

*Real Life Stories*  
*Mary Slessor, Among the Cannibals of Calabar*

There are many missionaries who, in one form or another, have contributed a paragraph, a page, or a chapter to the history of missions who have not been, geographically speaking, pioneers. But because of spiritual conviction, Christian courage, and consecration to the cause of Christ, they have become pioneers in a specific missionary work which others had considered neither possible nor essential.



Before Mary Slessor was born, as early as 1846, the United Presbyterian Church had sent missionaries to Calabar, West Africa. Thirty years later, Mary Slessor, one of the most heroic women in the history of missions, came to Calabar. It is because of her distinguished work there of almost forty years, not just the place nor the time, that her missionary endeavor is classified as pioneering for Christ.

Dr. Robert H. Glover, missionary statesman, teacher, and author, in his book, *The Progress of World-Wide Missions*, describes the life and work of Mary Slessor in the following brief words: "Her life rivals in many particulars that of David Livingstone. She served in Africa under the United Free Church of Scotland from 1876 to 1915. From an unlettered factory girl in the homeland, she advanced into the foremost rank of missionary pathfinders. Her work was that of a pioneer among the most savage tribes of the Calabar hinterland. Practically singlehanded she tamed and transformed three pagan communities in succession. It is a question if the career of any other woman missionary has been marked by so many strange adventures, daring feats, signal providences, and wonderful achievements."

Mary Slessor was born at Aberdeen, Scotland, December 2, 1848. Her father was a shoemaker, but his earnings were usually spent in the taverns. Small domestic possessions were pawned or sold to provide the necessary food and clothing. Mary was the second of seven children. She found her comfort, joy, and strength in God's Word. Bible reading and missionary stories, especially from Africa, captured the interest of both mother and children. They attended Sunday school faithfully and were always present when a missionary was speaking in the church.

### **LEAVING THE LOOM**

At eleven years of age Mary began to work in the spinning and weaving mills, toiling from six to six. When, in the year 1873, the news came from Africa that "Livingstone is dead," Mary was about twenty-five years old. She asked her mother if she might go to Africa as a missionary.

In 1875 she sent her application to the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, offering herself as a missionary for Calabar. She was accepted on the condition that she take a few brief studies at a normal school in Edinburgh. On the fifth of August, 1876, she sailed for Calabar, Africa.

The first duty of Mary Slessor was to study and learn the trade language called Efik. From her very first contact with the natives her heart was deeply touched because of the cruel treatment they received from their chief. They were whipped, sold, and killed.

Although Mary was not highly trained academically, she had the capacity of an ardent student and a ready learner. She realized that the principal reason for her coming to Africa was to lead people to Christ and train them to continue the work after she was gone. The boys and girls had to be taught to read and write. The abused and mistreated people had to be defended. And Mary had to win the confidence of both the heathen chief and the foreign authority. She knew that she had to live a Christian life as well as preach the truth concerning God and redemption through Christ before the natives would accept her teaching and her Saviour.

### **SAVING THE LITTLE ONES**

Witchcraft and heathen customs among the people were most difficult to overcome. For instance, the birth of twins meant a triple death—unless Mary Slessor arrived in time to prevent the murder. The mother of the twins was considered to be possessed of an evil spirit and she, together with the twins, would be killed. Mary would plead for

*Real Life Stories*  
*Mary Slessor, Among the Cannibals of Calabar*

the mother and often take the twins to her own humble home. It was her joy to influence the old chief to declare unlawful the murder of twins.

Mary Slessor's great desire in her missionary work was to go to "the regions beyond" to preach and live the gospel of Christ where messengers of the Cross had not been, and to render a service for Christ which up to that time had not been attempted. On her long trips through the jungles and in canoes on the rivers among the cannibals, she was often found barefoot, carrying in her arms twin babies whom she "had rescued from being murdered.

Because of her excellent judgment, her love for the people, and the confidence the High Commissioner of the government had in her opinion, she was asked to sit in their courts. In the district Ibibio she was requested to be in charge of the affairs of the courts, a position she held until November, 1909, when her health did not permit her to continue.

She supervised the construction of humble schoolhouses and churches. On her three brief furlough trips home she not only recuperated physically but was also able to represent effectively the need of the mission field, the claims of Christ, and her need of prayer. She would often repeat, "It is not Mary Slessor, but God and our united prayers that have brought the blessings to Calabar. Christ shall have all the honor and glory for the multitudes saved."

### **EVERYBODY'S MOTHER**

Critically ill with a fever in the early part of January, 1915, she became unconscious. A doctor from the Slessor hospital came to minister to the physical needs of Mary Slessor, but the day for her departure was drawing near. In her dying hour, surrounded by the native Christian girls and women, she was praying in Efik, the language of the people she had served. In the early morning of January 13, 1915, she went to be with the Lord. The natives cried bitterly, "Our mother is dead. Everybody's mother has left us." The coffin was draped with the British flag and brought to Duke Town for burial.

Many Christians have been challenged to follow and serve Christ by Mary Slessor, who began her missionary work under such unfavorable circumstances, but finished it after bringing multitudes to Christ. God still specializes in doing the impossible through human instruments who will say: "Not my plans, not my glory, but God's plan, and His glory."

*"God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty ... things which are despised, hath God chosen" (I Cor. 1:27-28).*

Mary Slessor wrote to a friend who had long prayed for her: "I have always said that I have no idea how or why God has carried me over so many funny and hard places, and made these hordes of people submit to me, or why the Government should have given me the privilege of a Magistrate among them, except in answer to prayer made at home for me. It is all beyond my comprehension. The only way I can explain it is on the ground that I have been prayed for more than most. Pray on, dear one—the power lies that way."

On another occasion she wrote: "Prayer is the greatest power God has put into our hands for service—praying is harder than doing, at least I find it so, but the dynamic lies that way to advance the Kingdom."

Concerned about the purposeless lives of some women in the homeland, she advised them, in words which may well be the secret of her own life of blessing: "Gird yourself for the battle outside somewhere, and keep your heart young. Give up your whole being to create music somewhere, in the light places and in the dark places, and your life will make melody."

"Don't talk about the *cold* hand of death," she said. "It is the hand of Christ."  
As for her rewards, she had but one question: "What would I do with starry crowns except to cast them at His feet?"

*Copied by Stephen Ross for WholesomeWords.org from Pioneer Missionaries for Christ and His Church by Thomas John Bach. Wheaton, Ill.: Van Kampen Press, ©1955.*