

Real Life Stories
Henry Martyn - Missionary to India and Persia



There are those who during their lifetime make a statement which summarizes their life. Such was the case with Henry Martyn. Not long before his death he wrote: "There is not a thing in the world for which I could wish to live, except the hope that it may please God to appoint me some work." Although he only lived a brief six hundred and fifteen days, what accomplishments he achieved.

Henry was born on the 18th February 1781 in the town of Truro, Cornwall in England. He began his early education in Truro Grammar school, and from there he continued his studies in St John's College, Cambridge, beginning in the autumn of 1797. It was his intention to go to the bar as a lawyer but God had other plans for him, plans which began to unfold in October 1802 when he was nineteen years of age.

In the providential movings of God he heard Charles Simeon (who is often considered as something of an ancestor of the evangelical movement in the Church of England) speak of the work done by William Carey, a single man. Another seed was planted when Henry read the life story of David Brainerd who was a missionary to native Americans. Henry decided that He would become a missionary and devoted himself to the church in Ely and then in the parish of Lolworth. Again God changed Henry's proposed plans for because of a financial disaster he could not go to the Church Missionary Society. The young man was left to earn sufficient of a living to support he and his sister. Getting a chaplaincy under the British East India Company he left England on July 5th 1805 to go to India.

En route to India he was at the conquest of the British at Cape Colony on January 8th 1806 where he spent the day tending the dying soldiers. Seeing first hand the horrors of war he came away feeling that the purpose of Britain was to convert, not colonize the world. With such a burden he wrote: "I prayed that England whilst she sent the thunder of her arms to distant regions of the globe, might not remain proud and ungodly at home; but might show herself great indeed, by sending forth the ministers of her church to diffuse the gospel of peace".

Arriving in India in April 1806 he was stationed at Aldeen until October when he went to Dinapur. There he held worship services among the people of the area, as well as establishing schools. Approximately three years later he was transferred to Cawnpore where he preached the gospel to the British and Indians in his compound. Despite his work and preaching, Henry began revising the sheets of his Hindustani New Testament. In time he translated the entire New Testament into Urda and twice into Persian. He also translated the Psalms into Persian and the gospels into Judaeo-Persic besides translating the Book of Common Prayer into Urda! It was a stupendous accomplishment.

Henry suffered from bad health and was ordered by his doctors to take a voyage, and with this suggestion he sought permission to go. It was his intent to go to Persia and correct his translation of the Persian New Testament and then to Arabia and translate the scriptures into Arabic.

Having seen his work at Cawnpore blessed by the opening of a new church on September 30th 1810 he left the next day for Calcutta, and leaving there on January 7th 1811 sailed for Bombay. The ship arrived on his 30th birthday. Leaving Bombay he went to Bushirte, and after a very tiring journey from the coast he reached Shiraz. Traveling to Tabriz he took very ill with a plague which left him with a fever and greatly weakened. After a temporary recovery, and seeking a better climate, he left for Constantinople, from where he hoped to return to England and recruit help for the missions in India. That was never to be. Henry wrote his final journal entry on 6th October 1812 which read: "Oh! when shall time give place to eternity? When shall appear that new heaven and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness? There, there shall in no wise enter in any thing that defileth: none of that wickedness which has made men worse than wild beasts, none of those corruptions which add still more to the miseries of mortality, shall be seen or heard of any more".

In Tokat on October 16th 1812 this young man died, thirty-one years of age!

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He wanted to meet the Shah and give him the translation but he died before that was possible, yet the Shah wrote a letter after Henry died in which he penned: "Through the learned and unremitting exertions of the Reverend Henry Martyn it has been translated in a style most befitting sacred books, that is in an easy and simple diction... The whole of the New Testament is completed in a most excellent manner, a source of pleasure to our enlightened and august mind".

When we consider that he had no computer and all the writing and translation had to be done personally, I personally stand in awe of that which he was able to accomplish in a matter of ten years. What a legacy he left and what rest is now His, and for all eternity.