

Mary Slessor – Missionary to Calabar

Mary Slessor was a study in contrasts: shy, afraid to speak in public and lacking a formal education; yet a fearless evangelist at home and abroad. She was born on Dec. 2, 1848, the second of seven children, in Gilcomston, a suburb of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Mary gave her heart to the Lord at a young age after hearing a fire-and-brimstone message preached by an older lady in her neighborhood. Because she had started working at the age of 11, she had only a rudimentary education. However, her hunger for God's Word and her mother's loving encouragement prompted her to snatch moments to read her Bible.

Mary's father was an alcoholic. His addiction caused the family to fall on extremely hard times and eventually led to his death. This, plus the premature death of her oldest brother, made Mary the family's main provider.

Painfully self-conscious and ashamed that she was the daughter of a drunkard, Mary was afraid of public attention, yet early in her life, her missionary zeal became apparent. She joyfully taught a girl's Bible class at her Presbyterian church every Saturday morning and eventually started a Bible class for wayward boys in a town not far from her home.

In May 1875, Mary petitioned the United Presbyterian Church to work in their mission in Calabar (an area now part of both Nigeria and Cameroon)—and at the age of 27, in August 1876, she set sail. In Calabar, Mary taught the tribal children at the missionary outpost. She became fluent in Efik, the local language, and went to homes and marketplaces, inviting the people to church services and school.

Due to her commitment and zeal, Mary was given her own mission in Old Town, an outpost further into Calabar. The people there soon succumbed to Mary's incessant, loving service and banished the 'god' of their town. Her mission home became a school, mediation center and refuge.

When word spread of her acceptance by the people, the Scottish Presbytery asked Mary to serve as a tribal judge. She presided over several tribal districts, always basing her decisions on God's Word.

In 1914, in honor of her missionary work, Mary received the Silver Cross. The following year, on Jan. 13, 1915, her life—and 39-year missionary adventure—ended.

Some considered Mary just a plain, timid working girl. But the Spirit of God within her empowered her to convert a pagan people in spite of frail health and the language and cultural barriers she faced.

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