

John G. Paton

You Will Be Eaten By Cannibals!

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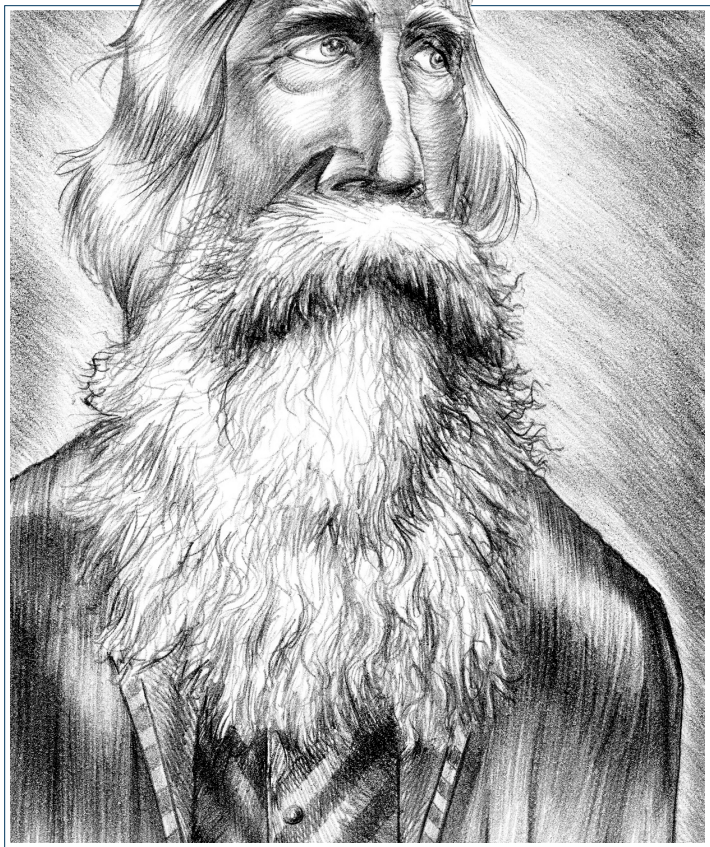
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For more biographies from John Piper, see Crossway's series, *The Swans Are Not Silent*.



In 1606, a chain of eighty islands in the South Pacific was discovered by Fernandez de Quiros of Spain. In 1773, the Islands were explored by Captain James Cook and named the New Hebrides because of the similarities with the Hebrides Islands off the Northwest coast of Scotland. In 1980, the New Hebrides gained its independence from Britain and France and was named Vanuatu. The chain of Islands is about 450 miles long. If you draw a line straight from Honolulu to Sydney, it will cut through Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, two thirds of the way between Hawaii and Australia. The population today is about 190,000.

The Early Work in New Hebrides

To the best of our knowledge, the New Hebrides had no Christian influence before John Williams and James Harris from the London Missionary Society landed in 1839. Both of these missionaries were killed and eaten by cannibals on the island of Erromanga on November 20 of that year, only minutes after going ashore. Forty-eight years later John Paton wrote, “Thus were the New Hebrides baptized with the blood of martyrs; and Christ thereby told the whole Christian world that he claimed these islands as His own” (75).¹

The London Missionary Society sent another team to the Island of Tanna in 1842, and these missionaries were driven off within seven months. But on the Island of Aneityum, John Geddie from the Presbyterian church in Nova Scotia (coming in 1848) and John Inglis from The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland (coming in 1852) saw amazing fruit, so that by 1854 “about 3,500 savages [more than half the

population²] threw away their idols, renouncing their heathen customs and avowing themselves to be worshippers of the true Jehovah God” (77). When Geddie died in 1872, all the population of Aneityum were said to be Christians.³

The Context of Paton’s Ministry

This is part of a great work God was doing in the South Sea Islands in those days. In 1887 Paton recorded the wider triumphs of the gospel. When certain people argued that the Aborigines of Australia were subhuman and incapable of conversion or civilization Paton fought back with mission facts as well as biblical truth:

Recall... what the Gospel has done for the near kindred of these same Aborigines. On our own Aneityum, 3,500 Cannibals have been lead to renounce their heathenism... In Fiji, 79,000 Cannibals have been brought under the influence of the Gospel; and 13,000 members of the Churches are professing to live and work for Jesus. In Samoa, 34,000 Cannibals have professed Christianity; and in nineteen years, its College has sent forth 206 Native teachers and evangelists. On our New Hebrides, more than 12,000 Cannibals have been brought to sit at the feet of Christ, through I mean not to say that they are all model Christians; and 133 of the Natives have been trained and sent forth as teachers and preachers of the Gospel (265).

This is the remarkable missionary context for the life and ministry of John G. Paton, who was born near Dumfries, Scotland, on the 24th of May, 1824. He sailed for the New Hebrides (via Australia) with his wife Mary on April 16, 1858, at the age of 33.

They reached their appointed island of Tanna on November 5, and in March the next year both his wife and his newborn son died of the fever. He served alone on the island for the next four years under incredible circumstances of constant danger until he was driven off the island in February, 1862.

For the next four years he did extraordinarily effective mobilization work for the Presbyterian mission to the New Hebrides, travelling around Australia and Great Britain. He married again in 1864, and took his wife, Margaret, back this time to the smaller island of Aniwa ("It measures scarcely seven miles by two," 312). They labored together for 41 years until Margaret died in 1905 when John Paton was 81.

The Destitution of the Islanders

When they came to Aniwa in November, 1866, they saw the destitution of the islanders. It will help us appreciate the magnitude of their labors and the wonders of their fruitfulness if we see some of what they faced.

The natives were cannibals and occasionally ate the flesh of their defeated foes. They practiced infanticide and widow sacrifice, killing the widows of deceased men so that they could serve their husbands in the next world (69, 334):

Their worship was entirely a service of fear, its aim being to propitiate this or that Evil spirit, to prevent calamity or to secure revenge. They deified their Chiefs... so that almost every village or tribe had its own Sacred Man.... They exercised an extraordinary influence for evil, these village or tribal priests, and were believed to have the disposal of life and death through their sacred ceremonies.... They also worshipped the spirits of departed ancestors and

heroes, through their material idols of wood and stone.... They feared the spirits and sought their aid; especially seeking to propitiate those who presided over war and peace, famine and plenty, health and sickness, destruction and prosperity, life and death. Their whole worship was one of slavish fear; and, so far as ever I could learn, they had no idea of a God of mercy or grace (72).⁴

Paton admitted that at times his heart wavered as he wondered whether these people could be brought to the point of weaving Christian ideas into the spiritual consciousness of their lives (74). But he took heart from the power of the gospel and from the fact that thousands on Aniwa had come to Christ.

The Fruit of Paton's Labor

So he learned the language and reduced it to writing (319). He built orphanages (“We trained these young people for Jesus,” 317). “Mrs. Paton taught a class of about fifty women and girls. They became experts at sewing, singing and plaiting hats, and reading” (377). They “trained the Teachers... translated and printed and expounded the Scriptures... ministered to the sick and dying... dispensed medicines every day... taught them the use of tools...” etc. (378). They held worship services every Lord’s Day and sent native teachers to all the villages to preach the gospel.

In the next fifteen years, John and Margaret Paton saw the entire island of Aniwa turn to Christ. Years later he wrote, “I claimed Aniwa for Jesus, and by the grace of God Aniwa now worships at the Savior’s feet” (312). When he was 73 years old and travelling around the world trumpeting the cause of mis-

sions in the South Seas, he was still ministering to his beloved Aniwan people and “published the New Testament in the Aniwan Language” in 1897.⁵ Even to his death he was translating hymns and catechisms⁶ and creating a dictionary for his people even when he couldn’t be with them any more (451).

During his years of labor on the islands Paton kept a journal and notebooks and letters from which he wrote his *Autobiography* in three parts from 1887 to 1898. Almost all we know of his work comes from that book, which is available in one volume now from the Banner of Truth Trust.

Paton outlived his second wife by two years and died in Australia on January 28, 1907.

Today, all these years since the death of John Paton, about 85% of the population of Vanuatu identifies itself as Christian, perhaps 21% of the population being evangelical.⁷ The sacrifices and the legacy of the missionaries to the New Hebrides are stunning, and John G. Paton stands out as one of the great ones.

In telling Paton’s story, I want to focus particularly on his courage:

- › What kinds of circumstances called for courage in Paton’s life?
- › What did Paton’s courage achieve?
- › Where did Paton’s courage come from?

What Kinds of Circumstances Called for Courage in Paton's Life?

He had courage to overcome the criticism he received from respected elders for going to the New Hebrides.

A Mr. Dickson exploded, "The cannibals! You will be eaten by cannibals!" The memory of Williams and Harris on Erromanga was only 19 years old. But to this Paton responded:

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 (56).

This is the kind of in-your-face spiritual moxie that would mark Paton's whole life. It's a big part of what makes reading his story so invigorating.

Another kind of criticism for going was that he would be leaving a very fruitful ministry. Paton had served for ten years as a city missionary in urban Glasgow among the lower income people with tremendous success. Hundreds of unchurched people were attending his classes and services during the week. One of his loved professors of divinity and minister of the congregation where he had served as an elder tried to persuade him to stay in that ministry. He reported that he argued that

Green Street Church was doubtless the sphere for which God had given me peculiar qualifications, and in which He had so largely blessed my labors; that if I left those now attending my Classes and Meetings, they might be scattered, and many of them would probably fall away; that I was leaving certainty for uncertainty—work in which God had made me greatly useful, for work in which I might fail to be useful, and only throw away my life amongst Cannibals (55).

In fact Paton says,

The opposition was so strong from nearly all, and many of them warm Christian friends, that I was sorely tempted to question whether I was carrying out the Divine will, or only some headstrong wish of my own. This also caused me much anxiety, and drove me close to God in prayer” (56).

We will see shortly how he rose above these temptations to turn back.

He had courage to risk losing his loved ones, and to press on when he did in fact lose them.

He and his wife arrived on the island of Tanna November 5, 1858, and Mary was pregnant. The baby was born February 12, 1859. “Our island-exile thrilled with joy! But the greatest of sorrows was treading hard upon the heels of that great joy!” (79). Mary had reaped attacks of ague and fever and pneumonia and diarrhea with delirium for two weeks.

Then in a moment, altogether unexpectedly, she died on March third. To crown my sorrows, and complete my loneliness, the dear

baby-boy, whom we had named after her father, Peter Robert Robson, was taken from me after one week's sickness, on the 20th of March. Let those who have ever passed through any similar darkness as of midnight feel for me; as for all others, it would be more than vain to try to paint my sorrows! (79)

He dug the two graves with his own hands and buried them by the house he had built:

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! (80)

The courage to risk the loss was one thing. But the courage to experience the loss and press on alone was supernatural:

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 (85).

Here we get a glimpse of the theology that we will see underneath this man's massive courage and toil:

I do not pretend to see through the mystery of such visitations—wherein God calls away the young, the promising, and those sorely needed for his service here; but this I do know and feel, that, in the light of such dispensations, it becomes us all to love and serve our blessed Lord Jesus so that we may be ready at his call for death and eternity (85).

He had courage to risk his own sickness in a foreign land with no doctors and no escape.

“Fever and ague had attacked me fourteen times severely” (105). In view of his wife’s death he never knew when any one of these attacks would mean his own death. Imagine struggling with a life-and-death sickness over and over with only one Christian native friend—a man named Abraham who had come with him to the island to help him.

For example, as he was building a new house to get to higher, healthier ground, he collapsed with the fever on his way up the steep hill from the coast:

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 (106).

He revived and was restored. But only great courage could press on month after month, year after year, knowing that the fever that took his wife and son lay at the door.

And it's not as if these dangers were only during one season at the beginning of his missionary life. Fifteen years later with another wife and another child on another island, he records,

During the hurricanes, from January to April, 1873, when the Day-spring [the mission ship] was wrecked, we lost a darling child by death, my dear wife had a protracted illness, and I was brought very low with severe rheumatic fever... and was reported as dying (384).

He had courage to persevere amid the almost constant threat to his life from the hostilities of the natives.

This is what makes his *Autobiography* read like a thriller. In his first four years on Tanna when he was all alone, he moved from one savage crisis to the next. One wonders how his mind kept from snapping, as he never knew when his house would be surrounded with angry natives or his party would be ambushed along the way. How do you survive when there is no kickback time? No unwinding. No sure refuge on earth. He writes:

Our continuous danger caused me now oftentimes to sleep with my clothes on, that I might start at a moment's warning. My faithful dog Clutha would give a sharp bark and awake me.... God made them fear this precious creature, and often used her in saving our lives (178)...

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 (117).

One of the most remarkable things about Paton's dealing with danger is the gutsy forthrightness with which he spoke to his assailants. He often rebuked them to their faces and scolded them for their bad behavior even as they held the ax over his head.

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 towards them.... 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" (115)...

[Once] when natives in large numbers were assembled at my house, a man furiously rushed on me with his axe but a Kaseru-mini 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; 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 (117).

As his courage increased and his deliverances were multiplied, he would make it his aim to keep warring factions separated, and would throw himself between them and argue for peace. “Going amongst them every day, I did my utmost to stop hostilities, setting the evils of war before them, and pleading with the leading men to renounce it” (139). He would go to visit his enemies when they were sick and wanted his help, never knowing what was an ambush and what was not.

Once a native named Ian called Paton to his sick bed, and as Paton leaned over him, he pulled a dagger and held it to Paton’s heart:

I durst neither move nor speak, except that my heart kept praying to the Lord to spare me, or if my time was come to take me home to Glory with Himself. There passed a few moments of awful suspense. My sight went and came. Not a word had been spoken, except to Jesus; and then Ian wheeled the knife around, thrust it into the sugar cane leaf. And cried to me, “Go, go quickly!” ... I ran for my life a weary four miles till I reached the Mission House, faint, yet praising God for such a deliverance (191).

He had courage in the face of criticism that he did not have courage to die.

After four years, the entire island population rose against Paton, blaming him for an epidemic, and made siege against him and his little band of Christians. There were spectacular close calls and a miraculous deliverance from fire by wind

and rain (215), and finally a wonderful answer to prayer as a ship arrived just in time to take him off the island.

In response to this, after four years of risking his life hundreds of times and losing his wife and child, he recounts this incident:

Conscious that I had, to the last inch of life, tried to do my duty, I left all results in the hands of my only Lord, and all criticisms to His unerring judgment. Hard things also were occasionally spoken to my face. One dear friend, for instance, said, "You should not have left. You should have stood at the post of duty till you fell. It would have been to your honor, and better for the cause of the Mission, had you been killed at the post of duty like the Gordons and others" (223).

O, how easy it would have been for him to respond by walking away from the mission at a moment like that. But courage pressed on for another four decades of fruitful ministry on the island of Aniwa and around the world.

What Did His Courage Achieve?

The entire island of Aniwa turned to Christ.

Four years of seemingly fruitless and costly labor on Tanna could have meant the end of Paton's missionary life. He could have remembered that in Glasgow for ten years he had had unprecedented success as an urban missionary. Now for four years he seemed to have accomplished nothing and he lost his wife and child in the process. But instead of going home, he turned his missionary heart to Aniwa. And this time the

story was different. “I claimed Aniwa for Jesus, and by the grace of God, Aniwa now worships at the Savior’s feet” (312).

The courageous endurance on Tanna resulted in a story that awakened thousands to the call of missions and strengthened the home church.

The reason Paton wrote the second volume of his *Autobiography*, he says, was to record God’s “marvelous goodness in using my humble voice and pen, and the story of my life, for interesting thousands and tens of thousands in the work of Missions” (220). And the influence goes on today—even, I pray, in this little book:

Ofentimes, while passing through the perils and defeats of my first four years in the Mission-field on Tanna, I wondered... why God permitted such things. But on looking back now, I already clearly perceive... that the Lord was thereby preparing me for doing, and providing me materials wherewith to accomplish, the best work of all my life, namely the kindling of the heart of Australian Presbyterianism with a living affection for these Islanders of their own Southern Seas... and in being the instrument under God of sending out Missionary after Missionary to the New Hebrides, to claim another island and still another for Jesus. That work, and all that may spring from it in Time and Eternity, never could have been accomplished by me but for first the sufferings and then the story of my Tanna enterprise! (222–223)

And the awakening was not just in Australia, but in Scotland and around the world. For example, he tells us what the effect of his home tour was on his own small Reformed Presbyte-

rian Church after his four years of pain and seeming fruitlessness on Tanna. “I was... filled with a high passion of gratitude to be able to proclaim, at the close of my tour... that of all her ordained Ministers, one in every six was a Missionary of the Cross!” (280). Indeed the effects at home were far more widespread than that—and here is a lesson for all churches:

Nor did the dear old Church thus cripple herself; on the contrary, her zeal for Missions accompanied, if not caused, unwonted prosperity at home. New waves of liberality passed over the heart of her people. Debts that had burdened many of the Churches and Manses were swept away. Additional Congregations were organized. And in May, 1876, the Reformed Presbyterian Church entered into an honorable and independent Union with her larger, wealthier, and more progressive sister, the Free Church of Scotland (280).

In other words, the courageous perseverance of John Paton on Tanna, in spite of apparent fruitlessness, bore fruit in blessing for the mission field and for the church at home in ways he could have never dreamed in the midst of his dangers.

His persevering work vindicated the power of the gospel to convert the hardest people.

Paton had an eye to the sophisticated European despisers of the gospel as he wrote the story of his life. He wanted to give evidence to skeptical modern men that the gospel can and does transform the most unlikely people and their societies.

So in his *Autobiography* he tells stories of particular converts like Kowia, a chief on Tanna. When he was dying he came to say farewell to Paton:

“Farewell, Missi, I am very near death now; we will meet again in Jesus and with Jesus!” ... Abraham sustained him, tottering to the place of graves; there he lay down... and slept in Jesus; and there the faithful Abraham buried him beside his wife and children. Thus died a man who had been a cannibal chief, but by the grace of God and the love of Jesus changed, transfigured into a character of light and beauty. What think ye of this, ye skeptics as to the reality of conversion?... I knew that day, and I know now, that there is one soul at least from Tanna to sing the glories of Jesus in Heaven—and, oh, the rapture when I meet him there! (160)

And then, of course, there was old Abraham himself. He was not one of Paton’s converts, but he was a converted cannibal from Aneityum and Paton’s absolutely trustworthy helper on Tanna during all his time there. So Paton writes again in witness to European skeptics:

When I have read or heard the shallow objections of irreligious scribblers 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 Jesus’—that I might just learn how many hours it took to convince them that Christ in man was a reality after all! All the skepticism of Europe would hide its head in foolish shame; and all its doubts would dissolve under one glance of the new light that Jesus, and Jesus alone, pours from the converted Cannibal’s eye (107).

The list could go on as to what Paton's courage achieved because in reality our second and third question overlap. What his courage achieved was, in fact, a vindication of the value of all that produced his courage. So let's turn to that, rather than lengthen the list here.

Where Did Paton's Courage Come From? What Was Its Origin?

The answer he would want us to say is: *It came from God*. But he would also want us to see what precious means God used and, if possible, apply them to ourselves and our situation.

His courage came from his father.

The tribute Paton pays to his godly father is worth the price of the *Autobiography*, even if you don't read anything else. Maybe it's because I have a daughter and four sons, but I wept as I read this section, it filled me with such longing to be a father like this.

There was a small room, the "closet" where his father would go for prayer, as a rule after each meal. The eleven children knew it and they revered the spot and learned something profound about God. The impact on John Paton was immense:

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?" (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 (21).

One scene best captures the depth of love between John and his father and the power of the impact on John's life of uncompromising courage and purity. The time came for the young Paton to leave home and go to Glasgow to attend divinity school and become a city missionary in his early twenties. From his hometown of Torthorwald to the train station at Kilmarnock was a forty-mile walk. Forty years later Paton wrote,

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 (25–26).

The impact of his father's faith and prayer and love and discipline was immeasurable. So much more could be said.

His courage came from a deep sense of divine calling.

Before he was 12 years old, Paton says, "I had given my soul to God, and was resolved to aim at being a missionary of the cross, or a minister of the gospel" (21). As he came to the end of his studies in divinity in Glasgow at the age of 32, he says, "I continually heard... the wail of the perishing Heathen in the South Seas; and I saw that few were caring for them, while I well knew that many would be ready to take up my work in

Calton” (52). “The Lord kept saying within me, ‘Since none better qualified can be got, rise and offer yourself!’”

When he was criticized for leaving a fruitful ministry, one crucial event sealed his sense of calling, namely, a word from his parents:

Heretofore we feared to bias you, but now we must tell you why we praise God for the decision to which you have been led. Your father’s heart was set upon being a Minister, but other claims forced him to give it up. When you were given to them, your father and mother laid you upon the altar, their first-born, to be consecrated, if God saw fit, as a Missionary of the Cross; and it has been their constant prayer that you might be prepared, qualified, and led to this very decision; and we pray with all our heart that the Lord may accept your offering, long spare you, and give you many souls from the Heathen World for your hire (57).

In response to that Paton wrote, “From the moment, every doubt as to my path of duty forever vanished. I saw the hand of God very visibly, not only preparing me before, but now leading me to, the Foreign Mission field” (57). That sense of duty and calling bred in him an undaunted courage that would never look back.

His courage came from a sense of the holy heritage in his church.

Paton was part of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, one of the oldest but smallest Protestant churches. It traced its lineage back to the Scottish Covenanters and had in it a strong sense of valor for the cause of the great truths of

the Reformation. Paton once wrote, “I am more proud that the blood of Martyrs is in my veins, and their truths in my heart, than other men can be of noble pedigree or royal names” (280).

The truths he has in mind are the robust doctrines of Calvinism. He said in his *Autobiography*, “I am by conviction a strong Calvinist” (195). For him this meant, as we have seen, a strong confidence that God can and will change the hearts of the most unlikely people. His Reformed doctrine of regeneration was crucial here in maintaining his courage in the face of humanly impossible odds. Commenting on the conversion of one native, he said:

Regeneration is the sole work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart and soul, and is in every case one and the same. Conversion, on the other hand, bringing into play the action also of the human will, is never absolutely the same perhaps in even two souls” (372)...

Oh, Jesus! To Thee alone be all the glory. Thou hast the key to unlock every heart that Thou has created (373).

In other words, Calvinism, contrary to all misrepresentation, was not a hindrance to missions but the hope of missions for John Paton and hundreds of other missionaries like him. So the final source to mention of Paton’s courage is not surprising.

His courage came from confidence in the sovereignty of God controlling all adversities.

We have already seen the words he wrote over his wife and child’s grave: “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” (85).

Over and over this faith sustained him in the most threatening and frightening situations. As he was trying to escape from Tanna at the end of four years of dangers, he and Abraham were surrounded by raging natives who kept urging each other to strike the first blow:

My heart rose up to the Lord Jesus; I saw Him watching all the scene. My peace came back to me like a wave from God. I realized that I was immortal till my Master's work with me was done. The assurance came to me, as if a voice out of Heaven had spoken, that not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing stone the fingers, without the permission of Jesus Christ, whose is all power in Heaven and on Earth. He rules all Nature, animate and inanimate, and restrains even the Savage of the South Seas (207).

After getting away with his life and losing everything that he had on earth ("my little earthly All"), instead of despairing or pouting or being paralyzed with self-pity, he moved forward expecting to see God's good purpose in time—which he saw in the ministry that opened to him, first of missions mobilization and then of work on Aniwa:

Often since have I thought that the Lord stripped me thus bare of all these interests, that I might with undistracted mind devote my entire energy to the special work soon to be carved out for me, and of which at this moment neither I nor anyone had ever dreamed" (220).

Year after year, “disappointments and successes were strangely intermingled” (247) in his life. There was no long period of time, it seems, where life was very easy. And we would distort the man if we said there were no low moments. “I felt so disappointed, so miserable,” he wrote about one period of his travels, “that I wished I had been in my grave with my dear departed and my brethren on the Islands who had fallen around me” (232). It was not always easy after the words, “The Lord has taken away,” to add the words, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.” But the way out was clear, and he used it again and again. When the mission ship, *Dayspring*, that he had worked so hard to fund, was sunk in a storm, he wrote:

Whatever trials have befallen me in my Earthly Pilgrimage, I have never had the trial of doubting that perhaps, after all, Jesus had made some mistake. No! my blessed Lord Jesus makes no mistakes! When we see all His meaning, we shall then understand, what now we can only trustfully believe that all is well—best for us, best for the cause most dear to us, best for the good of others and the glory of God (488).

Near the end of his life, at age 79, he was back on his beloved island Aniwa:

I cannot visit the villages, or go among the people and the sick, as formerly, owing to an increased feebleness in my legs and lumbago. Which is painful for the last fortnight. But all is as our Master sends it, and we submit thankfully, as all is nothing to what we deserve; and adored be our God. We have in our dear Lord Jesus [grace] for peace and joy in all circumstances.⁸

His courage came through a kind of praying that submitted to God's sovereign wisdom.

How do you claim the promises of God for protection when your wife was equally faithful but, rather than being protected, died; and when the Gordons on Erromanga were equally trusting in those promises and were martyred?⁹ Paton had learned the answer to this question from listening to his mother pray, even before he learned the theology that supports it. When the potato crop failed in Scotland, Mrs. Paton said to her children, "O my children, love your Heavenly Father, tell him in faith and prayer all your needs, and he will supply your wants so far as it shall be for your good and His glory" (22).¹⁰ This is what Paton trusted God for in claiming the promises: that God would do what was for Paton's good and for his own glory.

His courage when he was surrounded by armed natives came through a kind of praying that claimed the promises under the overarching submission to God's wisdom as to what would work most for God's glory and his good.

I... assured them that I was not afraid to die, for at death my Savior would take me to be with Himself in Heaven, and to be far happier than I had ever been on Earth. I then lifted up my hands and eyes to the Heavens, and prayed aloud for Jesus... either to protect me or to take me home to Glory as He saw to be for the best (164).

That was how he prayed again and again: "Protect me or... take me home to Glory as you see to be for the best." He knew that Jesus had promised suffering and martyrdom to some of his servants (Luke 11:49; 21:12-18). So the promises

he claimed were both: either protect me or take me home in a way that will glorify you and do good for others.¹¹ After one harrowing journey he wrote, “Had it not been for the assurance that... in every path of duty He would carry me through or dispose of me therein for His glory, I could never have undertaken either journey” (148).¹²

The peace God gave him in these crises was not the peace of sure escape but the peace that God is good and wise and omnipotent and will do all things well. “We felt that God was near, and omnipotent to do what seemed best in his sight” (197).

*Did ever mother run more quickly to protect her crying child in danger’s hour, than the Lord Jesus hastens to answer believing prayer and send help to His servants in His own good time and way, so far as it shall be for His glory and their good? (164, emphasis added).*¹³

His courage came from a joy in God that he knew could not be surpassed anywhere in any other ministry.

Oh that the pleasure-seeking men and women of the world could only taste and feel the real joy of those who know and love the true God—a heritage which the world... cannot give to them, but which the poorest and humblest followers of Jesus inherit and enjoy! (78)

My heart often says within itself—when, when will men’s eyes at home be opened? When will the rich and the learned... renounce their shallow frivolities, and go to live amongst the poor, the ignorant, the outcast, and the lost, and write their eternal fame on the souls by them blessed and brought to the Savior?

Those who have tasted this highest joy, “The joy of the Lord,” will never again ask—Is Life worth living?¹⁴

Near the end of his life he wrote about the joy that carried him on and about his hope that his own children would undertake the same mission and find the same joy:

Let me record my immovable conviction that this is the noblest service in which any human being, can spend or be spent; and that, if God gave me back my life to be lived over again, I would without one quiver of hesitation lay it on the altar to Christ, that He might use it as before in similar ministries of love, especially amongst those who have never yet heard the Name of Jesus. Nothing that has been endured, and nothing that can now befall me, makes me tremble—on the contrary, I deeply rejoice—when I breathe the prayer that it may please the blessed Lord to turn the hearts of all my children to the Mission Field and that He may open up their way and make it their pride and joy to live and die in carrying Jesus and His Gospel into the heart of the Heathen World! (444, emphasis added).

Where did the joy of John G. Paton most deeply repose? The answer, it seems, is that it rested most deeply in the experience of personal communion with Jesus Christ mediated through the promise, “Lo, I am with you alway.”

His courage came from personal fellowship with Jesus through faith in his promise, especially on the brink of eternity.

The promise had been given precisely in the context of the Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations... and Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”

(Matthew 28:19-20). More than any other promise, this one brought Jesus close and real to John Paton in all his dangers. After the measles epidemic that killed thousands on the islands, and for which the missionaries were blamed, he wrote:

During the crisis, I felt generally calm, and firm of soul, standing erect and with my whole weight on the promise, 'Lo! I am with you always.' Precious promise! How often I adore Jesus for it, and rejoice in it! Blessed be his name (154).

The power this promise had to make Christ real to Paton in hours of crisis was unlike any other Scripture or prayer:

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. In his words, "Lo, I am with you always, 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.... It is the sober truth, and it comes back to me sweetly after 20 years, that I had my nearest and dearest glimpses of the face and smiles of my blessed Lord in those dread moments when musket, club, or spear was being leveled at my life.¹⁵ Oh the bliss of living and enduring, as seeing "Him who is invisible"! (117)

One of the most powerful paragraphs in his *Autobiography* describes his experience of hiding in a tree, at the mercy of an unreliable chief, as hundreds of angry natives hunted him for his life. What he experienced there was the deepest source of Paton's joy and courage. In fact, I would dare to say that to

share this experience and call others to enjoy it was the reason that he wrote the story of his life.¹⁶ He began his *Autobiography* with the words, “What I write here is for the glory of God” (2). That is true. But God gets glory when his Son is exalted. And his Son his exalted when we cherish him above all things. That is what this story is about:

Being entirely at the mercy of such doubtful and vacillating friends, I, though perplexed, felt it best to obey. 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? (200)

Notes

- 1 All page references in the text refer to *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides, An Autobiography Edited by His Brother* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965, orig. 1889, 1891).
- 2 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity, The Great Century: The Americas, Australasia and Africa, 1800 AD to 1914 AD*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970, orig. 1943), 228.
- 3 George Patterson, *Missionary Life among the Cannibals: Being the Life of the Rev. John Geddie, D.D., First Missionary to the New Hebrides; with the History of the Nova Scotia Presbyterian Mission on that Group* (Toronto: James Campbell and Son, 1882), 508.
- 4 This description was made of the natives on the island of Tanna, but applies equally well to the conditions on the nearby island of Aniwa.
- 5 Ralph Bell, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides* (Butler, IN: The Highley Press, 1957), 238.
- 6 Ralph Bell, *John G. Paton*, 238.
- 7 Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 572.
- 8 Ralph Bell, *John G. Paton*, 238.
- 9 Mr. and Mrs. G. N. Gordon were killed on Erromanga on May 20, 1861. They had labored four years on the island

when they walked into an ambush. “A blow was aimed at him with a tomahawk, which he caught; the other man struck, but his weapon was also caught. One of the tomahawks was then wrenched out of his grasp. Next moment, a blow on the spine laid the dear Missionary low, and a second on the neck almost severed the head from the body.” Mrs. Gordon came running to see the noise and “Ouben slipped stealthily behind here, sank his tomahawk into her back and with another blow almost severed her head! This was the fate of those two devoted servants of the Lord; loving in their lives and in their deaths not divided, their spirits, wearing the crown of martyrdom, entered Glory together, to be welcomed by Williams and Harris, whose blood was shed near the same now hallowed spot for the name and the cause of Jesus” (166).

- 10 Compare this way of praying with the way Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the fiery furnace in Daniel 3:17–18, “God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”
- 11 This meant that, in one sense, life was not simple. If God may rescue us for his glory, or let us be killed for his glory, which way to turn in self-preservation was not an easy question to answer. “To know what was best to be done, in such trying circumstances, was an abiding perplexity. To have left altogether, when so surrounded by perils and ene-

mies, at first seemed the wisest course, and was the repeated advice of many friends. But again, I had acquired the language, and had gained a considerable influence amongst the Natives, and there were a number warmly attached both to myself and to the Worship. To have left would have been to lose all, which to me was heart-rending; therefore, risking all with Jesus, I held on while the hope of being spared longer had not absolutely and entirely vanished” (173).

- 12** “Often have I seized the pointed barrel and directed it upwards, or, pleading with my assailant, uncapped his musket in the struggle. At other times, nothing could be said, nothing done, but stand still in silent prayer, asking to protect us or to prepare us for going home to His glory. He fulfilled His own promise - ‘I will not fail thee nor forsake thee’ (329–330).
- 13** Paton taught his helpers to pray this way as well, and we hear the same faith and prayer in Abraham, his trustworthy Aneityumese servant. “O Lord, our Heavenly Father, they have murdered Thy servants on Erromanga. They have banished the Aneityumese from dark Tanna. And now they want to kill Missi Paton and me. Our great King, protect us, and make their hearts soft and sweet to Thy Worship. Or, if they are permitted to kill us, do not Thou hate us, but wash us in the blood of Thy dear Son Jesus Christ.... Make us two and all Thy servants strong for Thee and for Thy Worship; and if they kill us now, let us die together in Thy good work, like Thy servants Missi Gordon the man and Missi Gordon the woman” (171).

- 14** He goes on to expand the ground of this joy: “Life, any life, would be well spent, under any conceivable conditions, in bringing one human soul to know and love and serve God and His Son, and thereby securing for yourself at least one temple where your name and memory would be held for ever and for ever in affectionate praise, - a regenerated Heart in heaven. That fame will prove immortal, when all the poems and monuments and pyramids of Earth have gone into dust” (411–412).
- 15** “My constant custom was, in order to prevent war, to run right in between the contending parties. My faith enabled me to grasp and realize the promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always.’ In Jesus I felt invulnerable and immortal, so long as I was doing his work. And I can truly say, that these were the moments when I felt my Savior to be most truly and sensibly present, inspiring and empowering me” (342).
- 16** “I pity from the depth of my heart every human being, who, from whatever cause, is a stranger to the most ennobling, uplifting, and consoling experience that can come to the soul of man - blessed communion with the Father of our Spirits, through gracious union with the Lord Jesus Christ” (359).

