

Adoniram Judson

Life Verse, Part 5

John 12:24

In *John's Gospel at chapter 12*, the Lord Jesus is speaking to his disciples, foretelling His death, resurrection and glorification.

The Lord would not only speak prophetically of his own death, but of all those who, to this day surrender their lives to follow Christ no matter what.

He said in *verse 24, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Jesus certainly implies that suffering and fruit bearing go hand in hand.

In fact, there seems to be some parallel, doesn't there, between suffering much and influencing much for the glory of Christ.

Why is it that the people we study – both in the Bible and throughout church history – people who accomplished so much also suffered so much? In fact, the more they suffered, the more they are *studied* . . . still influencing our world for Christ.

The words of our Lord as He enters Jerusalem knowing that within days He will be crucified, still echo to this day with this lasting principle: a legacy of spiritual fruit belongs to that man or woman who effectively says to Christ, "Here am I, bury me."

Here am I, willing even to die, bury me.

If there was anyone included in this description by our Lord, of a fruitful life of surrender, it would be the man who became America's first foreign missionary.

He would experience incredible suffering; he would bury all but one of his children; he would dig graves for his first wife and then his second wife 19 years later. Many of his associates would die from disease and stress.

Long after becoming a living legend, he would write this kind of appeal to potential missionary candidates – and I quote – "Remember, a large proportion of those who come out on a mission to the East die within five years after leaving their native land. So walk softly . . . death is narrowly watching your steps."

How's that for a recruiting strategy? Are you willing to be a seed, planted in the ground, and by

suffering – even dying – bear a harvest for the gospel of Jesus Christ?

This missionaries name was Adoniram Judson. He was born into a pastor's home in 1788, in Boston Massachusetts.

By the age of three it was obvious that he was a fast learner – his mother was able – to her surprise – to teach him in one week how to read; it was during a week while his father was away preaching – and Adoniram surprised his father upon his return by reading an entire chapter to him from the Bible.ⁱ

When he was 16 his father enrolled him in Rhode Island College – now, Brown University, because his father considered Harvard and Yale too liberal. If he could only see them now.

Adoniram would be at the top of every class throughout college and he would graduate valedictorian in 1807.

He would keep a secret though that wouldn't be revealed for at least a year – and when he revealed it, after his 20th birthday, his parent's hearts would be broken.ⁱⁱ

Adoniram had been heavily influenced by a fellow student named Jacob Eames. Jacob Eames was popular, brilliant, artistic and an unbeliever. Jacob became one of Adoniram's closest friends and he introduced Adoniram to what was called free-thinking – really atheism and the tenets of skepticism – which ultimately denied the deity of Christ and the gospel of atonement.

By the time Adoniram graduated, he had abandoned the Bible he'd learned to read at the age of three – he had abandoned the gospel of his parent's faith.

After informing his parents of his unbelief and trying his hand at tutoring for a year, he set out to tour New England on horseback.

He eventually joined a group of actors in New York City where he lived what he called a reckless, vagabond life. They would find lodging in an inn, run up the score and then slip out in the night without paying their bills.ⁱⁱⁱ

After only a few weeks Adoniram grew tired of their undisciplined lifestyle and struck out on his

own – roaming . . . without purpose . . . without meaning.

One night he stopped to spend the night at an inn he'd never stayed at before. The innkeeper warned him that his sleep might be interrupted by a young man next door to Judson's room who was violently ill.

Sure enough, during the night, the moaning and crying of this young man in the next room kept him awake. The man seemed to be on the brink of dying – his moaning and groaning and crying kept Adoniram lying wide awake in his bed.

Adoniram wondered about the young man's soul – where would he spend eternity – what was his hope after death – in fact, Adoniram would recount later how he himself lay there thinking the same thoughts about his own soul and his own life and his own eternal destiny.

Eventually the moaning stopped and Adoniram drifted off to sleep.

Early the next morning, Adoniram asked the innkeeper about the man's health or outcome. The innkeeper confirmed that the young man had indeed died that night. Adoniram asked him, "Do you know who he was?" And the Innkeeper said, "Oh yes, his name was Eames . . . Jacob Eames."^{iv}

Adoniram could barely move. In fact, he stayed at the inn for hours pondering the death of his friend. He would recount later to a friend – and I quote – "That hell should open up in this country inn and snatch Jacob Eames, [my] dearest friend and guide, from the next room – this could not, simply could not, be pure coincidence."^v

It was clear to Adoniram Judson that God was on his trail. He immediately returned home and to the joy of his parents – and months later trusted Christ for his personal salvation and devoted himself entirely to the Lord.

Two years later, he finished his seminary studies and applied for missionary status with the Congregational Mission board. He had heard a sermon as a student that illustrated the mission fields of India, Burma and China and he determined to give his life to serve Christ in that part of the world.

While his parents were thrilled with his conversion, they were not happy with his desire for missionary service overseas. He had been offered a faculty position at Brown University – which he declined, much to their chagrin. He was offered a paid pastoral position nearby – which he declined, to his mother's tears.

On the same day he presented himself to the Congregational missionary board, he met a young woman named Ann Hasseltine. Over the next few weeks, they fell in love.

Adoniram was clear with his life's goal – he told her – and everyone else, that he was heading for Burma – located between southern India and China – now known as Myanmar.

She turned out to be just as committed to the gospel as he was.

One month after meeting her, he asked her father if he could marry Ann. His letter to Ann's father reveals his passion for the lost – but it also became prophetic of their future.

The letter reads – and by the way, Dads, imagine some young man wanting to marry your daughter and his proposal sounding like this – in 1800's English – and I quote – "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 for a heathen land, and her subjection to the hardships ad sufferings of a missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influences of the southern 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 heaven and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in the promise of meeting your daughter in the world of glory with a crown of righteousness, brightened by the acclamations of heathen now saved, through her means, who will there be praising her Savior?"^{vi}

How's that for a proposal?

Hey – I'd like to take your daughter away from you – to a pagan land where she'll probably suffer every deprivation until she eventually dies – and more than likely, violently.

During that same time, writing to a friend, Ann wrote, "I have come to the determination to give up all my comforts and enjoyments here, to sacrifice my affection to relatives and friends, and go where God shall see fit to place me."^{vii}

Ann's father said yes . . . and so did she.

In a way, Ann, her father, Adoniram were all saying the same thing to God – in different ways – "Here am I, bury me."

Two weeks after their wedding they were on a ship bound for India.^{viii}

The voyage would last 4 months. And it would create problems with their Congregationalist supporters back home – and their family.

You see, during their voyage, they spent a lot of time studying the word on subjects related to planting churches and they came to the conclusion that salvation should precede baptism by the church; and that baptism, literally translated and applied, could only mean immersion.

They changed their entire view and affiliation.

Which means – and was no small thing – they departed from America as Congregationalists and landed in India as Baptists.

Problem was, there was no Baptist Board back in America to support them financially.

No matter . . . they would trust God and never look back.

I bring that issue up because it reveals something about them early on. Their willingness to confront their religious past – their willingness to potentially upset their families – their willingness to lose all their financial support – all for the sake of biblical conviction, which reveals a lot, doesn't it, about the mettle of character and the tenacity of their convictions.

Adoniram and Ann Judson were baptized by immersion soon after landing in Calcutta, India.

Fortunately, when news did reach America of their changed position, Baptist churches rallied and created the American Baptist Missionary Union, and promptly began supporting them.

There were other changes ahead for them.

They had to move several times upon arriving until they eventually settled in Rangoon, Burma – just north of Thailand.

And there they would spend the next ten years attempting to learn the Burmese language, without a grammar, without a dictionary and without a church, without an English speaking teacher.

Adoniram had to learn by creating his own Burmese grammar over the next few years. In fact, it would take 6 years before he was about to preach his first sermon.

And then finally, 7 years after arriving, Adoniram led the first Burmese individual to faith in Jesus Christ.

And it's as if the kingdom of darkness took special note.

In the country of Burma, converting from Buddhism was punishable by death. Little wonder that it took Judson 12 years of church planting before he had 18 people as baptized members.

On one occasion, Adoniram and another missionary traveled to see the Emperor of Burma to petition for freedom to preach the gospel openly, without the threat of persecution or death for their converts. He not only disregarded their request, he threw the gospel tract he'd been handed to the ground after reading only a few lines.

In the meantime, their son, Roger William Judson, died at 8 months of age.

Back in their home region, Ann Judson continued serving along with her husband . . . she was able to befriend the wife of the political leader of Rangoon (sort of a Governor, in our culture) and began to make some inroads.^{ix}

Before long, a printing press arrived and materials that Adoniram had translated into Burmese were being printed by the thousands, including copies of Judson's translation of the Gospel of Matthew.

Eventually, Adoniram would complete the entire New Testament into Burmese.

War eventually broke about between England and Burma and all the English missionaries were immediately suspected as serving the British government as spies.

Five years after they baptized their first convert, on June 8, 1824, Burmese officials broke into their home, tied up Adoniram and dragged him from his wife's side and put him in prison.

He was placed in a prison building where 100 inmates. They were all lying on the floor, their feet in stocks and iron chains weighing 14 pounds. He would wear the scars of those chains for the rest of his life. At night, a bamboo pole was passed between the prisoner's shackled feet and hoisted up by pulleys so that they literally hung upside down – at a height which allowed their shoulders to rest on the ground while their feet were pulled above their heads all night long.

After some time, Adoniram was moved to a cage that one housed a lion – not high enough to stand up, not broad enough to lie down.

During this time, Ann delivered their daughter Maria and would walk with her every day, bringing Adoniram food she would beg the jailor to pass along to Adoniram.

But soon, she became ill and unable to nurse her baby and finally – if you can imagine it – the jailer had mercy on them and actually let Adoniram take the baby each evening into the village and beg for some nursing mother to give their baby milk.^x

Finally, suddenly, Adoniram was released after 17 months in prison. He was evidently needed to interpret between British and Burmese officials.

By the time he returned home, Ann was dead . . . a few months later, their little Maria died. Three months after that he received news that his father had only recently died as well.

He was crushed. He entered a deep depression that would last some 3 years. He dropped his translation work. He retreated from anything that might promote any sense of happiness or pleasure. He refused to eat with those outside the mission station. He renounced his honorary Doctor of Divinity degree that Brown University had given him. He gave away all his savings to the Baptist Mission Board and asked that his salary be reduced.

He then built a hut some distance from the mission house – deep in the jungle where he moved in, alone. He even dug an open grave beside his hut where he expected to die, and he would sit there for hours – even in pouring rain, contemplating his own death.

He would write in his journal feelings of utter spiritual desolation – and I quote, “God is to me the great Unknown – I believe in Him, but I cannot find Him.”^{xi}

He subsisted on a little rice each day and spent his day reflecting, praying for some sign that God had indeed forgiven him for all sorts of imagined failures:

- for not living up to his calling –
- for not being a more humble missionary –
- for getting caught up with pride in his commitment
- for accepting any accolade from others

The turning point came two years later – it was a letter informing him that his brother Elnathan had died at the age of 35.

Ironically, this became his first step out of depression because Adoniram had prayed for the past 17 years for his brother’s salvation – to no avail. However, the letter informed him that Elnathan had trusted Jesus Christ for his salvation and had died a believer.

He began to pour back into the scriptures . . . his tortured soul and mind began to receive hope in the promises of God’s forgiveness and grace.

He reentered the mission, picked back up his translation work and that next year – 1831 – was the beginning of a great outpouring of spiritual interest that he had never seen before.

Perhaps he, the seed, had truly died . . . buried, alone . . . but now, by the refreshing work of God’s Spirit, he was breathing new life and now, ironically, a great harvest would begin.

Eight years after Ann’s death, Adoniram married again – the widow of a longtime missionary in Burma. They had several children and as his family grew, so did the church.

On September 1835, he completed the Old Testament translation of the Bible into Burmese and he also baptized the 100th member of the Burmese church.^{xii}

These had been his two goals – and they were now accomplished.

Due to Sarah’s declining health, they decided to go home to recover and raise awareness of the mission in America. She would die en route to America and be buried on an island while Adoniram and their three oldest children continued on.

When they arrived in Boston, Adoniram was greeted as a celebrity. Newspapers covered his arrival and every move; everyone wanted to meet the first American missionary to return with stories of distant lands, prison shackles, disease, danger, suffering and death.

Since Adoniram was actually suffering at the time with lung problems, he could only talk in a whisper through an assistant.

In addition, he hadn’t spoken English for nearly 20 years and had a hard time putting 3 sentences together properly.

He had written to his board before his arrival – and I quote – “Do not expect me to make public addresses, for in order to become an acceptable and eloquent preacher in a foreign language, I deliberately abandoned my own.”^{xiii}

Congregations and gatherings in America were somewhat disappointed too that instead of talking about his adventures, he most often simply wanted to whisper the gospel and talk about Christ.

He had truly died to self.

While in America, he met a woman with a rather well known literary career underway. They fell in love and she agreed to be his wife, leaving her career and comforts of home for 108 degree weather, disease and difficulty.

She too became one more seed to say, “Here I am, Lord, bury me.”

They arrived back in Burma and the work simply exploded with fruit.

Adoniram began a ministry to the Karen people group – a large ethnic group that was still following

traces of Old Testament beliefs. They had handed down for centuries what they called “Traditions of the Elders.” Adoniram Judson had no idea – until his first encounter with them.

Their traditions included, for instance, the story of a Creator God who created man and then a woman from the rib of that man’s body. They also believed in a Devil who tempted mankind into sinning; they believed in a Messiah who would come one day to their rescue. They actually lived with the expectation of a messenger coming to deliver news of the Messiah from a sacred parchment roll.^{”xiv}

And here came Adoniram Judson.

Where he had once spent years sitting in a hut praying that someone would accept his invitation to listen to the gospel, now in one winter alone, 6,000 people came to him for material.

Some would travel three months from the borders of China and arrive saying, “Sir, we hear that there is an eternal hell; we are afraid of it; do give us a writing that will tell us how to escape it.” Others came from the north saying, ‘We have seen writings that tell of an eternal God. If you are the author, please give us more so that we can know the truth before we die.’^{”xv}

In one year alone Adoniram Judson and his team baptized more than 1,000 converts. Ten years to win 18 disciples. One year now to reach more than 1,000.

The buried seed was now bearing a harvest of fruit.

After several years of fruitful ministry, his health began to fail. He was now 61 years of age. When he had arrived in his early 20’s he had hoped and prayed for 100 believers and one church.

Soon after his death, at the age of 61, there were more than 200,000 Christians and hundreds of churches. One out of every 58 Burmese citizens had come to faith in Christ.

And for the last 150 years, since his death, every dictionary and every grammar written in Burma has been based on the original work of Adoniram Judson.

His Bible is still the premier translation for the Burmese people.

On the day he baptized his first convert – a day he’d waited some 6 years to see happen, he had

written in his journal such audacious words as these – “Oh, may this [baptism] prove to be the beginning of a series of baptisms in the Burman empire which shall continue in uninterrupted success to the end of the age.^{xvi}

Today, the fruit continues. There are nearly 4,000 evangelical Baptist congregations which include some 1.9 million people and counting.^{xvii}

And they all trace their spiritual lineage to the legacy of Adoniram Judson.

On April 3rd, 1850, he boarded a ship for a voyage he hoped would help him recover his strength. Instead, he became terribly ill and 8 days into the voyage, he passed away.

The crew gathered in silence as they wrapped his body for burial at sea; and after a few words by an unbelieving captain, his body was lowered into the Indian Ocean, without even a prayer.^{xviii}

But that wouldn’t have mattered to Adoniram Judson. He had died, long ago; and his welcome to his eternal Savior would have been amazing to see.

A seed, a kernel of wheat . . . surrendered . . . sacrificed . . . buried . . . but still bearing fruit.

We can observe so many truths in this mans’ life; two of them are simply this:

1. Serving Christ does not eliminate potential suffering.
2. Willingness to suffer is often the threshold of spiritual fruit.

And what matters most is a life surrendered – which effectively says, no matter where you are – Here am I, Lord, bury me.

A marble slab outside a Baptist church in the town where he was born – Malden, Massachusetts, placed there in Memoriam says all that I believe Adoniram Judson would care to have said:

*Rev. Adoniram Judson
Born August 9, 1788
Died April 12, 1850
Malden his birthplace
The ocean, his grave
Converted Burmans,
And the Burmese Bible
His monument
His record is on high.*

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- i www.gfamissions.org/missionary-biographies/judson-adoniram-1788-1850.html
- ii John Piper, Adoniram Judson: *How Few There Are Who Die So Hard* (ibook found at www.desiringgod.org, p. 11)
- iii Ibid, p. 1
- iv Ibid, p. 12
- v Ibid
- vi Jesse Clement, The Life of Rev. Adoniram Judson (Reprint from the University of Michigan Library), p. 170
- vii Piper, p. 13
- viii www.wholesomewords.org/missions/bjudson3.html
- ix www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoniram_Judson.html
- x Clement, p. 170
- xi Julia Cameron, Christ Our Reconciler (InterVarsity Press, 2012), p. 200
- xii gfamissions.org
- xiii wholesomewords.org
- xiv www.wikipedia.org/Adoniram_Judson
- xv wholesomewords.org
- xvi Ibid
- xvii Piper, p. 8
- xviii wholesomewords.org