

*Inspiring Female
Missionaries
Who Fulfilled
the Great Commission*

10 Women Who Changed the World

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MISSIONARIES

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God Knows What He Is Doing—
Beautifully Exemplified in the Life of

Sarah Hall Boardman Judson¹

PSALM 138

Sarah Hall Boardman Judson (1803–1845) was a remarkable Christian missionary who faithfully served King Jesus in Burma (modern Myanmar) for over twenty years. She married and buried one missionary husband (George Boardman) and then remarried and was buried by another (Adoniram Judson). Her life was a marvelous witness both to the grace of God and to the wisdom of God. Her life testifies that our God knows what he is doing even during the greatest difficulties and trials. Her life is also a beautiful commentary on a thanksgiving psalm of King David, Psalm 138, a psalm with Messianic overtones.²

This psalm has four movements (vv. 1–2, 3, 4–6, 7–8). It will be a journey of joy and sorrow to see the life of Sarah B. Judson reflected in its truth. Sarah's life was one of absolute confidence in a sovereign Savior, a confidence that enabled her to pen this hymn:

Proclaim the lofty praise
Of Him who once was slain,
But now is risen, through endless days,
To live and reign.
He lives and reigns on high,
Who bought us with His blood,
Enthroned above the farthest sky,
Our Savior, God.³

**Thank God for Who He Is
before the Nations**

(PSALM 138:1-2)

David sounds the praise of thanksgiving from the beginning of this psalm, “I will give you thanks with all my heart.” And where will David herald his thanksgiving? He says, “I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings” (v. 1). The meaning of this last phrase is not clear and is also translated as “before the gods” (so *ESV*) or “before judges” or “before kings” (see the translation note in the *CSB*). Allen Ross favors the translation “before the gods” and writes, “Other passages in this part of the Psalter refer to pagan gods as well (Pss. 95:3; 96:4–5; and 115:3–8). The psalmist praises the greatness and glory of Yahweh ‘in the face’—so to speak, of false gods.”⁴ We prefer this understanding. Verse 2 expands the thought of verse 1, explaining just how David will testify and sing his thanksgiving of the Lord before these false gods. He will “bow down toward [God’s] holy temple [or tabernacle]” in Jerusalem. There he will “give thanks to [the Lord’s] name for your constant love [Heb. *hesed*] and truth [Heb. *emet*, *ESV* “faithfulness”].” And why will he bow down and sing of the Lord’s love and truth, his “steadfast love and faithfulness”

(ESV)? Because “you [the LORD] have exalted your name and your promise (ESV, “your word”) above everything else.” Commenting on this verse, Charles Spurgeon writes,

The name of the Lord in nature is not so easily read as in the Scriptures, which are a revelation in human language, specifically adapted to the human mind, treating of human need, and of a Saviour who appeared in human nature to redeem humanity. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but the divine word will not pass away, and in this respect especially it has a pre-eminence over every other form of manifestation. Moreover, the Lord lays all the rest of his name under tribute to his word: his wisdom, power, love, and all his other attributes combine to carry out his word. It is his word which creates, sustains, quickens, enlightens, and comforts. As a word of command it is supreme; and in the person of the incarnate Word it is set above all the works of God’s hand. . . . Let us adore the Lord who has spoken to us by his word, and by his Son; and in the presence of unbelievers let us both praise his holy name and extol his holy word.⁵

If ever there was a follower of the Lord Jesus who praised the name of the Savior and extolled his gospel before the lost and their false gods, it was Sarah B. Judson. Sarah was born on November 4, 1803, in Alstead, New Hampshire. She was the oldest of thirteen children in a family that was extremely poor. At the age of seventeen, she was converted, professed Christ, and was baptized. She felt the call to missions immediately and wished “to follow in the footsteps of her heroine Ann Judson, who visited America in 1823.”⁶ In the book *Missionary Biography. The Memoir of Sarah B. Judson, Member of the American Mission to Burmah*, Emily Judson

(pen name Fanny Forester), the third and last wife of Adoniram Judson, includes an entry from Sarah's journal written less than a month after her baptism. There Sarah writes, "While I have this day had the privilege of worshipping the true God in solemnity, I have been pained by the thoughts of those who have never heard the sound of the gospel. When will the time come that the poor heathen, now bowing to idols, shall own the living and true God? Dear Saviour, haste to spread the knowledge of thy dying love to earth's remotest bounds!"⁷

Her passion for the lost would continue to grow. She became involved in tract distribution and established a prayer meeting. All but one who attended became Christians. However, her heart for the nations would not wane. In a letter to a dear friend she would write,

It is my ardent desire . . . that the glorious work of reformation may extend till *every knee* shall bow to the living God. For this expected, this promised era, let us pray earnestly, unceasingly, and with faith. How can I be so inactive, when I know that thousands are perishing in this land of grace; and millions in other lands are at this very moment kneeling before senseless idols!

And in her journal—

Sinners perishing all round me, and I almost panting to tell the far *heathen* of Christ! Surely this is wrong. I will no longer indulge the vain foolish wish, but endeavor to be useful in the position where Providence has placed me. I can *pray* for deluded idolaters, and for those who labor among them, and this is a privilege indeed.⁸

Sarah, however, could not shake loose her concern for the lost who were far away. Her heart for international missions would find a companion in a man named George Boardman. Moved by a poem he read on the death of a missionary named Colman, who died in Chittagong after only two years on the field, Boardman tracked down its author, who happened to be Sarah Hall. He proposed to her almost immediately, and she accepted. Initially, her friends and family discouraged her in this action, with her parents withholding their consent. Eventually, however, they gave their permission. George and Sarah wed on July 4, 1825. They would leave for Burma the same month, and the voyage would take 127 days. The moving scene of their departure, never to return, is one of the most heart-wrenching in all missionary lore. Sarah's departure is recorded in this way:

We recollect that when she left her paternal home, to reach the ship which was to convey her "over the dark and distant sea," after she had taken her seat in the stage coach with her chosen companion . . . and had bestowed her last farewell upon the family group—as though she felt that she had not obtained that free and full consent to her abandonment of home and country which her filial heart craved, she looked out at the coach window and said, "Father, are you willing? Say, father, that you are willing I should go." "Yes, my child, I am willing." "Now I can go joyfully!" was the emphatic response; and the noble wanderer went on her way with cheerful composure.

Of this scene [Sarah] writes to her husband's parents, "My mother embraced me as tenderly, when she whispered, 'Sarah, I hope I am willing,' as she

did one month before, when she wildly said, ‘Oh! I cannot part with you!’”⁹

Fanny then adds to this sorrowful scene:

And so the fond child’s heart was made glad even in the moment of its agony; for something of the previous reluctance of the sorrow-stricken parents to resign their treasure may be gathered from such pleadings as these [from Sarah].

“Let us, my dear parents, go to Calvary; let us behold for a few moments, the meek, the holy Lamb of God, bleeding for our transgressions. Then let us inquire, ‘Shall I withhold from this Saviour any object, however dear to my heart? Shall I be unwilling to suffer a few short years of toil and privation for his sake?’ Let us call to remembrance those days of darkness through which we passed before Jesus lifted upon us the light of his countenance. We have, I trust, each of us, seen our lost and ruined condition by nature, have seen ourselves exposed to the righteous indignation of our Creator, have felt ourselves sinking into endless despair and ruin, and all this is merited. But oh, amazing love! at that desperate moment the Saviour smiled upon us. He opened his arms of compassion, all polluted as we were with iniquity, he received us, forgave our sins, and bade us hope for joy unutterable beyond the grave. Did we not, then, surrender *all* into his hand? Was not this the language of our hearts,

‘Had I a thousand lives to give,
A thousand lives should all be thine!’

And has not the precious Redeemer as strong claims
upon us now as he had then?"¹⁰

May we, like David and like Sarah, thank God and proclaim his love and faithfulness before the nations and their false gods so that they too may worship and sing praises to our Lord!

**Thank God That He Answers Prayers
as We Witness**

(PSALM 138:3)

Verse 3 naturally flows out of verses 1–2. David praised and thanked God for his constant love and faithfulness because, at an unspecified time when David sought the Lord (“On the day I called”), “you answered me.” Furthermore, the answer included “increased strength within me.” Alec Motyer words this verse as, “You invigorate me with strength in my soul.”¹¹ Within his inner being, the Lord gave David strength, courage, and boldness as he rejoiced in the Lord before pagan gods and their idolatrous followers. This work is certainly something God did for Sarah Boardman Judson.

Unsurprisingly, Sarah would experience many hardships on the mission field. More than once she nearly died from severe sickness. Giving birth to three children with George, only one (George Jr.) would survive infancy. On more than one occasion, her life was put in danger by robbery of her home, riots, and rebellions. Indeed, she was warned by an English general of “lawless men and the wild beasts of the jungle” in Burma.¹² Yet in her journal, Sarah would write,

We trembled when we thought of the disturbances in
Burmah, and there was only one spot where we could

find peace and serenity of mind. That sweet spot was the throne of grace. [There] we would often [go] and lose all anxiety and fear respecting our dear friends, our own future prospects, and the Missionary cause in Burmah. It was sweet to commit all into the hands of God. . . . We considered it our duty to supplicate for grace to support us in the hour of trial, and for direction in time of perplexity.¹³

And, after the robbery in their home while they lay in bed at night, Sarah would recount the kind provision and protection of God in their lives. She writes,

I saw the assassins with their horrid weapons standing by our bedside, ready to do their worst had we been permitted to wake. Oh how merciful was that watchful Providence which prolonged those powerful slumbers of that night, not allowing even the infant at my bosom to open its eyes at so critical a moment. If ever gratitude glowed in my bosom, if ever the world appeared to me worthless as vanity, and if ever I wished to dedicate myself, my husband, my babe, my *all*, to our great Redeemer, it was at that time. . . .

Yes, my beloved friend, I think I can say, that notwithstanding our alarms, never did five months of my life pass as pleasantly as the last five have done. The thought of being among this people whom we have so long desired to see, and the hope that God would enable me to do some little good to the poor heathen, has rejoiced and encouraged my heart. I confess that once or twice my natural timidity has *for a moment* gained ascendancy over my better

feelings. . . . But these fears have been transitory, and we have generally been enabled to place our confidence in the Great Shepherd of Israel who never slumbers or sleeps, assured that he would protect us. . . . And we have also felt a sweet composure in the reflection that God has marked out our way; and if it best accord with his designs that we fall prey to these blood-thirsty monsters, *all will be right*.¹⁴

**Thank God That He Blesses the Humble
but Rejects the Proud**

(PSALM 138:4–6)

Verses 4–6 contain what Allen Ross calls “a prophecy concerning the nations.”¹⁵ I call it a “missionary promise!” All the nations, represented by their kings, “will give you thanks, LORD, when they hear what you promised” (v. 4; see also Ps. 68:29–32; 72:10–11; 102:15–16). This language anticipates and echoes Isaiah 52:15 and the great Suffering Servant song (Isa. 52:13–53:12). When the kings of the earth hear of the great salvation of God on their behalf through his Servant, “they will sing of the LORD’s ways,” joyfully acknowledging that “the LORD’s glory is great” (v. 5). Here salvation (v. 4) and adoration (v. 5) are beautifully woven together.

The glory of the Lord is further made known when you consider that “though [he] is exalted, he takes note of the humble” (v. 6; cf. Phil. 2:9–11). The Lord sees the down and out, the nobodies of this world, and they become the objects of his saving goodness and grace. In contrast, “He knows the haughty from a distance.” God *is* great, and the arrogant only *think* they are great. The humble he knows lovingly and intimately. The arrogant,

the prideful, and the self-righteous, he keeps at arm's length. "A glance from afar," says Spurgeon, "reveals to him their emptiness and offensiveness . . . he has no respect unto them, but utterly abhors them."¹⁶

The Burmese, awash in pagan religions, were proud and self-righteous. It would take a patient, steady stream of gospel truth to break through this barrier. God sent the Judsons and Boardmans to do just that. God brought a notorious Karen criminal and murderer—it is reported he was involved in more than thirty murders—Ko Thah-Byoo, to faith in Jesus. George Boardman would baptize him, and Ko Thah-Byoo would become a famous and successful evangelist among the Karen people. The gospel began to go forth in great power. It appears God had prepared the Karen for the day of their salvation. In their tradition, "they believe in a God who is denominated Yu-wah."¹⁷ Though they recognized that their wickedness had separated them from this God, they believed "God will again have mercy upon us, God will save us again."¹⁸ When will that day come? In one of their traditional songs, we read this verse, "When the Karen King arrives, / Everything will be happy; / When Karens have a king, / Wild beast will lose their savageness."¹⁹ Reflecting upon the grace of God among the Karen, but recognizing there was still much work to be done, Sarah would write to a beloved sister in 1828, "We have to suffer many little inconveniences in this country; but have no disposition to complain. We rejoice in the kind providence that has directed our steps, and would not exchange our condition. Our desire is to labor among the poor heathen until called to our eternal home."²⁰

God would indeed answer this desire of Sarah's heart. Both George and she would die on the mission field never having returned to America. Thank God He blesses humble servants.

**Thank God That He Will Fulfill
His Purpose in Your Life**

(PSALM 138:7–8)

This psalm concludes with a powerful confession of confidence in the providence, protection, and grace of a sovereign God. Five affirmations are made concerning the God who is with us. “If I walk into the thick of danger, [God] will . . . not abandon the work of [his] hands” (vv. 7–8). What does David declare in terms of his confidence in the Lord?

You will preserve my life from the anger of my
enemies.

You will extend your hand [i.e., your power and
strength];

your right hand will save me.

The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me.

LORD, your faithful love endures forever. (vv. 7–8)

These faithful promises apply so appropriately and beautifully in the life of Sarah Boardman Judson. God would spare her life on more than one occasion from serious illness. He would sustain her heart upon the death of her little daughter Sarah on July 8, 1829—she was two years and eight months. And he would preserve her as she watched her husband slowly descend into death from tuberculosis. Of this time, she would write to her mother, “Oh, my dear mother, it would distress you to see how emaciated he is!—and so weak, that he is scare able to move. God is calling to me in a most impressive manner to set my heart on heavenly things. Two lovely infants already in the world of bliss—my beloved husband suffering under a disease which will

most assuredly take him from me—my own health poor, and little Georgie [their son] often ill.”²¹

George Boardman would die on February 11, 1831, at the age of thirty. Of her first husband Sarah said, “He exhibited a tenderness of spirit, a holy sensibility, such as I never witnessed before. He seemed to see the goodness of God in everything. He would weep while conversing on the love of Jesus; and words cannot describe to you the depth of feeling with which he spoke of his own unworthiness.”²²

As he neared death, Sarah reports him saying, “You know, Sarah, that coming on a foreign mission involves the probability of a shorter life than staying in one’s native country. And yet obedience to our Lord, and compassion for the perishing heathen, induced us to make this sacrifice. And have we ever repented that we came? No; I trust we can both say that we bless God for bringing us to Burmah, for directing our footsteps to Tavoy, and even for leading us hither.”²³

After George’s death, Sarah at first considered returning to America with her young son, but her love for the Burmese compelled her to stay.

She wrote,

When I first stood by the grave of my husband, I thought I must go home with George. But these poor, inquiring, and Christian Karens, and the school-boys, and the Burmese Christians, would then be left without any one to instruct them; and the poor, [ignorant] Tavoyans would go on in the road to death, with no one to warn them of their danger. How then, oh, how can I go? We shall not be separated long. A few more years, and we shall all meet in yonder blissful world, whither those we

love have gone before us. I feel thankful that I was allowed to come to this heathen land. Oh, it is a precious privilege to tell idolaters of the Gospel; and when we see them disposed to love the Saviour, we forget all our privations and dangers. My beloved husband wore out his life in this glorious cause; and that remembrance makes me more than ever attached to the work, and the people for whose salvation he laboured till death.²⁴

Three years after her husband's death, Sarah Boardman would marry Adoniram Judson. She had not returned home to America as many friends counseled her to do. However, she would, with a broken heart, eventually send her young son George back to America because of health concerns. He would become the much-respected pastor of FBC Philadelphia (1864–1894) and a well-known opponent of slavery. Sarah would remain in Burma, continuing the work, making evangelistic tours, preaching the gospel to men and women when no qualified man was available, and supervising the numerous schools she helped establish. She would translate *The Pilgrim's Progress* into Burmese. She would translate tracts, including the tract "Life of Christ" that her husband Adoniram wrote, and the New Testament into Peguan. Concerning her preaching to both men and women, a point of controversy in her day and ours, her biographer Fanny Forester puts things in their proper perspective:

But now she sat in the zayat, which had been erected for her husband, at the foot of the mountain, and in others, wherever a little company of worshippers could be collected, and performed even weightier offices than those of Miriam and Anna . . . but meek, and sometimes tearful, speaking in low, gentle