

Going Where the Need Was Greatest: The Story of Elizabeth Wilson

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I can imagine Elizabeth Wilson turning over the calendar page at the end of another year and softly sighing. Perhaps she caught a glimpse of her gray hair in the mirror and wondered if she had been mistaken all these years. Perhaps God never meant for her to be a missionary.

When Elizabeth was a young girl in London, she met Hudson Taylor, a student training to be a medical missionary in China. They worshipped together in the Tottenham meetings, where Elizabeth was infected with Taylor's missionary vision and zeal. She followed his career as he graduated from medical school and left for the orient. She participated enthusiastically in missionary societies supporting Taylor's work and the organization he founded, China Inland Mission. In fact, when she was twenty, she dedicated her own life to missions. More than anything else, Elizabeth wanted to serve God in China.

She couldn't go right away. Her siblings had married and left home, leaving Elizabeth to care for her invalid parents. It was clear that she was greatly needed at home, and she never hinted to them that living there was a sacrifice. But as the years ticked by—five, ten, twenty, thirty—she must have wondered if God had forgotten her. That wasn't the case at all, of course. God would greatly increase Elizabeth's effectiveness as a missionary *through* the delay.

In the meantime Elizabeth never forgot her promise to God, and as soon as her responsibilities at home ended, she acted. Three weeks after her last surviving parent passed away, gray-haired, fifty-year-old Elizabeth contacted the China Inland Mission and offered to become a self-supported missionary. They accepted her application immediately. On March 18, 1876, Elizabeth Wilson landed in Shanghai and finally began her career.

Most of Elizabeth's first year abroad was spent learning the Chinese language and customs. After that, she accompanied Hudson Taylor on a five month tour of the Chekiang mission stations. Taylor's wife describes her as "full of energy and brightness" as they traveled, invigorated to be doing what she had waited so long to do.

No one was prepared for the reception Elizabeth would receive among the women they met on the way. Her gray hair became her greatest asset. Native Christian women walked painful miles on tiny, bound feet to meet the "Elder



Sister," sure that her silver hair meant that Elizabeth was old and wise. She was begged to teach from sun up to sundown in every town they visited.

After the trip, Elizabeth worked with women in the comfortable village of Hankow for three years. But when a need came up in the deep interior of rural China, she was the first to volunteer. Elizabeth's status, both as a woman and as an older person, made it easier for her to travel in China. European men were looked on with suspicion as possible agents of their government, but no one suspected a woman. "Courageous, earnest, devoted, wherever the need was greatest, there this woman would go," said Mrs. Taylor.

The need was great in Han-Chung. Newlywed Emily King was the only missionary woman for hundreds of miles in any direction. She couldn't keep up with the immense workload of teaching women in the area, especially with a baby on the way. Elizabeth and a young woman named Miss Faussett adventurously decided to make the trip inland without a European escort, depending on God alone to get them there safely.

This was no trip for the fainthearted! It was over one thousand miles from Hankow, where Elizabeth was stationed, to Han-Chung. They traveled by land and by boat, leaving in February of 1880 and arriving in May, after three long months of dangerous travel. Emily was placed in a neighboring village to the existing mission station and taught women every day. In the first year, 18 native women were baptized. Elizabeth rushed to George King's side when his young wife died of typhoid the next year, and comforted him again a year later in the loss of his infant son. She always went where she was needed most.

Elizabeth spent eight years in Han-Chung, until illness forced her to return to England in 1888. When she left China, Hudson Taylor wrote, "Whether she will be strong enough to return, as she so much desires, I do not know, but I do know that her life there has been an immense blessing."

Quotes and information in this article came from: *Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission*, Dr. and Mr. Howard Taylor, OMF International, 1918/1966/2005 *The Story of the China Inland Mission*, Geraldine Guinness, Morgan and Scott, London, *China's Millions*, J. Hudson Taylor, Morgan and Scott, London 1886, *Hudson Taylor in Early Years: The Growth of a Soul*, Howard Taylor, Hodder and Stoughton, New York, *The Gospel in All Lands*, Issue 10, Eugene Smith, New York, 1881 and assorted other periodicals

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