

Real Life Stories
William Leslie - Missionary To The Congo

There are two weapons Satan uses with great effectiveness on those who seek to do a work for God. They are discouragement and depression. These can be very real obstacles engaged in any aspect of spiritual work, especially when there seems to be little or no results. Other triggers for these tools are working alone with no one to encourage, toiling long and arduous hours unrecognized, or what I call, "fidelity in obscurity". There can be no doubt these tools of Satan were a constant with Dr. William Leslie, a missionary to the Congo.

William Leslie studied and trained to be a pharmacist and having achieved his degree, he worked in that profession in Ontario, Canada for a number of years. The exact date of his conversion to God is unknown but we do know that William Leslie moved to Chicago in 1881 after his conversion. It was there the Spirit of God began to impress upon his heart the desire to be a medical missionary. Consequently, he left Canada under the auspices of the American Baptist Missionary Union to work as a medical missionary. This work he did for thirty-five years. That which the Spirit laid on his heart was a very isolated tribe of people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, among whom he toiled for seventeen years.

In 1912 He made Vanga his base and began his missionary work. Of course Satan had to interfere and after a dispute with one of the leaders of the foremost tribe, he was asked to leave. This was the very tribe he was ministering to. The falling out with the leader caused him much soul searching as he felt he had fallen short of the work God had given him to do. In time the two men were reconciled.

Despite all he faithfully did in those years, he came back to Canada in 1929 where he died nine years later, believing his work in the Congo had been a complete failure. It must have been devastating for him to think that he had spent so much of his life trying to do a work for God, and many questions must have risen in his mind., such as, "Had he missed his true calling, would he have done a more effective work for God elsewhere, had he mistaken the guidance of God?"

What he will never learn, possibly until the Judgment Seat, was how effective his work was.

In 2010 a team led by Eric Ramsey and Tom Cox World Ministries made an amazing discovery. They found a network of reproducing churches in the dense jungle across the Kwilu River from Vanga where Dr. Leslie had been stationed. With the help of Missionary Aviation Fellowship, Ramsey and his team flew in to Vanga, then they hiked one-mile and from there they used dugout canoes to cross the half mile Kwilu River. After that they hiked with backpacks another 10 miles into the jungle, and it was only then they reached the first village, all Yansi people.

Because of the research Ramsey had done, he had expected that there had been some exposure to the name of Jesus, but no understanding of who he is. Ramsey and his team were totally unprepared for that which they found. It was utterly astounding to say the least, for they discovered eight villages had its own gospel choir. They did not have hymn books but wrote their own hymns and would have sing songs from village to village. He learned that in the 1980's this church got so large (it could seat 1000 people) with many walking miles to attend, that a church planting movement began in the surrounding villages.

They did not have the Bible in their language so they used a French translation and it was read and taught by those who were fluent in French. The question which was asked was, "How had these various villages so remote from each other hear the gospel and any of them learn French?". They learned that Dr. Leslie would cross the river and spend a month traveling through the jungle. It was in the villages he taught the people how to read and write Bible stories. He started the first organized educational system in the villages. The tribal people knew nothing of William Leslie except his first name and Ramsey did not know if this was his first and last name. All they knew was that he was a Baptist who went to the Congo in 1899 and returned in 1929.

In 1905, William and Clara pioneered work in Cuilo Angola. Seven years later they had cleared enough of the area to build a little mission station. It must have been disconcerting at times to know that in some of the villages around their area they were still practicing cannibalism.

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His aim was to spread Christianity, and yet after seventeen years it seemed that he had made so little an impact. Unknown to Leslie was the legacy he left behind.

It is my thought that there are times when we must thank God for not letting us know the impact of our work for Him but being assured that endeavor for Him will never by God go unnoticed or be forgotten, and unrewarded.

There is possibly someone reading this and it seems to you that your work for God is a failure. No matter how hard you have tried, earnestly prayed, and diligently taught there seems to be absolutely no response. To such I would seek to encourage you to stay with it, and there are two verses which come to my mind:

*“Be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord,
forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord”*
(1 Cor. 15:58)

*“For God is not unrighteous to forget your labour of love,
which ye have shown toward His name”*
(Heb. 6:10)

When that moment of assessment comes, the Lord will not reward according to success, but faithfulness, and then when He says “Well done”, it will all be so worthwhile.



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