

~Other Speakers S-Z: Classic Christian Writings:

The following account is taken from the autobiography of John G. Paton, "Pioneering in the New Hebrides." Dr. Arthur T. Pierson says in the introduction to the book, "This biography is not surpassed, for stimulating, inspiring, and helpful narrative, by any existing story of missionary heroism." John G. Paton was finally persuaded to write this autobiography by the conviction that there was much in his experience which the Church of God ought to know. He wanted to convey to readers the deep and certain confidence which he had that in God's hand our breath is, and His are all our ways (see Daniel 5:23).

The island on which Paton went to labor about 1860 was Tanna. Many of the inhabitants were cannibalistic natives. Another missionary couple lived some miles across the island, and some Aneityumese Christian teachers from a neighboring island came to assist Paton. During the first four months on the island his young wife sickened with fever and died suddenly, to be followed a few weeks afterward in death by the couple's infant son. Paton was able to bear the sorrow only by the grace and strength of the Lord. The following is a brief glimpse of God's care for the brave missionary laboring to make Him known in the New Hebrides. John G. Paton writes:

Fever and ague had attacked me fourteen times severely with slighter recurring attacks almost continuously after my first three months on the island. I now felt the necessity of taking the hint of the Tannese Chief to "Sleep on the higher ground."

Having also received medical counsel to the same effect, though indeed experience was painfully sufficient testimony, I resolved to remove my house, and began to look about for a suitable site. There rose behind my present site, a hill about three hundred feet high, or rather more, surrounded on all sides by a valley, and swept by the breezes of the trade winds, being only separated from the ocean by a narrow neck of land. On this I had set my heart. There was room for a mission house and a church, for which indeed nature seemed to have adapted it.

I proceeded to buy up every claim by the natives to any portion of the hill, paying each publicly and in turn, so that there might be no trouble afterwards. I then purchased from a trader the deck planks of a shipwrecked vessel, with which to construct a house of two apartments, a bedroom and a small store room adjoining it, to which I purposed to transfer and add the old house as soon as I was able.

Just at this juncture, the fever smote me again more severely than ever. My weakness after this attack was so great that I felt as if I never could rally again. With the help of my faithful Aneityumese teacher, Abraham, and his wife, (from a nearby island) I made what appeared my last effort to creep (I could not climb) up the hill to get a breath of wholesome air. When about two-thirds up the hill, I became so faint that I concluded I was dying.

Lying down on the ground, sloped against the root of a tree, to keep me from rolling to the bottom, I took farewell of old Abraham, of my mission work, and of everything around. In this weak state I lay, watched over by my faithful companion, and fell into a quiet sleep. When consciousness returned, I felt a little stronger, and a faint gleam of hope and life came back to my soul.

Abraham and his devoted wife, Nafatu, lifted and carried me to the top of the hill. There they laid me on coconut leaves on the ground, and erected over me a shade or screen of the same; and there the two faithful souls, inspired surely by something diviner even than mere human pity, gave me the coconut juice to drink and fed me with native food and kept me living--I know not for how long.

Consciousness did, however, fully return. The trade wind refreshed me day by day. The Tannese seemed to have given me up for dead, and providentially none of them looked near us for many days. Amazingly my strength returned, and I began planning about my new house on the hill. Afraid again to sleep at the old site, I slept under the tree, and sheltered by the coconut leaf screen, while preparing my new bedroom.

Here again, but for these faithful souls, the Aneityumese teacher and his wife, I would have been baffled, and would have died in the effort. The planks of the wreck, and all other articles required they fetched and carried, and it taxed my utmost strength to get them in some way planted together. But life depended on it. It was at length accomplished, and after that time I suffered comparatively little from anything like continuous attacks of fever and ague.

That noble old soul, Abraham, stood by me as an angel of God in sickness and in danger. He went at my side

wherever I had to go. He helped me willingly to the last inch of strength in all that I had to do, and it was perfectly manifest that he was doing all this not from mere human love, but for the sake of Jesus.

That man had been a cannibal in his heathen days, but by the grace of God there he stood verily a new creature in Christ Jesus. Any trust, however sacred or valuable, could be absolutely reposed in him. In trial or danger, I was often refreshed by that old teacher's prayers, as I used to be by the prayers of my saintly father in my childhood's home. No white man could have been a more valuable helper to me in my perilous circumstances, and no person, white or black, could have shown more fearless and chivalrous devotion.

When I have read or heard the shallow objections of irreligious writers and talkers, hinting that there was no reality in conversions and that mission effort was but waste, Oh, how my heart has yearned to plant them just one week on Tanna, with the "natural" man all around in the person of cannibal and heathen, and only the one "spiritual" man in the person of the converted Abraham, nursing them, feeding them, saving them "for the love of Jesus,"--that I might learn how many hours it took to convince them that Christ in man was a reality after all! All the skepticism would hide its head in foolish shame, and all doubts would dissolve under one glance of the new light that Jesus, and Jesus alone, pours from the converted cannibal's eye.....

One morning at daybreak, I found my house surrounded by armed men, and a Chief intimated that they had assembled to take my life. Seeing that I was entirely in their hands, I knelt down and gave myself away body and soul to the Lord Jesus, for what seemed the last time on Earth. Rising, I went out to them, and began calmly talking about their unkind treatment of me and contrasting it with all my conduct toward them. I also plainly showed them what would be the sad consequences if they carried out their cruel purpose. At last some of the Chiefs, who had attended the worship, rose and said, "Our conduct has been bad; but now we will fight for you and kill all those who hate you."

Grasping hold of their leader, I held him fast until he promised never to kill any one on my account, for Jesus taught us to love our enemies and always to return good for evil! During this scene, many of the armed men slunk away into the bush, and those who remained entered into a bond to be friendly and to protect us.

But again their Public Assembly resolved that we should be killed, because, as they said, they hated Jehovah and the worship; for it made them afraid to do as they had always done. If I would give up visiting the villages and praying and talking with them about Jehovah, they intimated that they would like me to stay and trade with them, as they liked the traders but hated the missionaries. I told them that the hope of being able to teach them the worship of Jehovah alone kept me living amongst them, that I was there, not for gain or pleasure, but because I loved them, and pitied their estate, and sought their good continually by leading them to know and serve the only true God. One of the Chiefs, who had lived in Sydney and spoke English, replied for all the rest,

"Missi, our fathers loved and worshiped whom you call the Devil, the Evil Spirit, and we are determined to do the same, for we love the conduct of our fathers. Missi Turner came here and tried to break down our worship, but our fathers fought him and he left us. They fought also Peta, the Samoan teacher, and he fled. They fought and killed some of the Samoan teachers placed on the other side of the harbor, and their companions left. We killed the last foreigner that lived in Tanna before you came here. We murdered the Aneityumese teachers and burned down their houses.

"After each of these acts, Tanna was good, and we all lived like our fathers and sickness and death left us. Now, our people are determined to kill you, if you do not leave this island, for you are changing our customs and destroying our worship, and we hate the Jehovah worship...."

After many such speeches, I answered all the questions of the people fully, and besides I cross-questioned my assailants on several subjects, regarding which they grossly contradicted each other, till the majority of voices cried out, "They are lying! Their words are crooked! Missi knows all the truth about the people..."

By this time, they were willing to remain quiet, and allowed me to talk of spiritual things and of the blessings that the Sabbath and the Bible brought to all other lands, and to conduct in their presence and hearing the worship of Jehovah.

But my enemies seldom slackened their hateful designs against my life, however calmed or baffled for the moment. Within a few days of the above events, when natives in large numbers were assembled at my house, a man furiously rushed on me with his axe, but a Kaserumini Chief snatched a spade with which I had been working, and dexterously defended me from instant death.

Life in such circumstances led me to cling very near to the Lord Jesus. I knew not for one brief hour when or how attack might be made. Yet, with my trembling hand clasped in the hand once nailed on Calvary and now swaying the scepter of the Universe, calmness and peace and resignation abode in my soul.

Next day, a wild Chief followed me about for four hours with his loaded musket, and though often directed toward me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in His hands, and felt immortal till my work was done.

Trials and hairbreadth escapes strengthened my faith, and seemed only to nerve me for more to follow; and they did tread swiftly upon each others' heels. Without that abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Savior, nothing else in all the world could have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably.

His words, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world," became to me so real that it would not have startled me to behold Him, as Stephen did, gazing down upon the scene. I felt His supporting power, as did St. Paul, when he cried, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).

It is the sober truth, and it comes back to me sweetly after twenty years, that I had my nearest and dearest glimpses of the face and smile of my blessed Lord in those dread moments when musket, club or spear were being levelled at my life. Oh, the bliss of living and enduring, as seeing "Him who is invisible!"