

God's Wisdom in the Martyrdom of Even Young, Eager, Flourishing Believers

By Steve Burchett



If you read a biography about John and Betty Stam, you will be impressed with their enthusiasm for Christ before they were ever on the mission field (serving with China Inland Mission [CIM]). They met at a CIM prayer meeting while students at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and eventually really liked each other. However, Betty graduated a year earlier than John and began making progress toward serving with CIM. She was soon far away from Chicago. John

wanted to write to her, but he knew it wouldn't be helpful if marriage was not God's will. John said, "And now, while Betty and I are looking forward to the same field, I cannot move one step in her direction until I am sure that it is the Lord's directive will. I don't want to wreck her life and mine, too."

They did get married in China on October 25, 1933, both in their mid-twenties. After their honeymoon, they immediately went back to tirelessly participating in the advance of God's kingdom in China. What a purposeful, Christ-exalting marriage and ministry they had ahead of them! They were not even 30 yet, so they certainly had four or five more decades of service to go, right? God would certainly prefer to protect them and use them for that long, right? They would one day be standing in a church in New Jersey (John's home state) as an older couple, sharing what God had done through them, inspiring missions participation, right?

God had a different plan. He first blessed them with a baby girl named Helen Priscilla, born on September 11, 1934 (follow these dates carefully). And then, after checking with local authorities and getting permission from CIM officials, John and Betty moved to Tsingteh on November 22, 1934. But then on December 6, Communist troops moved in from the south and overtook the Stam's new city and house, and then abducted John, Betty, and baby Helen.

The next morning, December 7, the Stams and other prisoners were taken twelve miles to another city (Miaosheo). They were left under the watch of a local postmaster at a post office while the soldiers ransacked the area. The postal worker asked, "Where are they taking you? Where are you going?" John replied, "We do not know where they are going, but we are going to heaven." That happened perhaps sooner than John could have known.

That evening they were led to an abandoned home. The next morning, the soldiers marched John and Betty out into the streets with their hands tied behind their backs, calling them "foreign devils" for all to hear. Baby Helen was left behind at the house, completely alone. They came to the end of the town's Main Street to a place called Eagle Hill. Vance Christie describes what happened next:

Presently John was ordered to kneel. He did so on one knee and spoke a few words to his captors. The local residents were not standing near enough to hear what he said. Suddenly and savagely one of the soldiers stepped forward and slashed his throat with a large knife. The missionary's lifeless body crumpled forward to the ground.

The witnessing crowd saw Betty shudder then drop to her knees. A moment later a large sword flashed through the air and struck through the back of her neck, killing her instantly.

It was December 8, 1934. John and Betty were not even 30. Baby Helen, soon rescued, was just shy of three months old. Eventually this was a global story. The Stam's parents responded in a God-honoring way. For example, John's father wrote in a letter to friends and family, "They loved him, they served him, and now they are with him. What could be more glorious?"

Why would God do this? When asking a question like that, we first must acknowledge that God is always wise and good, he is omnipotent, and though he is sovereign over all things, he is never morally culpable for evil. So we know God was right there with John and Betty on Eagle Hill. He could have kept them from death. He remained faithful, even in their deaths. For John and Betty, to die was gain (Philippians 1:21).

Still, how was God's wisdom displayed in the deaths of John and Betty Stam — this young, eager, flourishing, gifted couple with half a century of ministry left in them? One answer was given by Betty's mother who, when writing to friends of their deaths, said, "[T]he Lord must have been satisfied that their work here was completed, and that their willingness to die for him will bring in a larger harvest of souls than as if they had lived many years longer" (compare Stephen's death in his prime, Acts 7:54-8:8). Similarly, John's father wrote, "How glad we shall be if through this dreadful experience many souls shall be won for the Lord Jesus!"

John's father also said this, "How glad we shall be if many dear Christian young people shall be inspired to give themselves to the Lord as never before, for a life of sacrifice and service!" That is exactly what happened at Moody at the end of a memorial service for John and Betty as 700 students stood to commit to giving their lives to the Lord on the mission field. 200 students did similarly at Wheaton College. God knows what he's doing. Perhaps even now the wisdom of God in the martyrdom of John and Betty Stam is revealing itself in your life as you are reading this and you are moved by their story to give your life "to the Lord as never before, for a life of sacrifice and service!"

¹ I recommend either *John and Betty Stam: Missionary Martyrs* by Vance Christie (one by Barbour Publishing, 2000, or the exact content is found in his book with the same title published by Christian Focus, 2008) or *By Life or By Death*, Andrew Montonera, Moody Publishers, 2024. Information and quotes in this article are from Christie.