

Amy Carmichael

A Legacy of Light, Part 1

1 Corinthians 3:12-13; Mark 16:15

In 1867, the oldest of seven children was born into an Irish family known as the Carmichaels. Although David and Catherine Carmichael were dedicated Christians, they had no idea that their first born daughter, Amy, would grow up to become one of the modern world's most revered missionaries.

What they did learn, fairly quickly, was that Amy was strong willed and rather hard to handle; as a little girl she was even nicknamed Wild Irish.ⁱ

Whenever there was mischief in the Carmichael household of 7 children, Amy was usually the instigator.

One of the first incidents of her determined will and fiery personality occurred when she was around 5 years old. Her mother had told her that if she would pray about her needs, that God would answer her prayer. Amy had brown eyes – which she felt would be much better if they were Irish blue. And so one night she prayed that God would change the color of her eyes to blue. The next morning she jumped out of bed and ran to the mirror and Mrs. Carmichael could hear Amy wailing in frustration and disappointment. She had trouble explaining to Amy that God sometimes answered prayers by saying “no” . . . and He always had a reason, even if Amy didn't like it.ⁱⁱ

On another occasion, an adult told young Amy that she needed to stop swallowing those prune seeds because if she didn't, she would grow plum trees out of her head. Amy promptly swallowed twelve of them, delighted with the idea of growing an orchard on her head.

This sense of strong determination would serve her well years later in India as she abandoned the European dress for Indian dress; as she eventually

dropped her English mission agency and created her own; as she bucked the caste system of India, built an orphanage and treated all the staff and children equally.

Only years later, she would write, that she recognized why God had given her brown eyes instead of blue; it allowed her to impersonate a native Indian woman, so that she could enter a Hindu temple unsuspected in order to sneak away a young girl who was being kept as a prostitute – literally a sex-slave – by the Brahmin priests.

She would be accused often with the charge of kidnapping, but she would face her accusers without backing down.

At the age of 15, Amy believed the gospel and placed her life in the hands of God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ.

Two years later, her father unexpectedly died, leaving her and her mother to raise 6 younger children.

One Sunday morning soon after, Mrs. Carmichael and her children were walking home from a church service when Amy met a woman – whom we would call a street person – burdened down with a heavy load of rags.

Instantly, Amy and her brothers relieved the woman of her bundle, took her arms, and helped her along. Amy remembers the icy stares of the other church members – whom she called “proper Presbyterians” who obviously disapproved of her actions. You just didn't get your hands dirty like that.

Amy would later write that as she helped that old woman with her bundle of rags, a verse of scripture flashed to her mind – from *1 Corinthians 3* – turn

there and notice *verse 11. It will become one of her life verses. Paul writes, For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12. Now if any many builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.*

In this text, the Apostle references the coming evaluation of every Christian's life. This isn't a time of punishment, but a time of reward.

Paul will expound further on this judgment – we call it the judgment seat of Christ in *2 Corinthians 5:10 where Paul writes, Therefore we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to God; for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be rewarded – repaid, for his deeds in the body.*

Now we're clearly told that no believer is saved by good works – *Ephesians 2:8 & 9 – for by grace we have been saved through faith, and not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.*

That's pretty clear, isn't it? Salvation isn't earned by good works.

However, even though salvation isn't earned by good works, it is definitely evidenced by good works.

As the reformers put it so well centuries ago, saving faith is faith in Christ alone, but saving faith is never alone.

In other words, genuine faith is accompanied by good works that glorify the Father and cause the world to both see and hear the gospel.

So what are we revealing with our lives?

This is one of these verses that challenge the Christian to live a godly, passionate, disciplined, intentional life.

It's a call to offer our best to God.

So what are effectively giving to God? Stuff that will burn up under the gaze of Christ? Or do we offer Him that which will last.

By the way, Paul makes it clear in this text that our Christian service for Christ is not a matter of quantity, but quality. That's Paul challenge to the believer here – do we offer precious gems or cheap straw to Christ?

Are we giving God the cheaper things in our lives – the leftovers we can do without, or costly gifts?

It was this passage that sent Amy Carmichael to her room that afternoon after coming home from helping that woman . . . she prayed out of anguish over the idea that she would settle for the religious status quo . . . that she would keep her hands from getting dirty in the ministry of the gospel; that her life might make so little difference in people's lives and for God's glory.

Her biographers wrote that this day – and this passage – would echo throughout the rest of her life.ⁱⁱⁱ

God would soon test her resolve.

Not long after this signature event, Amy's father died unexpectedly, and with his death, their financial security was suddenly gone.

Eventually, Amy's mother was unable to care for all the children and Amy moved into the home of a godly widower who was raising his sons. He was the cofounder of the Keswick Convention and Amy would serve as his secretary for several years.

At the same time, the Lord began to burden her heart for young women who worked in a nearby mill. They were nicknamed Shawlies because they were too poor to purchase hats and so they wore shawls, pulled up around their heads.

It was an effective work and in a matter of months, a number of women had trust Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Living in the home of the Keswick leader allowed Amy the privilege of meeting choice servants of God like F. B. Meyer and Hudson Taylor, and Amy soon began to sense the Lord directing her to leave her local ministry for some distant land.

She would write that *Mark 16:15* would begin to play over and over in her heart and mind – just the first two words – *Go ye . . . Go ye . . . Go ye.*”

In the original language, it's written in the imperative – it's a command. Go . . . you. You – go . . . you go and deliver the gospel to the nations . . . not someone else – you go!

About that same time, Amy heard Hudson Taylor preach where he spoke of the Chinese unbelievers, dying at the rate of one million a month – and that further arrested her thinking.

Mark 16:15 would become her personal call from Christ to leave her homeland of Great Britain . . . to leave what she called *the luxury of light and go into the darkness.*

Amy applied to Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission, but was rejected because of her poor health.

She did suffer from weakness and persistent illnesses. She suffered from neuralgia, a disease that simulated the nerves to feel pain – it often forced her to lie in bed for weeks at a time.

Undeterred, a year later she was on a ship heading for Japan as a missionary. She would serve less than a year, forced to return home, her health broken.

For most people, certainly for a single woman in Victorian England, that would have been enough. She would have been applauded for good effort. She could have been satisfied with her sacrifice and her obedience to go.

But not for this Wild Irishwoman who once dreamed of growing an orchard on her head.

She knew God had called her to some distant and darkened culture. She wanted to do something for God that no one had done before!

She would later write, “Satan is so much more in earnest than we are--he buys up the opportunity while we are wondering how much it will cost us.” To the surprise of everyone – and many a concern, one year later, under a different board belonging to the Church of England, Amy set sail for India.

Not exactly an easier place to serve.

As I read from a number of sources, I discovered that even the missionaries who greeted her in India predicted she would not last 6 months on the field.

She did indeed struggle with poor health . . . she struggled with loneliness . . . she struggled to learn the Tamil language so that she could share the gospel with those around her.

But she would end up serving in India for 55 years – and without ever returning home on furlough.

But you need to know her ministry would take a turn she never expected – and neither did the other missionaries.

It would result in misunderstandings from her supporting church; disagreements with other missionaries; an angry power play by an influential family in England in an attempt to stop her work; trouble with the law of the land; but Amy would choose to stay, create her own mission agency, trust Christ to keep her out of prison and take care of her financial needs.

It all began with a little girl name Preena.

She was sold at the age of seven by her parents to the local Hindu Temple where she supposedly was married to the gods.

Pull back the mask and you discover that she was actually inducted into a world that today goes by the name, sex trafficking, although in her day and in this culture, it was accepted and even revered.

The practice had begun in the 6th century; it involved young girls who were sold by their parents to the Hindu Priests where at first they would be taught to sing and dance.

When they reached puberty, they would be forced by into lives of inescapable tragedy. They were nothing more than slaves of the Brahmin priests, used and abused by the men who came to the temple with their gifts of money and food.

When Preena, this little 7 year old Indian girl, realized what her life would actually become, she escaped – and she eventually made her way back to her home where she thought she’d be safe.

No sooner had she arrived home that a woman from the temple arrived as well, demanding that Preena be given back immediately.

Amy writes that Preena’s arms were clutching her mother’s waist while she cried to be rescued. The woman from the temple threatened that the Hindu gods would bring down their wrath and, fearing the Hindu deities, Preena’s mother actually unloosed her daughter’s clinging arms and handed her over to this woman.

When they returned to the temple, the priests took hot irons and branded Preena’s hands as punishment.^{iv}

But Preena refused to give up and she soon ran away again. This time she ran to a nearby village and was found by a Christian woman who hid her.

And it just so happened, by the providence of God, visiting that very same village that afternoon, was Amy Carmichael.

When she met Preena and heard her story, Amy uncovered what she later wrote, “was an ugly sore on Mother India’s body – where fathers and mothers sold their daughters to different gods, turning their precious daughters into temple prostitutes.”

And Amy went into action.

A village in southern India called Dohnavur became her mission headquarters – it was about 100 acres which soon saw the building of a school, a home, a hospital, an orphanage . . . but primarily, it became a refuge which Amy nicknamed, “The Gray Jungle Retreat.”^v

It wasn’t long before seventeen young girls had escaped or been rescued from nearby temples to this sanctuary at Dohnavur.

The children all called Amy, Amma – which means mother.

Now if you can believe it – many missionaries were appalled that Amy would interrupt the caste system or even dare to whisk little girls away in the night from Hindu Temples.

She would write about her experiences to her supporters back home – but one manuscript she hoped to publish which would open the eyes of her countrymen was refused by the publisher who sent it back for revision, saying that it was too discouraging to read.

Amy pressed on – sacrificing all she had – gold, silver and precious stone for the gospel of Christ.

Eventually her haven of Dohnavur cared for little boys and abandoned babies.

They all called her Amma.

I found it interesting to discover in my reading that most of the children who came to this refuge did not know their birthdate.

So they reckoned it this way; they chose as their birthday the day they arrived at Amy Carmichael’s mission – they called that their “coming day.” And that day became their birthday – because on that day they began to finally live.

Over the decades, without ever asking for it, Amy Carmichael began to gain international notoriety. She was personally awarded by Queen Victoria for her service; mission agencies sent her requests to come and speak.

At the height of her growing fame, Amy was walking through the compound one night – at a place where workers had dug a large pit she was unaware of – she fell into the pit, breaking her leg and twisting her spine in the fall. That injury would leave her bedridden for the last 20 years of her life.

She would write in her journal: we are not asked to understand, but simply to obey.”^{vi}

Those twenty bedridden years turned out to be amazingly profitable. She would write a half-dozen books along with poetry that would inspire thousands of people to make their lives count for Christ – to accept the personal call to go . . . to go . . . and build a life with precious jewels – with costly sacrifices – a work that would please the Lord.

Warren Wiersbe’s wonderful book that features Amy Carmichael’s ministry – in fact, he introduced me to her missionary work – Wiersbe asked the honest question – what church today would support a missionary like Amy Carmichael?

Consider these facts:

- She spent nearly 60 years in the field and never once came home to report to her supporters;
- While she went to the field under the authority of one board she pretty much did her own thing, upsetting conventional norms, ignoring the caste system; dressing like an Indian woman and demanding that everyone in her mission go by their Indian name;
- Consider the fact that she left her mission board and started an organization on her own;
- Consider the fact that she went to the field to carry on one kind of ministry, but within a few years began an entirely different ministry that got her into trouble with the law – in fact, on one occasion she faced a seven year sentence in prison for “assisting in the kidnapping of a child.” The case was later dropped;
- Consider the fact that the reports she mailed home were often too strange to be believed – or too shocking;
- Consider the fact that she was asked repeatedly to return home for a visit – but she refused to leave her mission; besides, she said – she didn’t have time and wouldn’t fly in one of those airplanes anyway – because, as she explained – since the devil was the prince of the power of the air, she had no desire to fly through his territory
(That’s a strange view to us, but many in her generation felt the very same way);
- One more – consider the fact that the final twenty years of her ministry, she was practically an invalid, directing the work from her bedroom.^{vii}

Who would support a missionary like that?

Stubborn and strong willed to the end; in fact, I discovered this – when she was 80 years old she read a reviewer’s comment that her books were popular. “Popular? She responded, “Lord, is that what these books written out of the heat of battle are to people? Popular? O Lord, burn my books to ashes it that is true.”^{viii}

To aspiring missionary candidates she simply wrote to them with honest realism – she told them that they would never make it in India as a

missionary unless they brought with them a sense of humor and absolutely no sense of smell.

She would tell other candidates that above everything else, serving with her offered them one thing only – a chance to die.

She lived up to her life verse – that God desires to see in us the most precious sacrifices – things that cost the most – not so that we can be saved, but so that we can bring glory to the God who saved us – and then called us . . . to go . . . to go.

When Amy died in 1951 at the age of 83, she left behind a magnificent legacy – built upon the foundation of Christ – precious, priceless lives of hundreds of children whose lives were physically and spiritually rescued by the gospel.

As death neared, she insisted that no grave marker be placed where she was buried – she wanted no temptation left to her teammates to build some temple or shrine in her honor.

They honored her wish – to a point – for on top of her grave they placed a bird bath bearing a simple plaque on the birdbath with one word engraved – Amma – mother.

I couldn't help but think of the irony so many children had found a home because she had been willing to give up hers.

She had lived for 60 years for the day of reckoning – when she would be evaluated and rewarded, as her life verse said, for its quality – authenticity and integrity and truth and humility and perseverance and love and faith.

This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he referred to a life built upon the foundation of Christ with priceless deeds of gold and silver and precious stones.

Lives willing to be sacrificed – to face the penalties – to embrace the costs of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I close with the words to a poem she wrote which reveals her attitude toward life, ministry, suffering . . . a life she wanted, like the Apostle Paul, to matter for Christ.

*[Free me] from prayer that asks that I may be
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,
From fearing when I should aspire,
From faltering when I should climb higher
From silken self, O Captain, free
Thy soldier who would follow Thee;*

*From subtle love of softening things,
From easy choices, weakening,
From all that dims Thy Calvary
O Lamb of God, deliver me.*

*Give me the love that leads the way,
The faith that nothing can dismay
The hope no disappointments tire,
The passion that will burn like fire;
Let me not sink to be a clod;
Make me Thy fuel, Oh Flame of God.*

One of the action points I want this series of studies to include is the encouragement for you to choose and memorize a verse that God is using in your life at this time in your life in a special way. All of scripture is inspired and all of it is profitable, but there are seasons in life where a passage or a verse becomes especially encouraging and maybe even convicting.

At the close of each service, I'll open the floor for just a moment – you'll have to be quick on your feet, for you to stand and quote that verse for our encouragement as well.

You can't read it . . . you have to quote it . . . so this will be an encouragement to memorize scripture as well.

As Jeremy is hopping up here to complete our service with a song on the ancient words of scripture that ring ever true, does anyone here tonight have a special verse that God is using in your life right now . . . stand and tells us what it is.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/22/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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- ii www.christianity.com/AmyCarmichael/KindlyKidnapper
- iii www.historymakers.info/inspirational-christain/amy-carmichael.html
- iv Adpated from Frank L. Houghton, *Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur* (CLC, 1953), p. 138
- v www.torchlighters.org
- vi *Amy Carmichael, Candles in the Dark*
- vii Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *50 People Every Christian Should Know* (Baker Books, 2009), p. 299
- viii www.heroesofhistory.com/page17.html