

Gladys Aylward: Ministry in China

Born 24 February 1902

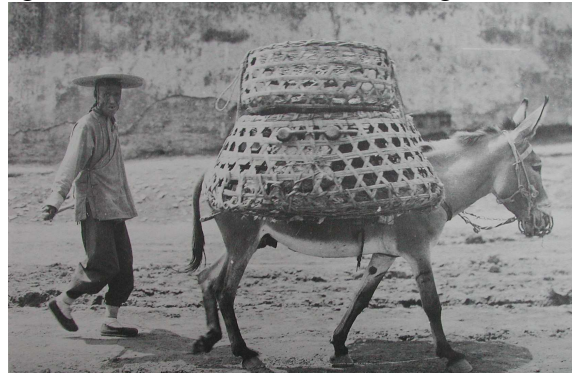
Missionary to China

Died 1 January 1970



Gladys Aylward arrived at the coast of China in December of 1932. She was to work with Mrs. Jeannie Lawson, a missionary who had spent most of her life in China with her husband, then as a widow, in the city of Yangcheng. Mrs. Lawson sent a man to accompany her on the ten-day trip by train, bus, and mule litter across three mountain ranges and numerous rivers. When Gladys arrived at her new home, Mrs. Lawson provided her with the quilted trousers and jackets of the country women, saying that “We want to be as Chinese as possible—and their clothes are much more sensible than ours, anyway!”

Jeannie Lawson had purchased a dilapidated roadside inn, and her dream was that the Inn of the Eight Happinesses would become an overnight stopping place for muleteers. Each evening when the men had been fed and were resting, she would tell them stories from the Bible. In rural China the people were still suspicious of outsiders, so it was difficult to persuade them to come to the Inn. Gladys’ first missionary assignment was to stand outside the gate calling out the Chinese words the cook had taught her. “We have no bugs. We have no fleas. Good, good, good! Come, come, come!” If the drivers still wouldn’t turn in through the gate, then Gladys would grab the bridle of the lead mule, forcing them to turn. Wherever the lead mule went the rest would follow, and as it would be too difficult to get the train going again, there they would stay for the night.



Since Jeannie Lawson and the cook could speak Chinese, they were the ones who sat by the fire to tell the muleteers stories from the scriptures. This left Gladys out with the mules to feed them and scrape off the day’s mud. This provided good incentive for her to learn Chinese. When she was not caring for the mules she spent time in the village listening and trying to speak. She wrote, “The language is very difficult, but I am a good mimic and so am picking up little bits without study.”

By the end of a year Gladys could make herself understood in Chinese, and she had several stories she could tell. This from a woman who had been told she likely could never learn the language. Gladys perhaps could have scoffed at the mission board who had rejected her, but many years later she wrote,

Looking back I cannot blame them. I know, if no one else does, how stupid I must have seemed then. The fact that I learned not only to speak, but also to read and write the Chinese language like a native in later years, is to me one of God's great miracles.

Only a year after Gladys arrived, Mrs. Lawson died. Gladys continued at the inn, held services regularly, visited houses and gave what medical aid she could. As her Chinese improved she began to speak in the marketplaces with a Chinese evangelist.

Gladys began sensing that God wanted her to spread the gospel to places outside Yangcheng, but she couldn't see how it could be accomplished. It was dangerous to travel alone in the mountains, and she wouldn't be able to go far on foot. She couldn't afford any other transportation.



God opened China more widely to Gladys through the command of the mandarin, the local representative of the national government. He had told her to find someone to be a foot inspector to enforce the law banning foot-binding, a centuries-old tradition that crippled young girls in the name of "beauty" and prestige. When he couldn't find anyone, he appointed her to the post. The mandarin would provide a mule for transportation and two soldiers to accompany her.

The mandarin's appointment gave her the authority to enter every home in every village in the province. Not only would she inspect feet, but she told the mandarin she would use this opportunity to preach the good news of Jesus. He replied, "From the standpoint of this decree, your teaching is good, because if a woman becomes a Christian she no longer binds her feet." Gladys was very effective in her post, and over time the practice of foot-binding ceased and in each village small groups of new believers gathered.

The small parlor maid from London and the learned and refined mandarin had an interesting relationship, one filled with mutual respect and challenges. The mandarin even asked her to deal with a prison riot because the head of the prison and the soldiers were afraid. Gladys was able to calm the prisoners down, and she promised she would help to bring about reform so they would have work and more food. In the quiet following the riot one of the men called to her, "Thank you, Ai-weh-deh!", and this name, meaning The Virtuous One, became hers. She even took this as her official name when she became a naturalized Chinese subject in 1936, four years after she arrived in China.

One day Gladys confronted the mandarin about a child-seller she had encountered on the road. He said it was better to leave them alone because if confronted they would only do worse things. He told Gladys, "About the child-dealer the law says that Ai-weh-deh, the Virtuous One, is to put her head in the air and pass on the other side of the road. And you

will not repeat my words to anyone!” By protocol the mandarin should have had the last word. But Gladys turned in the doorway “I have to inform you, Mandarin, that I did not come to China only to observe your laws. I came for the love of Jesus Christ, and I shall act on the principles of His teaching, no matter what you say.” Gladys went back to the child seller and gave her five Chinese coins for the little girl, and this began an era where Gladys took more and more children into her home and heart.



Gladys’ stand on the child-seller issue had a significant effect on the mandarin, and months later he told her it was the beginning of his true regard for her. In the Spring of 1939, seven years after Gladys first arrived in Yangcheng, she was seated at a feast in the place of honor at the mandarin’s right hand. She had been to many feasts, but never as the guest of honor. All the important people of the town were there as well, and the mandarin offered several minutes of praise for Gladys, speaking about Ai-weh-deh’s work among them, of her care for the sick and the prisoners, and of her Christian faith. He then announced that he wanted to embrace her faith and become a Christian. From the mandarin on down, all levels of society had been touched by Jesus through Gladys Aylward.



After the Japanese invaded China in 1938, Gladys spent nearly two years going from village to village and into the mountain caves to avoid capture. During this time she wrote a letter to her mother revealing her love for the Chinese:

Life is pitiful, death so familiar, suffering and pain so common, yet I would not be anywhere else. Do not wish me out of this or in any way seek to get me out, for I will not be got out while this trial is on. These are my people, God has given them to me, and I will live or die with them for him and his glory.

In 1940 she was back at the damaged Inn of the Eight Happinesses when 100 children from a mission orphanage arrived. She knew the Japanese would soon come back to Yangcheng, so she led the children on a sixteen day journey to refuge in Fufeng. During the trip she became sick with typhus; it took her many weeks to recuperate. When she did recover she moved to Lanchow and then to Chengdu, teaching new Christians and serving the Chinese church.

In 1949 Gladys returned to England and remained there for several years, however she yearned for China. Since the Communists were in control she could not go to mainland China, she moved as close as she could by living in Taiwan. There God led her into a ministry with orphans, and there she died New Year’s Day 1970 at the age of 68.

You may be familiar with the movie *Inn of the Sixth Happiness* starring Ingrid Bergman as Gladys Aylward. Gladys was very displeased with the movie, citing numerous

inaccuracies, and she felt some aspects of the film made a black mark on her character. At the time the film was produced Ingrid Bergman's behavior was anything but Christian, and Gladys wrote Ingrid to express her displeasure. According to information recorded several years ago on Elizabeth Elliot's radio program, Gladys' life had an impact on Ingrid Bergman and she visited Gladys' home and gravesite in Taiwan. Following that visit it is reported that Ms. Bergman publicly declared her faith in Jesus.



References:

Faithful Women & Their Extraordinary God, by Noel Piper, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2005.

The Little Woman, by Gladys Aylward and Christine Hunter, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1999.

To hear a teaching and testimony by Gladys Aylward, go to <http://www.sermonindex.net/>