the fireplace on the last night of the conference, he cited Luke 9:23-24 along with Mark 10:29-30. She was soon leaving for Chicago to study at the Moody Bible Institute. After graduation, she sailed in 1928 for China as a single woman, with 'Let us go on' from Hebrews 6:1 on her lips. Isobel's mother utterly opposed her going to China, initially at least, although she herself was president of the Women's Missionary Society of the Canadian Presbyterian Church.

In 1929 in China, Isobel married John Kuhn, who had been in China already for two years, waiting for her – 'the irresistible force collides with the immovable object', was how Isobel described it. They lived in a remote area, working amongst the Lisu in the far western province of Yunnan – a people who considered the desire for privacy to be the Westerners' queerest trait. Often they were separated for fairly lengthy periods, yet they lived out the motto they had adopted for their marriage 'God first', based on Matthew 6:33. They had two children – Kathryn and Danny, born twelve years apart.

Evangelism was a struggle, but God worked in sovereign grace. Isobel was musical and could play the organ and the piano, and also sought to use her Hawaiian guitar to advantage. John would at times engage in all night prayer meetings. When a convert named Small Pearl was baptized, the local Chinese thought she must have done something terrible to warrant such punishment!

Isobel saw her life as one lived 'in the arena' (1 Cor.4:9). These were extremely troubled times. By 1937 there was war, with the Kuomintang and the Communists cooperating against the common enemy, Japan. In all the turmoil and dislocation, Isobel often rested on Genesis 28:15. Another woman missionary, Gladys Aylward, became famous for her heroic trek whereby she led 100 homeless children to safety across Japanese-held territory. The Chinese civil war recommenced after the ending of World War II, and in October 1949 the (misnamed) People's Democratic Republic of China was declared. Those missionaries who survived the Communist revolution were soon expelled – in 1948 there were about 6,000 Protestant missionaries in China, but by 1951 they were all gone. With Kathryn thankfully already in the USA, Isobel had escaped with Danny into Burma (Myanmar), citing Isaiah 59:10, while John stayed on for another eighteen months to help the church.

In 1952 they were relocated in the mountains of north Thailand, a move which Isobel accepted after reading the words 'Climb or die' in one of Amy Carmichael's writings. However, within a couple of years, Isobel was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she died in 1957. She calmed herself with Psalm 127:2, and sought to battle her fears with a number of other verses, including 2 Timothy 1:7. The medical treatment was not successful, but as she was dying, Isobel cited Luke 2:29-30 to two fellow missionaries. Her husband John recorded of Isobel's death: 'If ever I was near heaven, and if ever I was conscious that death had lost its sting, it was then.'

*Peter Barnes (abridged and edited, with permission)*