

Harold St. John

by John Bjorlie

Harold St. John was a devoted Christian who lived a life of faith, trust in God, and love, and shared his extensive knowledge of the Bible with others through his teaching and writing.

Scripture: Psalm 23:4, Isaiah 40:31, Matthew 9:36, Luke 4:18, 1 Corinthians 14:34, Philippians 4:19, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, Hebrews 2:14, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Evangelism"

Description

John Bjorlie delivers a sermon on the life of Harold St. John, a devoted Christian missionary who exemplified saintliness through his unwavering faith and dedication to serving God. St. John's early encounter with Christ led to a life of fearless preaching and evangelism, even in the most challenging environments. His deep understanding of Scripture and commitment to prayer and spiritual growth inspired many to seek a closer relationship with God. Despite facing hardships and disruptions in his missionary work, St. John remained steadfast in his faith, radiating joy and love for the Lord until his final moments.

Transcript

Harold St. John (1876-1957) preferred to have his name pronounced sin-jun, feeling that the title of "saint" was too superior sounding. But if anyone wanted an example of saintliness, they could have pointed in Harold St. John's direction.

His father had a government position as the treasurer of Sarawak, a state in Malaysia. Later his family would also spend time in Germany and Belgium. After his mother, Blanche, became a believer, she quickly applied the principles of Christian child rearing to her home. By God's grace, Harold and his five siblings came to know and love the Lord Jesus. In their stays in England, the St. John family had Bible teachers such as W. J. Lowe around the tea table, and Harold recounts paying visits to old veterans like Charles H. Mackintosh.

Harold was eighteen when he definitely came to know Christ.

I remember the day--I shall never forget it, when I saw my Saviour with the giant's head in His hand, unchallengeable proof that the work of salvation was eternally finished, for He had destroyed him that had the power of death, and, through fear of death, had imprisoned those who all their lifetime were subject to bondage. And since that day, when I knew my Saviour had destroyed the giant and broken his power

forever, and carried the witness of His victory up to the City of God--since that day, I have never known the slightest challenge or fear in my heart as to my eternal security in the Lord Jesus Christ...He has triumphed, He has gone up to God, and by His mercy I am going there, too.

About this time, he secured a position at a London bank. His normal workday lasted nine hours, after which he would catch a quick tea and march off to a preaching appointment. Vacation time was given to helping Lord Radstock in his evangelistic work on the continent. To mix in with the highbrow element would have been natural for this oh-so-proper Englishman. But he had already set his course, and his brush with aristocracy did not turn his head. Percy Rouff worked at the bank, too, and said that he never saw him dawdle, on the street or in life. Together they would descend to places like "The Mile End Waste" to preach in the open air. Ada Habershon also did personal evangelism among the street people of London and Harold helped. He was willing to do this kind of work, but it did not come naturally to the upscale bank employee.

Many nights he preached in the open air, or in flop houses, but was disturbed by the way his less fortunate audience took to his message:

When I was quite young I used to go down to the slums of London. I would go into a common lodging house on a Sunday night dressed in a frock coat and a silk top hat and I would stand there with a Testament in my hand and preach and preach, and be very much surprised that the people did not listen to me. I was enormously impressed at their iniquity! Here was a young man in a frock coat and a silk top hat, and they didn't even listen to him! Then I discovered the reason why they would not listen. I got hold of the oldest suit I could borrow and in the pocket of that suit I placed the sum of four pence. In the evening I went, with the ragtag and bobtail of the district, to that lodging house where two or three hundred men were to sleep for the night.

I sat where they sat, and the fleas that bit them bit me; the same crawly things that crawled on them crawled on me. I spent some nights in that dreadful chamber silently listening to their needs and woes. Then at six o'clock one morning, when they were getting their breakfast, I arose and began to speak to them. Now I found there was not the slightest difficulty in obtaining their attention. I understood how the seas of life were buffeting them, and they were perfectly willing to listen to a man who had sat where they sat.

The greatest day in our history was the day when it came to the heart of God to draw closer to us than He had ever done before, after forty centuries of dwelling in cloud and thick darkness. But He did not send His Son to start preaching some code: when our Lord went into the business of Redemption, for thirty years He never said a word of public ministry. For thirty years He sat where men sat and listened to their thoughts and experiences. For thirty years He knew hunger, weariness, poverty, and the cares of that little home. Then He began to speak. And the world has been listening ever since.

The Lord Himself had become his objective, and thereafter a mediocre Christian experience could not be tolerated. He complained about delivering "a dispiriting lecture to a handful of resigned looking people. London is a freezing place spiritually." But in that chill atmosphere Harold overcame. The intensity of his early Christian life shows in his diary entries.

"Jan. 8. Hall full and prayer meeting after. Is revival beginning? O God, give me purpose in prayer. Guard my lips from folly and open them for testimony.

"Jan. 15. Hall full, but, oh for power! True teaching and natural freedom useless. Why is it withheld? More prayer and obedience to the will of God. A watch tells time if in harmony with the universe.

"Jan 29. Hall well filled. By grace some power, but it is not revival. Oh, let it come; my heart breaks for it. I haven't begun to live the Christian life. I need ways directed by the Word and sympathies in harmony with the mind of Christ.

"Feb. 24. Spent all night in prayer with M.G. Preaching next day, voice failed and spirit, too. Wonderful stories of revival in Wales. Why not here?"

In April of 1905, Harold enjoyed a taste of that longed for revival in a fishing village of St. Ives in Cornwall. He had taken his Easter vacation to hold gospel meetings with his older brother Arthur when the blessing fell.

"11th. Crowds at first meeting. Fifty more came in at 9:30. Five cases of conviction. Left the hall at 11:00. I sorely need wisdom to direct.

"13th. Five to ten cases of conviction. I spoke on 1 Corinthians 14:34 . Rowdyism in the meeting. Stayed till midnight with backsliders. Two young men confessed grandly. One dropped down on the floor crying, 'If that's the gospel, I accept Christ.'

"14th. T.C. broke down and came out well for Christ. A fine brother's meeting re converts. Several more till midnight. Beginning of real opposition.

"Wed. Reaping day. Nine cases of conversion. One said, 'I needn't go upstairs; I received Christ here.'

"Thur. Landlord of the Inn closed his pub, saying, 'I can't serve God in this business.'

"Fri. Huge overflow; many turned away."

At the close of those meetings three hundred people came out to see the St. John brothers off on the train. Decades later, they still spoke of that season of blessing. Can we attribute these results to natural talents? Percy Rouff said, "St. John, with his powerful voice and fluent tongue, drew and held the crowds with his graphic word pictures and his youthful, ruddy appearance. Either alone or with one other, he would go to Hyde Park and preach to the crowds." Yes, there was natural ability. But we judge by the fruit that there was an immense hidden root system in his life that drew on God's supernatural powers.

Once St. John stood in the private chapel of Keble College, Oxford, viewing a copy of Holman Hunt's masterpiece, The Light of the World, when some tourists sauntered by. The guide intoned, "The original of this picture was sold for #5000." Before the words had died on the air, St. John's own voice announced: "Ladies and gentleman, may I add that the true original of this picture was sold for thirty pieces of silver." Only silence followed Harold's words. The stunned tourists lingered long enough to let this message penetrate, and, with new reverence, filed out of the chapel.

In 1913, he astounded his superiors by resigning from the bank in order to pursue missionary work. His manager asked, "How will you live, and who will provide for your expenses, since you are not going out under any recognized missionary society?"

Harold answered, "I'm going out to do God's work. God is sending me, and God will provide."

"Well, St. John, I wish I had your faith."

In July of 1914, he married an equally devoted Christian, Ella Swain, and that fall they sailed to Buenos Aires, Brazil. Harold's experiences among the slum dwellers was good training. Their home there was infested with beetles and other creeping things that would immerge from the cracks and crevices at night. The legs of their camp beds stood in pans of kerosene to deter the ones that could not fly. There Ella learned to share a kitchen with four other families. Such were the St. John's romantic missionary beginnings.

When expecting their first child, Ella received news that her father was gravely ill back in England. They elected to have Ella sail to England, to be with her father and wait to deliver her first child. This disruption to their family life was worsened when Ella and baby Hazel could not return to Brazil because of World War I. Harold and Ella accepted these awkward and difficult situations as a part of God's will in their lives. The love and spiritual reality that reigned in the St. John home by all accounts was true.

Harold had linked up with Homer Payne and gone on extended missionary trips into Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina, often by horseback and on foot. Then in 1917, he and Stuart McNair began a more localized teaching ministry in Carangola, with a Bible School, stating, "Our chief desire is that there may be an atmosphere of prayer and spiritual power, in order that, while progressing in study, there may be still more progress in the knowledge of God."

In 1921, he left Brazil for a trip to British Guiana, and to pursue an expansive itinerant ministry. From there he extended his ministerial confines beyond South America to the Northern Hemisphere, the West Indies, Europe, North and South Africa, Palestine, Australia, and New Zealand. He co-labored with many honored servants of Christ, including E. H. Broadbent, Harold P. Barker, C. F. Hogg and W. W. Fereday.

Fred Mitchell, the home director of the China Inland Mission, was a dear friend who said that St. John "knew his Bible better than anyone else in Britain." His extensive studies in God's Word have recently been made available by Gospel Tract Publishers of Glasgow in 2 large volumes (available from Uplook Ministries). Reading them, we can see why F. F. Bruce referred to St. John as "The Maestro" and said: "For detailed acquaintance with the text of Scripture he had few equals."

Evangelist Eric Hutchings wrote: "Mr. Harold St. John has been one of the greatest spiritual influences of my life. It was he above all others who inspired me to get down to a detailed study of the Bible, to seek the plain and obvious meanings of the words, rather than to attempt to see typical meanings, sometimes abstruse and remote, in everything. By this sane, prayerful approach, the true typical teaching of Scripture emerged. In other words, he taught me that it was necessary to go to the Scripture first and let the Word of God unfold itself, rather than to get hold of some dispensational or typical outline and force the interpretation of such a meaning. He stayed with us in Manchester many times during the years 1935-1945, and even when he was not staying with us, we would lunch together once or twice a week to discuss the things of God. My last meeting with him was typical...It was the last time I saw him...his face radiant with the glory of God."

This word "radiant" was used repeatedly to describe the currents of joy that friends saw in him. There was a luminous quality about his face. He was tall, his hair had turned a clean white, and a rosy shine seemed to come from beneath the skin of his face. A man who enjoyed a long walk to his preaching appointments, he would stride along, his lips moving in what he called "perambulatory prayer," arms swinging, oblivious to passersby. Once in the pulpit, he stood before the saints and, without looking at his Bible, would recite

from memory the passage to be studied.

His final year was spent in Abergele, North Wales, where Ella's sister was headmistress of a girls' school. Brother St. John's closing Bible teaching was to the pupils. Nearby in Malvern was the Gospel Hall where the family met with the believers and where he had baptized all of his five children.

In a letter to Ella he wrote, "Take plenty of time for peace and quiet, and keep a good wide margin for giving thanks for the children. We have been so terribly happy in all five--and in the three daughters-in-law. You met me at the foot of the hill, and I am nearly at the top, but oh! what a lovely climb it has been, and what a world of wealth and music they have brought us--and what a joy that we are all, without exception, one in Christ Jesus."

To the end, Harold St. John kept himself in the sunshine. From his deathbed he said, "I am too weak to pray, I am too tired to love Him much, but I'm just lying here, letting Him love me." In and out of consciousness, he would murmur, "When I go in to see the King it will be very bright...the King in His beauty...pure, cloudless joy...it's all gone, all my sins, all my fears...only Christ now...I'm the happiest man alive...It's all bright, all bright!"

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