



# Adoniram Judson: Endurance Personified

By Paul Borthwick *(Copyright, Paul Borthwick, reprinted with permission of the author)*

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In 1993, under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Myanmar Evangelical Fellowship, my wife and I traveled to Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma) to speak to youth and youth workers.

To connect our trip with missions history, we decided to re-read the biography of Adoniram Judson, pioneer to Burma, during our trip. Judson and his wife, Nancy Hasseltine Judson, went out as one of the first North American missionaries, sailing in 1812 from Massachusetts.

Our presence in the Burmese capital city, still dominated by the overwhelming Shwe Dagon Pagoda, looked much like the city Judson described to supporters at home.

The most striking aspect of the Judson-Burma story is suffering. From start to finish, his biography describes hardship. He, his family, and his co-workers lived lives of affliction almost unparalleled in modern mission history.

The tribulations begin on the sail to India (his first anticipated destination) from Salem, Massachusetts. A devout Congregationalist, Judson had not resolved the issue of immersion baptism, so he set his sights on studying the issue on the three-month sail. On the journey, he decided that the Baptist perspective was the correct one, and he and Nancy were baptized upon arrival. He wrote to his Congregationalist supporters in Massachusetts, provoking the first crisis. They immediately cut all of their support.

Support from Baptists came, but not without some very uncomfortable weeks. But this problem was only the beginning. The Judsons encountered visa difficulties in India, and their first years took them from India to Mauritius (Isle of France) to Malaysia, while considering both Ceylon and Java. They reluctantly ended up in Burma in 1813.

Anguish and struggles in Burma included:

- language learning - more than two years to learn Burmese, in a country where no English was spoken;
- resistance to conversion - six years to the first Christian convert, Maung Nau in 1819;
- the torture of young Burmese Christians by the government in 1819;
- suspicion of being a spy during Civil War with Britain, followed by a torturous stint in the “Death Prison” (1824-25), which included being hung every night upside down in leg-irons as well as a “death march” that nearly killed him;
- a temporary loss of his accumulated translation work in 1824 (which was eventually recovered);
- severe depression (almost insanity) in 1828 that followed Nancy's death; Judson sat for months by her grave, contemplating her decaying body and writing, “God to me is the Great Unknown; I believe in Him, but I cannot find Him.”
- the falling-away of believers;
- and a lifetime devoted to one primary task: to give the Burmese a Bible in their own language.

As hard as it is to believe, these struggles pale in comparison to the amount of personal grief that surrounded the Judson mission.

Reviewing the detailed account of Judson's life in *To The Golden Shore* (Courtney Anderson, 1987, Judson Press) illustrates the biblical teaching that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself, alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

A chronology of loss outlines the Judson life:

- 1812: the Judsons and the Newells set sail to India.
- 1813: Harriet Newell and her child die at sea, en route to Mauritius.
- 1814: A European woman employed by the Judsons in Mauritius dies.

- 1814: Nancy gives birth to a stillborn child at sea, en route to Burma.
- 1814: potential co-worker, Felix Carey, departs Burma, sailing up the Irrawaddy River; the boat capsizes, and Felix's wife and two children die.
- 1816: the Judson's first son, Roger Williams Judson dies in his second year of life.
- 1819: co-worker Edward Wheelock dies.
- 1821: Mr. Newell (husband of Harriet) dies in Bombay.
- 1826: Judson's beloved partner and true soul-mate, Nancy dies in October.
- 1826: Mrs. Price, wife of medical co-worker Dr. Price, dies three days after Nancy.
- 1826: Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Hall, Christian friends in Burma, die, Rodgers as a result of the Death Prison.
- 1827: Dr. Price dies.
- 1827: less than six months after Nancy's death, their baby Maria dies at 2 years, 3 months on April 24.
- 1830: Judson Wade Boardman, son of George Boardman, who had been recruited as a church planter in the north, dies.
- 1831: George Boardman dies and leaves his young wife, Sarah, and the rest of their family alone, north of Rangoon.
- 1834: Judson marries Sarah Boardman, widow of George.
- 1836: friend and supporter in Burma, Luther Rice, dies.
- 1841: Sarah gives birth to a stillborn son, Luther Judson.
- 1841: Henry Judson dies at age 1 year, 7 months.
- 1845: Sarah Boardman Judson dies.
- 1845: Charlie Judson dies, age 1 year, 6 months.
- 1848: Judson travels to the United States, meets and marries his third wife, Emily.
- 1850: after completing his translation and the Burmese-English dictionary, Judson sails into the Indian Ocean in hopes of clearing his lungs from ongoing tuberculosis. He dies at sea and is buried in obscurity.
- 1850: Charles Judson, son of Adoniram and Emily Judson, dies at birth on April 22.
- 1854: Emily Judson dies of tuberculosis on June 1.

In 1812, Adoniram and Nancy Judson, with the Newells, sailed for India. By 1850, all were dead. Judson himself died in obscurity, leaving few surviving children and only a few Burmese believers.

Statistics are not clear, but it seems that there were between a dozen and twenty-five enduring Burmese converts at the time of Judson's death. No matter what the statistics, the Judson-mission-deaths equaled or exceeded the number of converts.

But one mission had been completed. The Burmese had the Bible in their own language.

Leave the Judson saga and return with my wife and me to 1993. In a meeting with youth and youth leaders, we picked up a copy of the Burmese Bible. The Burmese script was unintelligible to us, but we noticed one English sentence on the title page: "Translated by the Reverend A. Judson."

A Bible translation that had stood the test of time—over 140 years! A testimony to Judson's scholarship and meticulous linguistic study.

I took the Bible over to Matthew Hla Win, our host and then head of the Evangelical Fellowship. "Matthew," I asked, pointing to the English sentence, "do you know who this man is—Judson?"

"O yes!" he exclaimed. "Whenever someone mentions the name 'Judson' great tears come to our eyes because we know what he and his family suffered for us."

He went on with great emotion, "Today, there are over 2 million Christians in Myanmar, and every one of us traces our spiritual heritage to one man – the Reverend Adoniram Judson."

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Adoniram's son, Edward, speaking at the dedication of the Judson Memorial Church in New York City, summarized his father's story:

“Suffering and success go together. If you are succeeding without suffering, it is because others before you have suffered; if you are suffering without succeeding, it is that others after you may succeed.”

Judson probably illustrated this truth as much as any man who ever lived. Probably the greatest lesson we can learn from the life of this great man is that we have to trust in the work of God, even if our efforts seem fruitless and wasted. Judson's life is proof that God is faithful in bringing about his work in due time, and we simply need to remain faithful and trusting in Him. When Adoniram Judson died on April 11, 1850, he had not seen vast numbers saved directly through his ministry. He will be remembered, however, for his role in the establishment of US missions, his outstanding translation of the Bible into Burmese, and his foundational work among the Burmese people.

*To learn more about Paul Borthwick, his books, and the ministry the Lord has entrusted to him, see:*

<http://www.borthwicks.org/>

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For further study related to suffering and trials, see:

[\*\*Anchors of Hope for Any Trial\*\*](#)

[\*\*Don't Lose Heart\*\*](#)

[\*\*God is Faithful\*\*](#)

[\*\*God's Purposes in His Children's Trials\*\*](#)

[\*\*The Three Victories in Trials\*\*](#)

[\*\*Trials, God's Pathway for Growth and Grace\*\*](#)

[\*\*Sorrows that Last a Lifetime\*\*](#)

[\*\*Trusting in God in Trials Out of Our Control\*\*](#)

[\*\*Testimony—My Trials Can Help Others\*\*](#)