

# John G. Paton's Father: A Key to His Courage

By John Piper

John G. Paton was a missionary to the New Hebrides, today called Vanuatu, in the South Seas. He was born in Scotland in 1824. I gave my Pastors' Conference message about him because of the courage he showed throughout his 82 years of life. When I dug for the reasons he was so courageous, one reason I found was the deep love he had for his father.



The tribute Paton pays to his godly father is, by itself, worth the price of his autobiography, which is still in print. Maybe it's because I have four sons (and Talitha), but I wept as I read this section. It filled me with such longing to be a father like this.

There was a "closet" where his father would go for prayer as a rule after each meal. The eleven children knew it and they revered the spot and learned something profound about God. The impact on John Paton was immense.

"Though everything else in religion were by some unthinkable catastrophe to be swept out of memory, were blotted from my understanding, my soul would wander back to those early scenes, and shut itself up once again in that Sanctuary Closet, and, hearing still the echoes of those cries to God, would hurl back all doubt with the victorious appeal, 'He walked with God, why may not I?'" (Autobiography, p. 8)

"How much my father's prayers at this time impressed me I can never explain, nor could any stranger understand. When, on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in Family Worship, he poured out his whole soul with tears for the conversion of the Heathen world to the service of Jesus, and for every personal and domestic need, we all felt as if in the presence of the living Savior, and learned to know and love him as our Divine friend." (Autobiography, p. 21)

One scene best captures the depth of love between John and his father, and the power of the impact on John's life of uncompromising courage and purity. The time came for the young Paton to leave home and go to Glasgow to attend divinity school and become a city missionary in his early twenties. From

his hometown of Torthorwald to the train station at Kilmarnock was a 40-mile walk. Forty years later, Paton wrote,

"My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. His counsels and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are fresh in my heart as if it had been but yesterday; and tears are on my cheeks as freely now as then, whenever memory steals me away to the scene. For the last half mile or so we walked on together in almost unbroken silence — my father, as was often his custom, carrying hat in hand, while his long flowing yellow hair (then yellow, but in later years white as snow) streamed like a girl's down his shoulders. His lips kept moving in silent prayers for me; and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was vain! We halted on reaching the appointed parting place; he grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence, and then solemnly and affectionately said: 'God bless you, my son! Your father's God prosper you, and keep you from all evil!'"

"Unable to say more, his lips kept moving in silent prayer; in tears we embraced, and parted. I ran off as fast as I could; and, when about to turn a corner in the road where he would lose sight of me, I looked back and saw him still standing with head uncovered where I had left him — gazing after me. Waving my hat in adieu, I rounded the corner and out of sight in an instant. But my heart was too full and sore to carry me further, so I darted into the side of the road and wept for time. Then, rising up cautiously, I climbed the dike to see if he yet stood where I had left him; and just at that moment I caught a glimpse of him climbing the dike and looking out for me! He did not see me, and after he gazed eagerly in my direction for a while he got down, set his face toward home, and began to return — his head still uncovered, and his heart, I felt sure, still rising in prayers for me. I watched through blinding tears, till his form faded from my gaze; and then, hastening on my way, vowed deeply and oft, by the help of God, to live and act so as never to grieve or dishonor such a father and mother as he had given me." (pp. 25-26)

The impact of his father's faith and prayer and love and discipline was immeasurable. O fathers, read and be filled with longing.

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