

Adoniram Judson: Free Thinker Set Free

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The early 19th century American missionary Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) made a lasting impression on Burma, now Myanmar. His toil as a church planter, Bible translator, and sufferer for Christ is legendary. As a young man, however, he was radically opposed to the Savior he later preached.

Adoniram was intelligent, and he received much encouragement to excel from his pastor father. When he was just 16 he was sent to Rhode Island Christian College in Providence. There he fell under the influence of a “free thinker” named Jacob Eames. Before long he considered the Christianity he had learned as a child out-of-date with the new rationalism he was hearing about. He graduated in 1807.



In Plymouth, he opened a private school. He soon published two books, one on English grammar and the other on arithmetic. Sadly, by age 20 he severed all ties to Christianity, breaking the hearts of his parents. He left home to remove himself from any restraints they might put on him.

His rebellion did not last long. Adoniram arrived at an inn late one night and was told that there was only one room available. The innkeeper warned him that he would likely be awakened in the night by the activity in the adjacent room. There was a young man there who was desperately ill and about to die.

All night long the groans and cries of the young man persisted. Adoniram could not sleep, nor could he keep from thinking. He wondered about what awaited this young man after his death. His thoughts oppressed him throughout the early morning hours. He could not turn them off.

The next morning, when he asked about the man, the innkeeper replied, “He is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, he is gone, poor fellow! The doctor said he would not survive the night.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Yes, he was a young man from Providence College—a very fine man; his name was Jacob Eames.”

Dead? His mentor? Adoniram was shaken deeply, as you may well imagine. It seemed that all his former philosophical views died with his friend. He immediately realized that there was no hope in his rationalism. In a short time he fully embraced Christ and His message which he found to be an unshakable foundation for his life. As a true believer, he soon joined the church where his father was pastor and later became one of the most revered leaders in missionary history.

Skepticism dies hard in some people, but in others it falls away abruptly the moment its emptiness is revealed. Nothing purifies the thinking like death. Even “free thinkers” are not free to avoid such contemplations.

Judson’s devotion to Christ caused imprisonment and chains, the loss of his family, and constant harassment for the sake of the gospel. He faced death and dying unlike his mentor because of his confidence that God’s promise of eternal life was true—a confidence that his former rationalism could never foster.