

“You Will Be Eaten by Cannibals”

Biblical lessons from the life of John G. Paton

Various Scriptures

After the defeat of the French Empire and its allies in the Napoleonic Wars, the British Empire became the world's leading power, controlling one quarter of the world's population and one fifth of the total land area. Under the reign of Queen Victoria it enforced a kind of Pax Britannica all around the world which encouraged trade and far-reaching exploration. The 19th century was an era of unparalleled invention and discovery, with significant developments in the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and electricity. But more significant than all of that was the fact this period of history opened the way for the gospel to spread around the world like it never had before.

It was during this time that God raise up some of our greatest Christian heroes. This was the era of men like William Carey, Hudson Taylor, George Muller, Adoniram Judson, and Charles Spurgeon. But there was another Christian hero that most of us are rather unfamiliar with. He was already ten years old when Charles Spurgeon was born, but decades later he would be introduced by Spurgeon as the King of the Cannibals. His name: John G. Paton.

I want to begin by offering a short overview of Paton's life and ministry so you'll have the big picture, and then we'll spend most of our time talking about specific ways he lived in obedience to God's word that I think will help us evaluate our own lives in the light of Scripture.

John Paton was born in Dumfriesshire, Scotland in May 1824 to a James and Janet Paton. He would be the eldest of 11 children born in the Paton home. Their house was a typical thatched roof village cottage with three rooms and a dirt floor. One of those rooms was designated for his father's looms where he worked as a stocking manufacturer. At age 12 John began working with his father there for 14 hours a day helping earn a living for the family. During his two hours of meal and rest breaks each day, John disciplined himself to read and study both Latin and Greek in hopes of someday being able to attend the university and be trained for missionary service. His family belonged to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

Eventually, John moved to Glasgow, where he undertook theological and medical studies to prepare him for the mission field. In Glasgow he applied to the City Mission (a Presbyterian ministry) and was hired to do missionary work in a needy part of the city. Here he visited the poor, held weekly Bible studies, did evangelism and began preaching in the streets. God blessed his ministry in extraordinary ways! Sometimes hundreds of people would come to hear him preach on the city street. Bar owners hated him because so many people were repenting that it harmed their business. They tried to have him arrested. They hurled stones and boiling water at him, but his success in ministry only continued.

Eventually he learned about a missionary from his church in Glasgow who needed help with his work among the islands of the New Hebrides in the South Pacific (now called Vanuatu). After being accepted as a missionary, he married a young lady named Mary, and together they sailed to the New Hebrides and were appointed to the Cannibal-infested island of Tanna.

John ministered on Tanna for four years, but was eventually driven off by the cannibals. For

the next four years he traveled for the mission and raises money to have a ship built to serve the world-wide mission effort. Then he returns home for a year to tell his story and raise support for the mission throughout Scotland and the British Isles. Before returning to the south Pacific he married his second wife, Margaret, with whom he began a new ministry.

Returning to the South Pacific, he was assigned to the small island of Aniwa. Though he was constantly under the threat of death, eventually he and Margaret were able to reduce the native tongue to a written language, build two orphan homes, a church house, and a printing house by which they printed the N.T. in the native language, and raise six of their own children to serve the Lord.

They loved the natives with their very lives, shared the gospel at every opportunity, and in the end saw an island full of cannibalistic natives transformed into lovers of Jesus Christ and His word by the power of the gospel. Moreover, because of the work accomplished on the Island of Aniwa, missionaries from all over the world came to bring the gospel to each of the other islands where much gospel fruit was borne.

After a full and fruitful ministry of 41 years, Margaret died on May 16, 1905 at age 64. Two years later (Jan 28, 1907) John joined her in heaven at the age of 82.

Now, I hope you will pick up a copy of his biography or autobiography to fill in the details of his story, but let me use the remainder of our time to talk about how John Paton's life exemplified obedience to the word of God.

I. Matthew 28:19-20 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

1. Under the influence of a godly mom and dad and a solid church John as a young boy became convinced that God was calling Him to "Go." "Although [he] didn't know this until he was much older, on the day he was born his parents solemnly gave him back to the Lord in prayer, to serve Him overseas as a missionary, if that should be God's will" (KC, p. 20).

2. It was indeed God's will, and John would not allow any obstacle get his the way of his calling. When he heard about the need in the New Hebrides, he didn't let fear of cannibals derail his mission. As it turned out, the stories of cannibalism were true! On several occasions while he was there warring tribes on the Island of Tanna killed enemy warriors, dragged them home and ate their flesh. Not only that, but they practiced widow sacrifice. When a married man died, they killed his wife so that he would have someone to serve him in the netherworld.

3. That the threat of cannibals couldn't derail his obedience to the Great Commission reveals Paton's fearless trust in the promise of God. Even when some otherwise faithful men in his own church attempted to persuade him to change his mind about going to the New Hebrides, he was absolutely unmoved.

One old Christian tried to discourage him from going by warning him, 'The cannibals! You will be eaten by cannibals!'

John replied, Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect

is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my Resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.

4. As John Piper says, “This is the kind of in-your-face spiritual moxie that marks Paton’s whole life and makes his story so invigorating to read.” But as I read this story, I find myself asking, “Do I trust the promises of God like Paton did? Does my life look anything like the lives of those named in Hebrews 11, who trusted the promises of God faithfully to the end and saw God bear extraordinary fruit in their lives? How is God calling me to change?”

5. Even though Paton was resolute in his faith, I don’t think he had any idea how much he would suffer when he finally began fulfilling his calling on the island of Tanna. And this brings us to another critical text.

II. Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

1. Having never lived in a tropical climate before, John had no idea how unhealthy it would be to build his home on the low land close to the water. The result was devastating.

2. Three months into their ministry on the island, their son Peter was born. Nineteen days later, having contracted tropical fever, Mary unexpectedly died. Seventeen days after that, baby Peter died as well. He dug their graves with his own hands beside their little house and became overwhelmed with grief.

Stunned by that dreadful loss, in entering upon this field of labor to which the Lord had Himself so evidently led me, *my reason seemed for a time almost to give way*. The ever-merciful Lord sustained me . . . and that spot became my sacred and much- frequented shrine, during all the following months and years when I labored on for the salvation of the savage Islanders amidst difficulties, dangers, and deaths. . . . But for Jesus, and the fellowship he vouchsafed to me there, I must have gone mad and died beside the lonely grave.

3. What was it that sustained him? It was His faith in a God who is sovereign over all things. He said, “I felt her loss beyond all conception or description, in that dark land. It was very difficult to be resigned, left alone, and in sorrowful circumstances; but feeling immovably assured that my God and father was too wise and loving to err in anything that he does or permits, I looked up to the Lord for help, and struggled on in His work”

4. He had told Mr. Dixon in his home church that his faith was in the promise of the resurrection.

Now God was calling him to live in that promise and to continue in faithful service without using his suffering as an excuse to quit.

5. And this was merely the beginning of his suffering. Before coming to the New Hebrides he had heard the story of the first missionaries who attempted to reach these people on a neighboring island. In Nov. 1839 two British missionaries, John Williams and James Harris, arrived by ship and rowed to the beach of the island of Erromanga. They had no sooner gotten out of their boat when a band of savages attacked them, clubbed them to death, built a fire and ate them in full view of ship that had just let them off. Now Paton was to face the cannibals of his own island.

6. We need to understand that the natives lived in constant fear of evil spirits and their whole religion consisted of attempting to keep these spirits appeased. Every time something went wrong on the island (Hurricane, disease, lightning strike, an unexplained death) they concluded something had made the spirits angry. Usually that meant the missionaries were to blame.

7. John Paton did nothing but help the natives of Tana. He loved them by treating their injuries when they were wounded in battle, nursing them to health when they were ill, he warned them when unscrupulous traders came to take advantage of them. For the most part, all he received in return were accusations, threats, the theft of his property and occasionally physical attacks.

8. On one occasion one of the natives rushed at John with an ax raised above his head, but at the last second one of the chiefs grabbed a spade John had been using and managed to avert the blow. On another occasion a group of armed men tried to break into his house at night, but they were frightened off by Paton's little dog, Clutha. Its amazing how many times God used that little Scottish Terrier to save Paton's life.

9. It seemed at every turn there were people who were determined to intimidate or kill him. At one point he wrote,

My enemies seldom slackened their hateful designs against my life, however calmed or baffled for the moment... A wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards 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 other's heels. (Autobio; p. 117)

10. We looked at Matthew 28:19-20 earlier, but one of the promises from which Paton found the most comfort was at the end where Jesus says, "*Lo, I am with you always.*" Prov. 29:25 "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe." Or how about Prov. 30:5

“Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.”

11. I am convinced that Paton’s boldness and fearless obedience to God was largely owing to his confident assurance that the Lord was with him in every trial and would never allow anything to happen to Him except what was carefully measured for his good. He was so confident in the Lord’s power supporting him that he was able to say with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”

12. Do you know why most of us seldom step out and share our faith? Isn’t it because we fear man rather and trust God? Do we even have the capacity to see how much and how often our lives are ruled by the fear of man rather than faith in the promises of God? The lives of men like John Paton are used of God to expose these fleshly vises and smash our clever excuses. We need this, beloved. If we are going to be all that God wants us to be as individuals and as a church, we need this.

14. One time a merchant ship came to the island and turned loose four of its men on the island armed not with guns, but with the measles. They also capture some of the natives, brought them aboard ship, put them in the hold for some time with some men who had measles, and then set them free to go back among their people. The natives had never been exposed to such a thing before, and the disease spread like wildfire. In the end almost a third of the population died.

15. You can imagine what happened next. The natives concluded that the evil spirits were punishing them for not killing the missionaries, so they set out to make it right.

16. One evening an army of angry warriors appeared over a hill and began descending upon the house. Chief Nowar who had become John’s friend called to him and said, “Missi, sit down beside me, and pray to our Jehovah God, for if He does not send deliverance now, we are all dead men. They will kill us all on your account, and that quickly. Pray, and I will watch.”

As Nowar watched, he saw the approaching army unexpectedly come to a halt about three hundred meters away at the foot of the hill leading to the village. He touched John’s knee to draw his attention and said softly, ‘Missi, Jehovah is hearing! They are all standing still.’ Then a man came running along the ranks, giving them some kind of message as he passed. Then the warriors turned round and began to march back the way they had come.

Nowar and his people cried out in great excitement, Jehovah has heard Missi’s prayer! Jehovah has protected us and turned them away back! Paton later wrote, ‘I know not why they turned back; but I have no doubt it was by the doing of God who saved our lives.’

17. Years later John had the opportunity to talk with the leader of the men who came that night and ask why they had not attacked and killed him and the other missionaries. The chief replied with another question: ‘Who were those men with you that night?’ What actually happened that night remains a mystery, but John believed that God must have sent his angels to protect him and the other missionaries who were praying in the little house. (KC p. 276)

18. One entry in Paton's diary reads, "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; and 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."

19. Shortly after this most recent attack, his friend Nowar urged him to hide himself in a chestnut tree while the natives were combing the jungle searching for him and the other missionaries. What would be going through your mind; what would your soul feel in those moments? Paton writes,

I climbed into the tree and was left there alone in the bush. The hours I spent there live all before me as if it were but of yesterday. I heard the frequent discharging of muskets, and the yells of the Savages. Yet I sat there among the branches, as safe as in the arms of Jesus. Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly in my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among those chestnut leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone! If it be to glorify my God, I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree, to feel again my Savior's spiritual presence, to enjoy His consoling fellowship. If thus thrown back upon your own soul, alone, all alone, in the midnight, in the bush, in the very embrace of death itself, have you a Friend that will not fail you then? (Autobio. p. 200)

III. Romans 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..."

1. John would never have risked his life the way he did if he had not believed that the gospel is powerful to bring about genuine salvation and radical change in the lives of all who believe. And while it may sound like the gospel was unable to break through the hard hearts of savage cannibals, it just isn't so. Some did come to Christ and experienced radical change.

2. On one occasion a native Christian helper called Namuri had been injured in an attack against his life. While John was nursing him back to health he urged the man not to go back to his village, but the man replied, "Missi, when I see them thirsting for my blood, I just see myself when the missionary first came to my island. I desired to murder him, as they now desire to kill me. Had he stayed away for such danger, I would have remained heathen; but he came, and continued coming to teach us, till, by the grace of God, I was changed to what I am. Now the same God that changed me to this, can change these poor Tannese to love and serve him. I cannot stay away from them, but I will sleep at the mission house, and do all I can by day to bring them to Jesus" (KC p. 110).

3. Its true that Paton was forced to leave Tanna before the gospel ever took root and flourished there, but the fruitfulness of his gospel ministry on the island of Aniwa is quite another story.

With his second wife, Margret, he faced similar opposition in the early days of their ministry. But eventually the H.S. swept through that Island in a manner that is rarely seen in church history.

4. Instead of seeking to end Paton's life, they were frustrated by the fact that they could not learn about Christ more quickly. When Paton completed his first printed booklet intended to be an introduction to the Bible in the native language, his helper, Chief Namakei exclaimed,

“Missi, is it done? Can it speak? Does it speak my words?”

When John replied that it did, the old man begged him, ‘Make it speak to me, Missi! Let me hear it speak!

AS John started to read it aloud from the book, Namakei was so excited that he shouted, ‘It does speak! It speaks my own language, too! Oh, give it to me!...O Missi, dear Missi, show me how to make it speak!’ (KC, p. 235).

5. By the end of Paton's 40 years of ministry on Aniwa, the entire island had turned to Christ. So much so that today it is still largely a Christian island.

6. When I reflect on the life of John Paton, I am left asking. What the means God used to make such a man as this? Yes, his home church was partly responsible. They taught sound doctrine and John heard it from his earliest years. He, like most of the great missionaries that we read about, was an unabashed Calvinist. His Calvinism didn't deter him from missions, it propelled him into it!

7. There are certainly other influences in Paton's life that molded him into a great man of God, but there was perhaps none so influential in his life as His godly father.

IV. Deuteronomy 6:6–7 “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. ⁷ “You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

1. The tribute Paton pays to his father is worth the price of his autobiography. James Paton was a rock of faithfulness and spiritual vitality. He was determined to lead his eleven children to God. In the mornings he prayed with them. In the evenings he read Scripture to them and prayed some more. On Sunday he would lead them on the long walk to church.

2. They were poor and the church was 4 miles from their home. Paton says that those walks to church and back home every week were some of the most spiritually instructive and nourishing hours of his childhood, as they would talk about the Lord all the way there and discuss the sermon all the way home.

3. When I read that this week it occurred to me that our house is almost exactly 4 miles from the church, and I wondered how long it would take to walk it. So I called home to Josh and said, “Hey! You want to take a walk?” Calvin and Shaena joined us. I was sure it would take two

hours or more, but we made the trip in 1:20... and that included a stop at Sonic on the way!

4. What would you do if you had to walk 4 miles with your family to get to church? Would you come? It is said of James Paton that as far as anyone could remember there were only two Sundays in his adult life that he ever missed Sunday Worship, and both occasions were due to horrifically bad winter weather.

5. More than that, however, John Patton was influenced by the prayers of His father. Late in life John could still remember how his father would leave the table after every meal (3 times a day), enter into his little closet of a bedroom and talk to God... out loud. He writes,

Though everything else in religion were by some unthinkable catastrophe to be swept out of memory, were blotted from my understanding, my soul would wander back to those early scenes, and shut itself up once again in that Sanctuary Closet, and, hearing still the echoes of those cries to God, would hurl back all doubt with the victorious appeal, "He walked with God, why may not I?" (Autobio. p. 8)

How much my father's prayers at this time impressed me I can never explain, nor could any stranger understand. When, on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in Family Worship, he poured out his whole soul with tears for the conversion of the Heathen world to the service of Jesus, and for every personal and domestic need, we all felt as if in the presence of the living Savior, and learned to know and love him as our Divine friend. (Autobio. p. 21)

6. One of the best scenes in the book that depicts the depth of the relationship between John Paton and his father happens just as John is leaving home to go to school in Glasgow. From his home to the train station was a 40 mile walk. Years later John would recall that day with these words:

My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. His counsels and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are fresh in my heart as if it had been but yesterday; and tears are on my cheeks as freely now as then, whenever memory steals me away to the scene. For the last half mile or so we walked on together in almost unbroken silence – my father, as was often his custom, carrying hat in hand, while his long flowing yellow hair (then yellow, but in later years white as snow) streamed like a girl's down his shoulders. His lips kept moving in silent prayers for me; and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was vain! We halted on reaching the appointed parting place; he grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence, and then solemnly and affectionately said: "God bless you, my son! Your father's God prosper you, and keep you from all evil!"

Unable to say more, his lips kept moving in silent prayer; in tears we embraced, and parted. I ran off as fast as I could; and, when about to turn a corner in the road

where he would lose sight of me, I looked back and saw him still standing with head uncovered where I had left him – gazing after me. Waving my hat in adieu, I rounded the corner and out of sight in an instant. But my heart was too full and sore to carry me further, so I darted into the side of the road and wept for a time. Then, rising up cautiously, I climbed the dike to see if he yet stood where I had left him; and just at that moment I caught a glimpse of him climbing the dyke and looking out for me! He did not see me, and after he gazed eagerly in my direction for a while, he got down, set his face toward home, and began to return - his head still uncovered, and his heart, I felt sure, still rising in prayers for me. I watched through blinding tears, till his form faded from my gaze; and then, hastening on my way, vowed deeply and oft, by the help of God, to live and act so as never to grieve or dishonor such a father and mother as he had given me. (Autobio; pp. 25-26)

7. Brothers, fathers, if you are not convicted by this I trust it is only because you are living out such faithfulness before your children. For my part, I see much in my soul that I am asking God to change.

8. Today is New Years Day. It's a great time for us to evaluate our lives to see how we measure up against the word of God. How is your Master calling you to change? And what are you going to do about it this year?