

Serempore Sorrows: Finding Courage in Catastrophe

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William Carey's associates at the Serampore Mission in India were unsure how the fire started. Perhaps it was a workman's hookah [pipe] or even arson. Regardless, the long building that housed the translation work burned to the ground. At times flames shot 25 feet into the air. Among all the Mission's aims, translating Scripture, and preparing works for future translators were among its most strategic. The loss, therefore, was almost incalculable. The day was March 12, 1812.



This great fire followed other painful days at the mission. There had been five burials since Christmas, including his fellow missionary's infant son.

In the fire Carey lost the labor of years, including all his "Karnese New Testament, two whole large Old Testament books in Sanskrit; many pages of his *Bengali Dictionary*; all his *Telegru Grammar*, and much of his

Punjabi; a year's work of Marshman [his missionary colleague] and himself on the *Ramayana*; and every vestige of his well-advanced *Dictionary of Sanskrit and its Indian Cognates* (the *magnum opus* of his linguistic life). . . . Also lost were 1400 reams of English paper, and much more of their own; 4,400 lbs of English type, and many fonts of English-cast Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Arabic and Tamil; not less than 104 fonts of Nagari, Telugu, Bengali, Burmese, Marathi, Punjabi, Oriya, Tamil, Chinese and Kashmiri (all of these created and cast by them). In addition the fire took all the building, books, printing materials and tools."

One observer wrote:

The scene was indeed affecting—the long printing office reduced to a mere shell, the yard covered with burnt paper, Carey walked with me over the smoking ruins. The tears stood in his eyes. "In one night," he said, "the labors of years are consumed. How unsearchable are the divine ways! I had lately brought some things to the utmost perfection I could, and contemplated the Mission with, perhaps, too much self-congratulation. *The Lord has laid me low, that I may look more simply to Him.*"

That evening, to fight off their sorrows, the missionary team reviewed God's blessings.

In twelve years their one Bengal church of eleven members had become eleven churches, with an average of thrice eleven in each. They had twenty native evangelists. Calcutta's membership had doubled in the

previous year to 110, and its missionary spirit was most active. Owen Leonard, a converted soldier, promised to develop into a most moving Benagali preacher. "The heaven," they said, "was spreading: the little one was becoming a thousand." Three hundred fifty children were being educated in their free Portuguese schools, Jessore was really prospering. Next to Serampore it was the most promising of the stations. Chamberlain was in Agra, John Peter was in Orissa, the Chaters were on their way to Ceylon to plant there its first Protestant mission, Robinson was preparing for Java, Felix was steadfast in Burma, and Carey's youngest son, Jonathan, was newly baptized, and rarely prayed without voicing his desire for missionary service. The fire could not touch these considerable encouragements."

Carey had waited years before God granted their first convert, Krishna Pal. But since that time, the work had grown steadily, as new believers and new helpers joined with the original three.

Carey could only think of one fitting text for Sunday following the great fire—"Be still, and know that I am God." The sermon had two simple points:

1. God's right to dispose of us as He pleases.
2. Man's duty to acquiesce in His will.

What is the benefit of rehearsing this huge tragedy in Carey's life? Perhaps, as you consider your difficulties, thinking of William Carey might bring motivation to continue on. Your faith in the middle of trials might even provide inspiration and support for others.

Paul called God "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:4).

Carey knew this comfort from God. He wrote home expressing what God can do for believer's spirits when the trials might otherwise completely overwhelm us. Quoting Paul, he is realistic, but also confident in God, just as we must be:

Much ground must be laboured over again, and I have suffered most. But we are not discouraged. We are chastened and not killed; cast down, but not destroyed; perplexed, but not in despair.

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Quotes for this article are taken from *William Carey*, by S. Pearce Carey, his grandson. It is the definitive biography of Carey (London, Wakeman Trust, 1923, edited by Peter Masters in 1993).