Henry Martyn (1781-1812)



Anglican chaplain in India with a vision to make the Scriptures accessible to Muslims in India, Persia and beyond

Henry Martyn was born in Truro, a small town in the southwest corner of England. His father was head clerk in a local merchant's office. He was largely self-taught. His mother died when he was two years old. His parents were greatly influenced by the preaching of John Wesley. His father regularly attended local prayer meetings.

At school Henry proved himself an able scholar – especially in classics (Latin and Greek). He was sent to the University of Cambridge at 17 years old. He was a brilliant mathematician, but his love was languages and his delight was the grammar of different languages. As an undergraduate he mastered seventeen of these.

Before his conversion Henry was known as outwardly friendly. But underneath he was seething with irritability and he often gave vent to a furious temper. He once hurled a knife at a fellow student who annoyed him. He missed! His sister Sally was a devout believer and undertook to win Henry for the Lord Jesus. She wrote long and frequent letters to him at Cambridge. Henry was angry and answered her letters harshly. But what the living cannot accomplish can sometimes be accomplished by the dead!

On January 1st 1800 Henry was stunned by the news of his father's death. He didn't have funds to go home for the funeral. In his grief he turned to the Bible starting to read at Acts. Gradually there was a growing realisation that the Lord Jesus was a living person. His conversion followed this discovery.

At this time Henry came under the ministry of Charles Simeon of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. Simeon was one of the foremost preacher/teachers of the Evangelical Awakening in England. On graduation Henry won the highest honours Cambridge could bestow with prizes in mathematics, classics and languages. With such a magnificent record he could easily have chosen any easy path. He was appointed as a lecturer and a Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge.

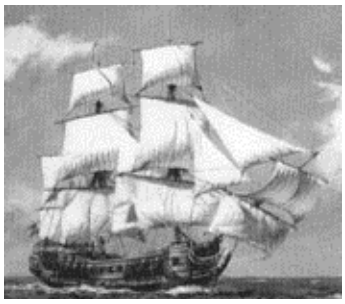
But Charles Simeon spoke to Henry about "**the transcendent excellence of Christian ministry**" and the pressing need for servants of Christ in India. At first Henry rebelled. He didn't want to be poor for Christ's sake. Money, position and studious leisure were his goal. His goal was to study law as it was a lucrative profession.

But God began to speak to Henry. He devoted more and more time to being alone with God. In these times Henry caught such glimpses of the love of the Lord Jesus and His majesty that it melted him and he became more than willing to be poor for Jesus' sake. In the summer of 1802 he made his decision that, if God enabled him, he would go to India. His friends were shocked. Even Sally disapproved!

Henry had begun a friendship with a girl from his home town. Her name was Lydia Grenfell. Once he had decided for India, Henry realised that he would probably have to end this friendship. He wrote in his diary, "**Parted with Lydia for ever in this life with a sort of uncertain pain which I knew would increase to violence.**"

Once Henry was in India and earning a chaplain's salary he began a correspondence with Lydia and cherished the hope that she would one day join him. This correspondence continued for eighteen months until he finally received her refusal. During these days Henry read the diary of David Brainerd and this had a profound effect on him leading him to a path of rigid inner discipleship.

Henry prepared for India by becoming Charles Simeon's assistant for eighteen months. He preached in villages around Cambridge. Being a missionary in India was forbidden by the East India Company and so, at Simeon's suggestion, Henry applied to be a chaplain to the British troops in the East India Company. His application was accepted.



A merchantman of the East India Company

The voyage to India took all of ten months in a 'merchantman'. He arrived in Madras in April 1806. Immediately he sensed the presence of Satan – the ***"prince of the power of the air"*** and the demons who ruled India. Now the battle was set. He was going to attack those demonic forces. Here he uttered that thrilling statement, **"Now let me burn out for God"**.

Henry moved to Calcutta and met William Carey and the others from the "Serampore Trio" – Marshman and Ward. Carey learned of the Trio's commitment to reach the Hindus of India. Knowing Henry's skills in languages they challenged him about the three great Muslim languages of South and West Asia – Arabic, Persian (Farsi) and Urdu and the need for Scriptures in these languages.

A few months later in October 1806, Henry was moved to Patna in Bihar to a British cantonment. During the six weeks up the Ganges on a riverboat he studied Urdu, Persian and Bengali from Hindu and Muslim language helpers. Stammeringly he began preaching the Gospel in Urdu and Bengali.

In Patna he found the British as pagan as the Indians. The local British judge had married a Muslim woman, built a mosque and openly renounced Christianity. Most of the ex-patriate community deeply resented Henry's ministry. Still a handful of soldiers came to his house for a weekly Bible study and singing since there was no church building.

The following year the number grew to over thirty. The Indians deeply distrusted him. Henry wrote, **"Here every native I meet is an enemy to me because I am an Englishman."** So he started schools for Indian children staffed by Indians but using material from the Bible. It was at Patna that Henry began a serious study of Islam and developed a sensitivity to the Muslim mind.

In April 1809 the East India Company moved Henry to Kanpur (known as Cawnpore before 1948) another 300 miles up the Ganges. Here he stayed for eighteen months. Here he had Christian fellowship. He was faithful in his duties as chaplain to the expatriate community, but he used all his scholarly skills in language learning. Starting with Urdu and Sanskrit and continuing with Arabic and Farsi his aim was to put the New Testament in all three languages.

By 1810 the Urdu New Testament was ready for the press. His Urdu translation was excellent literature. It was also idiomatic and simple enough for the least educated. Today's translation of the Urdu New Testament is still based on Henry's translation.

For the Farsi he had a Muslim – Mirza Fitrut as a helper and for the Arabic Sabat was his helper. Sabat was a proud and fanatical Muslim who was responsible for the violent death of a friend who had followed Jesus. Sabat eventually became a follower of Jesus and was martyred for his faith in Indonesia.

During his stay in Kanpur Henry contracted tuberculosis. Still he persisted in preaching in the open air to crowds of Indians often coughing blood as a result. Only one person is known to have come to faith as a result of his preaching to the people of Kanpur. A young Muslim attended one of his open-air meetings. After Henry left this young man openly declared himself to be a follower of Jesus. He was baptised and became the first Indian clergyman of the Church of England and a preacher of the Gospel to Muslims.

Henry completed Arabic and Farsi translations of the New Testament but these were considered to be sub-standard. He decided that a truly idiomatic translation could only be made by living in Iran and Arabia. The idea of going to these countries gripped his mind. His TB was so serious people thought a sea voyage might help. In October 1810 he left India to travel to the Gulf. Friends who saw him off grieved. They could see he was not far from the grave.

There was a strange paradox about Henry. The weaker his body became, the stronger his spirit grew. His whole life flamed with one desire that before he died he would give Asia a Farsi New Testament. His ship stopped off in Muscat, Oman. Henry discovered how deficient his Arabic New

Testament was. He went on to Iran arriving in May 1811. On arrival in Bushire, he joined a caravan to the great intellectual centre of Shiraz where he hoped to find scholarly help to complete the Farsi New Testament.

He arrived in Shiraz in June. Here he found several Muslim scholars to help him. He wrote, **"Whether life or death be mine, may Christ be magnified in me. If He has a work for me to do, I cannot die."**



A Mosque in Shiraz

Henry only wore Iranian dress in Iran. He lived in a sparsely furnished room with no tables or chairs. He ate with his hands. While he was there he had no Christian fellowship. Life was a mixture of encouragements and discouragements. Muslim boys stoned him. One missile hit him in the hip and severely hurt him. One day a Muslim scholar helping him translate the Gospels remarked to him, **"There is something so awfully pure about Jesus."** Henry's room was daily visited by a stream of Mullahs, poets and others eager to meet this "beardless boy" who knew so much about religion.

In February 1812 the Farsi New Testament was completed together with the Psalms. Henry travelled to Tabriz in North West Iran to present a copy to the Shah of Persia. Before he left Shiraz a young man named Muhammad Rahim, who had bitterly opposed Henry, put his faith in the Lord Jesus.

Henry reached Tabriz and sought an audience with the Shah but was not able to gain entrance to his courts. Eventually the British Ambassador took a copy of the New Testament to the Shah on Henry's behalf and gained approval for its distribution in the Shah's territories. The Shah was overjoyed at such excellent use of the Persian language. He wrote a letter of thanks to be passed to Henry by the British Ambassador. In this letter he said, **"In truth through the learned and unremitting exertions of the Reverend Henry Martyn it has been translated in a style most befitting sacred books that is in an easy and simple diction .... The whole of the New Testament is completed in a most excellent manner, a source of pleasure to our enlightened and august mind."**

At Tabriz Henry decided to return to England via the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). He set out to travel over 700 miles to Istanbul. He reached Tokat where the plague was raging. He was still 400 miles from his destination. We don't know the details. He probably collapsed in the street and died. Armenian Christians buried the unknown Englishman **"Of whom the world was not worthy"**.

His last diary entry was October 6. He wrote: **Oh! When shall time give place to eternity? When shall appear that new heaven and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness? There, there shall in no wise enter in anything that defileth: none of that wickedness which has made men worse than wild beasts, none of those corruptions which add still more to the miseries of mortality shall be seen or heard of any more."**

Many years later a worker in North Africa was invited to meet the chief of a bedouin tribe in the Sahara. The chief took him into his tent, drew out a little book and gave it to him to look at. The worker asked, **"Where did you get this book?" "From my Father"** the chief replied. **"Many years ago he went on a pilgrimage to Persia. There he met a kind white man who gave him this book. The white man continued his journey and my Father learned later that he had died in a town called Tokat. My father returned home but he never forgot that white man. Before he died he called me to his side and said, 'Son, take this book and read it much and never lose it. If ever a man comes to our people telling about one called Jesus ... treat him kindly for the sake of that one who was such a friend to me in Persia long ago.' "**

Henry left two of the most perfect and influential translations of the New Testament that West and South Asia have ever seen. He said, **"Even if I never see a native converted, by my patience and continuation in the work God may design to encourage future workers".**

Henry Martyn left us an example, not of a perfect man but of what God can do with a very imperfect man who takes the call of God very seriously. Thomas Babington Macaulay's Epitaph written in early 1813 testified to the impression made by his career.

"Here Martyn lies. In manhood's early bloom
The Christian hero finds a pagan tomb.
Religion, sorrowing o'er her favourite son,
Points to the glorious trophies that he won.
Eternal trophies! Not with carnage red.
Not stained with tears by hapless captives shed.
But trophies of the Cross! For that dear name,
Through every form of danger, death and shame,
Onward he journeyed to a happier shore
Where danger, death and shame assault no more.



In 1812 the Armenian priests had buried Henry in the Armenian Cemetery. His grave was neglected and the plaque was buried under dirt and sand. The Board of Directors of the Hon. East India Company agreed to pay for a new grave in the Mission Cemetery in Tokat.

His grave was relocated to this cemetery on a high hill overlooking Tokat in about 1855 ~43 years after his death. He was buried in a vault and a marble obelisk was erected on top of it. The obelisk is made of local marble and it was carved by local craftsmen.

The inscription opposite was carved on each side in a different language – English – Armenian – Persian and Turkish.

REV. HENRY MARTYN, M.A.

Chaplain of the Hon. East India Company,
Born at Truro, England, February 18, 1781,
Died at Tokat, October 16, 1812.

He laboured for many years in the East, striving to
Benefit mankind both in this world and that to come.
He translated the Holy Scriptures into Hindostanee
and Persian,
And preached the God and Saviour of whom they testify.
He will long be remembered in the East, where he was
known as a Man of God

Towards the end of his life Henry wrote in his journal:

"What do I not owe to the Lord for permitting me to take part in a translation of His Word? Never did I see such wonder, and wisdom, and love in that blessed book as since I have been obliged to study every expression. All day on the translation, employed a good while at night in considering a difficult passage, and being much enlightened respecting it, I went to bed full of astonishment at the wonders of God's Word. Never before did I see anything of the beauty of the language and the importance of the thoughts as I do now. I felt happy that I should never be finally separated from the contemplation of them or of the things concerning which they are written. Knowledge shall vanish away, but it shall be because perfection has come."

