



William Carey (1761-1834) - Great things through grace

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51:2)

The second half of Carey's life was spent in India. The early months were trying. On 23 January 1794 he wrote: 'All my friends are but One, but He is all-sufficient.' The letters of the 'rope-holders' at home never arrived during Carey's first two years in India. He and his family were forced to make a number of moves, including to an indigo plant at Mudnabatti, a very lonely place. His five-year-old son Peter died of malaria. Dorothy went insane, ranted and raved, made wild accusations against Carey, and tried to kill him. She died in 1807, and six weeks later Carey announced that he would be marrying Lady Charlotte von Rumohr, a petite, elegant and cultured Dane. She died in 1821, and the following year Carey married Grace Hughes who outlived him.

Carey struggled spiritually in an unbelieving environment, and his pundit, Ram Ram Basu (a high-caste Brahmin), was helpful linguistically but erratic in his Christian life. Carey dismissed him because he went back to the idols, engaged in embezzlement, committed adultery, and procured an abortion. Carey wrote back to England with honesty, saying of the Indians: 'Never was a people more willing to hear, yet more slow to understand.' Children were sacrificed to the River Ganges, while the sick and the aged were left to die. In 1799 Carey witnessed a case of sati (widow-burning), 'exclaiming loudly against the murder, and full of horror at what we had seen.'

Eventually, in 1800, a missionary community was set up at Serampore, a Danish settlement near Calcutta. Twice a day they gathered together for Scripture and prayer, and on Saturday night they aired any differences. The Serampore Trio were William Ward (a printer, who died of cholera in 1823), Joshua Marshman (a sharp-tongued schoolmaster, who ran a Bengali weekly newspaper after 1818), and Carey. Henry Martyn was to write: 'Three such men as Carey, Marshman, and Ward, so suited to one another and their work, are not to be found, I think, in the whole world.'

Success came, and in 1800 Krishna Pal and Felix Carey were baptized. By 1821 some 1,400 Indians had been baptized. These first generation Christians, like their counterparts in the New Testament era, retained their 'pagan' names and did not adopt 'Christian' names. Also, as Ward put it: 'We carefully avoid whatever might Anglicise our students and converts.' There was no compromise whatsoever with the caste system – all converts had to share together in the Lord's Supper.

Free schools were established. By 1817 there were 103 schools with 6,703 pupils. In 1818, Serampore College was founded, with Carey as professor of divinity and lecturer on botany and zoology. It was designed not just for Christians and not just for theology. Carey corresponded with the famous botanists of the world, and several Indian plant species were named after him, e.g. *Carea Saulea*.

Carey's primary task was that of Bible translation. In 1801 the first edition of the New Testament in Bengali appeared. Carey was delighted: 'To give a man a New Testament who never saw it, who has been reading lies as the Word of God; to give him these everlasting lines which angels would be glad to read – this, this is my blessed work.' Ultimately, Carey was involved in the translation of the Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Hinki, Assamese, and Sanskrit (the language of the Brahmins), as well as portions of 29 other languages. As he said in 1804: 'I am more in my element translating the Word of God than in any other employment.'

Yet there were still many setbacks and trials. In 1812 a fire broke out which destroyed the printing house, with presses, paper, books, and manuscripts. It seems to have been an accident and not a case of arson. As his sister commented: 'Whatever he began he finished: difficulties never seemed to discourage his mind.'

Relations with home base deteriorated, and in 1828 the Serampore Mission severed ties with the Baptist Missionary Society. After suffering a series of strokes, Carey died peacefully on 9 June 1834. When he thought he was dying in 1823, he said that he wanted Psalm 51:2 to form the text for his funeral sermon. On his grave, next to his second wife, he had engraved words from a hymn by Isaac Watts:

A wretched, poor, and helpless worm,
On Thy kind arms I fall.

He depended utterly on grace: 'If I ever get to heaven, it must be owing to divine grace from first to last.'

[Peter Barnes, with permission]