

John Paton of New Hebrides (Vanuatu)



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John Paton was from Glasgow, Scotland, where for ten years he helped the poor, by providing food and clothes, preaching the Gospel and running Sunday schools for the children. But for several months he had been challenged by news of the death of John Williams, a missionary in the Pacific Islands.

“Who will go to these people, to tell them of the love of Jesus, God’s Son?”

Many times he had heard the appeal from his church.

“Somebody should go,” he thought. One day God spoke to him clearly, “Don’t expect someone else to go if you’re not willing to go yourself. Are you willing?”

John prayed about it. “I’ve completed three years of a medical course. I’ve done Bible training and I have ten years’ experience helping the poor.”

John knew that God wanted him to go. He knew that the young people in his Bible classes would miss him, but he knew God would raise up another leader to serve in the mission to help the poor in Glasgow.

He set out for the New Hebrides, (now Vanuatu) in 1858, at the age of thirty-three. He had just been married, and his new bride, Mary, knew that God was also calling her to be a missionary.

They sailed to Australia, and stayed for a short time, then received a message, “There is an American ship sailing for the South East Asian region. The captain is willing to take you to the New Hebrides on his way and land you at the island of Aneityum, the southern-most island of the group.”

John and Mary were excited.

“What is there on Aneityum?” they asked their friends.

“As you know, Tanna and Erromanga are islands a little further north in the New Hebrides group. It’s nearly twenty years since the missionaries John Williams and his friend Harris were killed when they tried to land on Erromanga. John Williams had left three Samoan teachers on Tanna just the day before they died, but they became ill from the fever and two of them died. Since then there have been seven different attempts by the London Missionary Society to place missionaries on Tanna, but all have failed because of the hostility of the people and the constant sickness and fever. However, about ten years ago a couple from Nova Scotia, Rev and Mrs. John Geddie, settled on Aneityum. They have had a hard time, but with the help of Rev and Mrs. Inglis, who joined them four years later, they have a group of people around them now who are growing in their Christian life. You will go first to Aneityum to meet Mr Geddie and receive your directions from him.”

After a journey north along the eastern Australian coast they were eventually landed on the shore at Aneityum. John Geddie welcomed them warmly. "It's so good to have you people here with us. The task is so huge and we are so few."

Mr. Geddie explained to them, "Tanna is a most difficult island, and as you know there have been a number of failed attempts to set up a mission station there. I want you to go to Port Resolution, on the eastern coast. There are high mountains in the centre of the island. I'll send a group of my young men from here to work with you. They can help you build your houses. They will be able to learn the local language more quickly than you can, and they can begin to teach the Christian message in the people's own language, until you are able to master it yourselves.

The next morning they set out from Aneityum on the mission boat, called *John Knox*, and landed on the beach at Port Resolution some hours later. On arrival they heard a screaming group of warriors being chased by another group. One of their team, who understood a little of the local language spoke with a village man, "Why all this chasing and yelling and carrying of spears and clubs?" he asked.

"We always have war here," was the reply. "The people who live in the mountain always fight with us people who live by the coast. We fight all the time."

This was soon evident. There would be the yelling of warriors coming out of the bush, then close behind them their enemy, brandishing clubs, spears and muskets. A trader who lived around the north side of the bay had supplied the guns and ammunition.

The mission team looked around for a site suitable to build their houses on. They chose a position close to the beach. "We should get all the breezes from the sea here; it would be cooler than up the hill away from the water. And it will be easier for loading and unloading boats."

With the help of the team members from Aneityum, they gained the permission of the village chiefs to build on this site, paid them with knives and axes, and proceeded with the building.

At first the new-comers were a novelty and the villagers stood at a distance watching proceedings, but after a time they became tired of observing the strangers and turned back to their old sport of fighting. One day the sounds of war were uncomfortably close in the nearby bush. The discharge of muskets, the horrible yelling of armed men rushing about, feathers in their twisted hair, faces painted red, black, white or yellow; excitement and terror were on every face. The mission team left their building work and retired to the village house they had been loaned. There they prayed earnestly to God for the people to whom they were sent. As the afternoon wore on the noises of war gradually faded and towards evening they all went back to their villages.

Next morning one of the team members from Aneityum went to the nearby spring for water to make tea for the mission team. He returned without the water. "They told me that they killed six men from the mountains yesterday. Last night they had a cannibal feast near the spring and they've spoiled the water. I couldn't get clean water for your tea."

The village people began to make life more difficult for John and Mary Paton. One day a village head man came to see John. "You didn't give us enough knives and axes for our land that you took. You only gave us half. You must pay the rest or we'll kill you all. You must not do any more building until it is all paid." Although John knew he had paid what they first asked, he knew they would be killed unless they paid again. This kept the chiefs happy for a while.

The Paton's house down beside the beach was finished and they moved in, happy to have a place for themselves. But soon disaster struck. They both contracted fever and realised that their choice of building site was a mistake, for it was not only near the beach, but also beside a mosquito-breeding swamp. At night-fall the mosquitoes descended in their thousands, causing malaria.

Only four months after they landed on Tanna, Mary gave birth to a baby boy. She had had a bout of fever three days before the birth, but seemed to recover and both mother and baby were well. John and Mary were so happy to have a son. But after three days after the birth, Mary was again affected with fever and for the next fortnight she fought a losing battle against the disease, and after two weeks she died. John was devastated. Weakened from fever himself, depressed from the sudden loss of his loved one, left with a new baby to care for alone, he found enough strength from God to dig a grave beside the house. To add sorrow to sorrow, a week later the precious baby also died of fever, and he was laid to rest beside his mother.

There were a few weeks of dry weather, causing the village food crops to suffer. Two village chiefs visited John. "It's your fault that our food gardens are dying," they said accusingly. "You and your God are not welcome here, our gods don't like your God. If there is no rain very soon our people have orders to kill you. If the coastal people don't kill you then the mountain people will."

The Mission team prayed, and the following morning, Sunday, heavy rain began to fall. The village people met and agreed that it must have been the missionaries' God who sent the rain, so they would allow them to stay. It lasted for many days; hurricane winds blew, damaging trees and food gardens, causing the people to say, "It's because you are still here that this rain keeps on falling and our fruit trees are spoiled." However, they were still allowed to remain on Tanna.

John Paton, supported by his helpers from Aneityum, struggled on. Sometimes the task seemed impossible. Constantly they were confronted with cannibalism, worship of idols, strangling of widows, and belief in the power of witch-doctors. There were few, if any, signs that the people were receiving the Christian message. However, John would look at the helpers from Aneityum who had been the same as the people of Tanna not many years before, and think, "If God could change their hearts and lives then He can, and will, change the people of Tanna." This was the hope he clung to, which kept him on Tanna in spite of friends and captains of passing ships, who tried to persuade him to leave.

One small, encouraging sign came when a small group of village men began visiting John after dark. They would check that all doors and windows of his house were shut so they could not be seen by anyone, then they would start asking all kinds of questions. One of this group, a chief, said to John one day, "I would like to be a Christian man but I'm afraid the others would laugh at me."

The wife of one of these men died, and the husband decided that he wanted a Christian funeral, that he had seen when Mary Paton died. Another chief called Nowar, also friendly towards John Paton, offered to conduct the funeral service. This would be the first such burial on Tanna. Nowar, though not yet a Christian believer, prayed a prayer to the Jehovah God he did not yet know, in the presence of all the people, many of whom were against the gospel.

One time John was struck down with another serious bout of fever, so severe he believed he was dying. He attempted to crawl up the hill to catch the refreshing breezes, but half-way up he fainted and could go no further. A faithful old helper named Abraham came to his rescue and with the help of his wife, Nafatu, carried him to a shaded spot on the hill-side. There they laid him, under a coconut-leaf shade, gave him coconut milk to drink, yams and taro to eat, and kept him living. He was semi-conscious for some time, but gradually regained strength. Abraham and Nafatu stayed with him faithfully for the remainder of his time on Tanna, helping him build the house on the hill and serving him in whatever way they could.

Around the other side of the harbour lived a trader, Captain Winchester. The white traders were not Christians and tried to take advantage of the people of Tanna. Captain Winchester presented the chiefs with guns and ammunition to encourage them to fight. In return they brought him pigs and chickens which he sold. The Christian gospel did not please him because it encouraged people not to fight. John visited him one day. "If you would stop supplying these people with guns and ammunition they wouldn't do so much killing of each other. You're only doing them harm."

But the trader took no notice of John and supplied even more arms and ammunition to the rival tribes who continued to fight and kill each other.

The younger brother of the war-chief, Miaki, came to John and said, "I don't want this fighting. It's not good to kill men. I want to leave the fighting and live with you."

But Miaki came and forced his brother, Rarip, to join the fight. He was placed among the warriors, right next to Miaki, where he was hit by a bullet from a musket and mortally wounded. John hurried to the village as soon as he heard of Rarip's death. He was given a Christian burial amidst much loud weeping and wailing.

But the wars dragged on until finally Miaki went to the trader. "You led us into this war. You deceived us and we began it. Rarip is dead, and so are many others. Your life will go for this." The trader pleaded for mercy. He asked John if one of the teachers could come and live with him to protect him. He begged to be allowed to stay at the mission house with John, but John Paton would not allow it. The trader ended his days on Tanna sleeping out in the harbour on his boat until a trading vessel came by and took him off the island, much to the relief of everyone on Tanna.

One day John took a long journey to help another missionary couple on the other side of the island. They were running out of supplies and were in poor health. So John decided he should go by a large canoe, with Nowar and some others who were friendly to him.

A large pot was filled with flour and packed well down with a lid tied firmly on top of it. The pot was then fastened firmly in the centre of the canoe. Paton was placed directly in front of a strong swimmer in case the canoe rolled over, for John could not swim.

The hazardous journey began, the men paddling the canoe as close to the shore as was possible, until they reached a point only a couple of miles from the mission station. But here the waves were breaking over the reef quite dangerously and the crew said, "We can go no further. We have to wait for a smaller wave and ride in to shore over the reef."

For a time they waited, watching each wave as it came towards them. Then suddenly their captain cried, "John, hold on. There's a smaller wave coming, we'll ride in on that."

The wave came rolling on; each man paddled with all his strength and the canoe was flying like a sea-gull on the crest of the wave towards the shore. Then the wave broke on the reef and the canoe emptied out its crew into the water. They struggled ashore and retrieved their pots of flour.

The missionary friends, the Mathiesons, were very pleased to see John Paton arrive, and to accept the flour. After they had prayed together and encouraged each other, John decided to walk back home to the other side of the island. His

guide left him once the sun set, too afraid to walk through the bush in the dark. John was told he would be killed if he went on alone, for there were very hostile tribes in villages he would have to pass on the way back. Walking alone through the bush in the dark placed him at great risk, but waiting till daylight made it more likely he would be caught by hostile villagers.

He set out, following the shore line as far as he could, but when he heard voices he took to the protection of the bush until the people had safely passed, then groped his way back to the shore line, which was his only way of finding a path. Halfway on his journey he came to a perpendicular rock face which he succeeded in climbing, holding on precariously to roots and bushes until he safely reached the top. Trying to stay near the shore, but at the same time needing to avoid hostile villages when he happened to get too close to them, he missed the path he was looking for and found himself on the edge of a great rocky outcrop. He had to crawl along the edge of this huge rock, a sheer drop to the sea on one side, the bush on the other. He wrote later, "I could never have done this even in daylight, but I felt I was supported and guided in that entire life or death journey by my dear Lord Jesus."

Eventually he came to a land-mark he recognised, another huge rock which he knew was sheer down to the sea on one side, so groping around in the dark he found what he thought was the right side. He threw stones down to try and gauge the height of the rock above the sea, but he heard nothing. He threw down his umbrella, but it told him nothing. He knew it was unsafe to stay there till daylight; he must take action now. Trusting in God's protection he fastened all his clothes around him as securely as possible, he lay down on the rock on his back, feet first and head held forward. He let himself down as far as possible, hanging on to a branch of a nearby bush, and then let go, throwing his arms forward and keeping his feet well up. For what seemed an age he was flying through the air, then his feet struck the water. It was low tide so he was able to wade ashore and quickly found the pathway around the beach that brought him to a village quite near his house. Here he promised some young men fish-hooks if they would guide him the nearest way home.

He was soon home and more than ready for a long refreshing sleep after this hazardous journey of fifteen or twenty miles on foot, in the dark and through hostile territory. When the village people heard next day about his remarkable journey they exclaimed, "How is it that you were not killed! Your Jehovah God alone protects you and brings you safely home."

John Paton's silent response was, "Yes, and He'll be your helper and protector too if only you'll obey and trust Him."

John Paton's life was constantly under threat, more than ever before. Once, at daybreak, he heard noises outside. He found that his house was surrounded. One of the chiefs told him they had come to kill him. Seeing he was at their

mercy he knelt down and surrendered himself to God, for what seemed to him then the last time. The warriors were so surprised by this act of devotion they didn't know what to do, and they did not touch him.

"Why do you want to kill me?" he asked them. "What harm have I done to you? I've only ever done good things for you."

Some of the chiefs who attended the church services regularly responded by saying, "Our conduct has been bad, but now we will fight for you and kill all those who hate you."

"Please don't kill anyone on my behalf," he pleaded, "God wants you to live in peace, not war." The men finally left the house and once again Paton's life was saved.

On another occasion the missionary heard loud noises outside in the nearby bush. On going out to investigate he suddenly found himself surrounded by warriors, spears at the ready to kill him. Immediately he raised his hands to heaven and began to pray for these men that God would save them. The men grew so ashamed that one by one they slunk away into the bush, leaving John unharmed. Like St. Paul he was in dangers often, threatened constantly by the people of Tanna.

Another source of trouble came from the traders who tried to bribe the chiefs of Tanna to kill John. The traders did not like John because he tried to stop illegal sandalwood trading. One day four vessels entered the harbour and cast anchor. The captains strode up to John Paton's house and said, "We know how to get rid of the people of Tanna!"

"Surely you don't intend to attack and destroy these poor people!" exclaimed John.

"Sure," he laughed back, "We've sent the measles into their midst. It kills them by the dozen."

John learned that they had taken a boy from a nearby village and thrown him into the hold of a ship with a group of others who were all suffering from the measles.

"We'll put them ashore on other islands and soon the epidemic will spread all through the islands." laughed their leader.

Sure enough hundreds of villagers were affected by the disease. Because it was new to them they had no idea how to deal with it. When their bodies grew hot with fever they ran down to the sea to cool off in the water. This brought on pneumonia and death.

Thirteen members of the missionary team died, leaving so few that when the mission boat, John Knox, visited the island they all packed up and went back to Aneityum, leaving John Paton with his faithful friend Abraham and his little dog.

Of the six mission posts he had established around the island only one now remained, the one where John lived and worked. Determined to get rid of the last trace of this worship of Jehovah God, Miaki called a meeting of all the village people and did not rest until they had resolved to kill the missionary. One of the chiefs addressed John:

“Our fathers loved and worshipped the devil, the evil spirit, and we are determined to do the same. We have killed or sent away all the others who came to tell us about Jehovah, and we are determined to kill you, too. You are changing our customs and destroying our worship and we hate Jehovah worship.”

Other chiefs spoke in a similar way, then John Paton spoke with them kindly, and no harm was done to him that day. However, the threats to his life were becoming daily more persistent, until the day came when Miaki and his warriors broke down the locked doors and invaded his house. John narrowly missed being killed with a tomahawk. Then, to the amazement of all, he appeared on the verandah of his house with a pistol in his hand. It had been a gift he had never used and even now it wasn't loaded, but the sight of it had the desired effect. The warriors cried, “He'll kill us all!” And they fled into the bush.

When the excitement had abated Miaki came to see John, and said, “I'm very sorry for what happened to you and your house. It won't happen again, I promise.”

But Nowar, a friendly chief, warned John, “Don't believe Miaki, he's telling lies. The warriors are planning to attack again tomorrow.”

Nowar sent a canoe for John to escape from the danger, but he refused to leave his place.

Next morning John looked out his window to see great numbers of warriors emerging from the bush and decided finally that he must leave to save his life. Quickly he grabbed his Bible, his scripture translations in the local language, and a blanket and ran to Nowar's village. Even there he wasn't safe so another friendly chief from a mountain village came to his rescue and offered to escort him over the mountains to the mission post held by his friends, the Mathiesons. They were followed by hostile warriors on their way and their lives were miraculously preserved several times. At last they reached the Mathieson's place.

“Thank God you are alive!” cried Mr. Mathieson when they saw him. “We heard that your place has all been burned down and we feared you were dead.”

They praised the Lord together and prayed for His protection as they continued to face the threat of ever-present warriors. That night they lay down, exhausted from all the fearful excitement, but trying to keep watch in case of another invasion of the Mathieson's house. But they fell asleep.

During the night a flickering light in the room woke his faithful dog, which had stayed with him through all the turmoil. John was instantly alert at the sound of its alarmed barking. A quick glance out the window told John that the reed fence surrounding the house had been set on fire. In a few minutes the house would also be ablaze.

Taking his harmless revolver in his left hand and a tomahawk in his right, John pleaded with Mr. Mathieson to let him out of the house and lock the door behind him.

"No, I can't do that," objected Mathieson, "Stay in the house and let us all die together!"

But John persisted, so Mathieson let him out of the door, locking it from the inside once again. Immediately he attacked the blazing fence, chopping it into pieces which he threw back into a pile where they burned without allowing the fire to spread to the house. As he was completing this task he realised there were seven or eight warriors surrounding him, with clubs ready to attack.

"Kill him! Kill him!" some of them cried. But their hands were restrained, and not one of them could strike the fatal blow. God was still in control. At that point an amazing thing happened. There came a rushing, roaring sound which they all recognised immediately as an approaching tornado, bringing powerful winds and rain. The wind blew the flames from the burning fence away from the house and poured down a deluge of rain that completely extinguished the fire, though not before it had destroyed the church.

The warriors fled from the scene, seeking refuge from the tornado, but overawed at the sudden turn of events. "This is Jehovah's wind and rain," they said to one another. Truly their Jehovah God is fighting for them and helping them. Let's get away from here."

John Paton returned to the door of the house, "Let me in!" he called, "I'm all alone. It's safe." Together they praised the Lord for once again preserving their lives."

Next morning a group of friendly villagers came weeping around the missionaries. "They say that today they are going to kill you all, plunder your house, then set fire to it. You can hear them coming now." Sure enough the shouting of the warriors could be heard approaching their house. But then, above the sound of warriors came another, welcome sound. "Sail O!"

Were they imagining this or was it real? But the cry was repeated, "Sail O! Sail O!"

The shouting of approaching warriors suddenly faded; the people seemed to have melted away. Was this just a trick to get them out of the house? John Paton cautiously peered out the door, and saw it was no trick, there was a ship sailing in to the harbour. The missionaries on Aneityum, having heard of the troubles on Tanna had sent Captain Hastings on his ship, the *Blue Bell*, with twenty armed men to rescue the missionaries, if they were still alive. The Mathieson's belongings were packed and loaded on the *Blue Bell* with the help of the helpers from Aneityum and the next day they arrived safely at Aneityum.

The Mathiesons were both in poor health and Mrs. Mathieson died not long after they left Tanna, her husband only survived her by three months, which meant that John Paton was the only missionary left who could tell the story of those pioneering days on Tanna.

John Paton had seen the urgent need for a boat owned by the mission that could help them care for the islander teachers and missionaries stationed in isolated posts around the islands and extend the work of evangelism. Obtaining a boat meant raising money, so John agreed to visit Australia to stir up interest in such a project and gain the financial support of church congregations. After his visit to Australia, he returned home to Scotland to do the same. There he met his second wife, Margaret, who accompanied him back to Aneityum, in their own new mission boat called the *Dayspring*.

The islander people were amazed as the boat sailed from island to island. "How is this?" they exclaimed, "We drove them away, we killed many of them. We plundered their houses and robbed them. If we had been treated like that we would never return. But these people come back with a wonderful new ship and more and more missionaries!"

The Patons agreed not to return to Tanna, but to settle on a nearby island, Aniwa, about fifteen miles away. The *Dayspring* had to call at Tanna on the way to Aniwa and bad weather caused them to anchor in the harbour there for some days. The old friendly chief, Nowar, came out in his canoe to visit the Patons on the ship. "I'm very sad that you are not going to stay on my island," he said, "Won't you change your mind?" After further discussion Nowar realised the Patons would definitely be living on Aniwa. So he called the Aniwan sacred man to him, removed the white shells, the token of chieftanship, from his own arm and tied them on the Aniwan's arm. He spoke firmly to the sacred man, "By these you promise to protect John Paton and his wife and child on Aniwa. Let no evil come to them, or I and my people will avenge it."

Settling on Aniwa meant first obtaining a plot of ground and negotiating with the village people to secure it. From past experience on Tanna they knew it must be higher ground, away from the swamps. Their first choice was not approved by

the villagers who suggested another site covered with mounds that had to be cleared away. On clearing them they discovered heaps of bones, the remains of cannibal feasts from ages past. No-one but their sacred men were allowed to touch these bones and it became clear that they had been offered this land in the hope that their gods would strike them dead. The villagers stood around watching the missionaries and their islander helpers digging and clearing away the bones with no bad effect. The people of Aniwa had seen that the Jehovah God of the missionaries was stronger than their own idols and this understanding, even before they had heard any teaching about the Christian message, made it easier for them to receive and believe it.

The first Christian believer on Aniwa was an old chief named Namakei, on whose land the missionaries had built their houses. One day he brought his daughter, Litsi, to the mission house with the request, "Please, John, would you train Litsi for Jesus?" She was the appointed Queen of her tribe and her conversion exerted quite an influence on her followers. Shortly afterwards Namakei's brother brought his daughter to the mission house also, for the mothers of both girls had died. As often as they cared to, these two girls returned to their villages and told their relatives what they had learned. As a result many parents brought their children to the mission school and begged the missionaries to teach them about Jehovah God and His Son Jesus. Some of these children became the best missionaries for they spoke favourably of the mission and also spread the message of the gospel as they learned it.

In the early days those who attended Sunday worship came fully armed, bow and arrow, spear, tomahawk or club always at the ready. People were still very fearful and did not trust their neighbours. Much of their fear was generated by their life-time service of evil spirits. One morning a village man came to John saying, "I've killed the devil! He came to catch me last night but I called all the people and we fought him around the house with our clubs. At daybreak he came out and I killed him dead. We will have no more bad behaviour now. The devil is dead!"

John Paton went with the man to view the dead snake, which turned out to be a huge sea-snake. "You didn't kill the devil, my friend," explained John, "You just killed a snake. But it was good that you were brave enough to kill it." John knew that in time past snakes were the symbol of evil and men were afraid to kill them.

One day, as John was working on an extension to his house, a village man named Nelwang, tomahawk in hand, hovered nearby. "Can I help you, Nelwang?" asked Paton.

"If you will help me now I'll be your friend for ever," declared Nelwang. "I want you to help me get married."

"What do you want me to do?" asked John.

"The trouble is, the woman I want to marry is a chief's widow, Yakin, who lives up in an inland village."

"Then why don't you ask her to marry you?"

“There are thirty young men in the village looking for wives. Each one of them wants her, but no one is brave enough to take her because the others would kill him. Now, if you were in my position, what would you do?” asked Nelwang.

After some thought, John suggested a plan. Two of Nelwang’s trusted friends were placed as lookouts one at each end of the coral rocks above the village. Nelwang cut a passage through the fence at the back that led into the bush. Then, at dead of night he carried off his bride and escaped into the seclusion of the bush. In the morning there was some outcry because Yakin’s house was deserted, then on checking all houses, Nelwang’s was also found to be deserted, so the conclusion was reached that they had run away together. For revenge their houses were plundered and the village people enjoyed a feast at the expense of the missing couple. It was thought they had escaped by canoe to Tanna.

Three weeks later Nelwang appeared again at the mission house when there was no one else around. “Hello,” said Paton, “where have you come from? And where is Yakin?”

“I can’t tell you yet, but I’ve come to keep my promise. I will help you and Yakin will help Mrs. Paton and we will be your friends. We will come and live with you until peace comes to our island.”

So began a wonderful partnership as Nelwang became a faithful disciple helping John Paton in many ways, while Yakin soon learned to attend to cleaning, washing and cooking to assist Mrs Paton who spent much time teaching the women and girls to sew and to sing. They loved the music and were fascinated by the organ she played.

On the first Sunday after Nelwang and Yakin returned, John persuaded them to appear in church to announce their marriage. Nelwang came in a little cautiously, tomakawk in hand, just in case, and sat as near as he could to John. Then Yakin appeared at the door on the women’s side. Nelwang held his tomahawk at the ready, poised across his shoulder, proudly watching as his bride entered the church. The day ended in peace, the village men accepted Nelwang’s claim of Yakin as his bride, and bloodshed had been avoided.

Aniwa was a coral island, so there were no high mountains to attract rain clouds, which meant that shortage of water was a constant problem. John showed the people of the island how to dig a well to obtain underground water.

The village people did not believe that water could be obtained from the ground in this fashion.

“Come tomorrow,” said John, “and I hope and believe that Jehovah God will send you the rain water up from the earth.”

There was a great faith in John's heart that there would be water, despite the doubts that it may be salty. The next morning he went out early to inspect the hole and sank a small hole a further two feet down. Suddenly water gushed up and began to fill the hole. Muddy though it was he tasted it eagerly. It was slightly brackish but not enough to prevent anyone drinking it. The chiefs had gathered nearby, waiting expectantly. John waited for the water to settle and clear, then he got a jug, allowed the chiefs to see it was empty, then went down the ladder to fill it with water from the well. The chiefs gathered round. Namakei shook the jug to see if it would spill. He touched it to see if it felt like water. Finally he tasted it, rolling the liquid around in his mouth for a moment. Then he swallowed it and cried, "Rain! Rain! Yes, it is rain! But how did you get it?"

"Jehovah God gave it out of His own earth in answer to our prayers and hard work. Go and see it springing up for yourselves."

Although every one of them could scale a tree or a cliff without any difficulty, not one of these men dared to walk to the edge of the well and look in. To them this was miraculous, something to be feared. However, they overcame their problem by forming a line, holding hands, and one by one the man at the front looked into the well to view Jehovah's rain, then passed to the end of the line until everyone had seen the water in the well.

When they had all seen the water with their own eyes the chief said, "How wonderful is the work of your Jehovah God! No god of Aniwa ever helped us in this way. The world is turned upside down since Jehovah God came to Aniwa. But will it always rain up through the earth? Or will it come and go like the rain from the clouds?"

"There will always be water in the well, my friend. It is a good gift from Jehovah God for us to use," John assured him. "You and your people and all the people of the island can come and drink and carry away as much as you please."

The chief looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, "What can we do to help now?"

"You can help me build a fence around the well to make it stronger," said John.

No sooner was this said than everyone rushed for the shore to bring back coral rocks and stones which John placed carefully in position, round and round the wall of the well.

When the well was finished and neatly fenced in the old chief Namakei said, "John, I think I could help you next Sunday. Will you let me preach a sermon?"

The people believed that the miracle of water appearing from the earth was due to the fact that John knew how to pray to his God. The chief thought that he too needed to pray to John Paton's God, in order for the water to keep springing up.

Word was passed around that the chief would be speaking on the Sunday so everyone was there waiting to hear what he had to say. "Friends," he began, "we have seen and heard many strange things since John Paton came to Aniwa, things too wonderful for us to understand, and we said they must be lies. The strangest of all was when he said rain could come from out of the earth. But now the world is turned upside down. We have seen rain come from the earth. Only John Paton's God could do this, our gods never could. The water was there under the ground all the time but we could not see it until the coral and sand were removed. Now it has been cleared away and we can see the water. I have been blind and could not believe in Jehovah God, but the sand has been taken from my mind and I promise to follow Him for the rest of my days. I am old now, but when I die I shall see Him with my own eyes.

If any of you listening to me feel as I do, then go and fetch the idols from your houses and bring them back here. We will burn and bury them. Let us follow Jehovah God and learn from John how to worship and serve Him."

That afternoon the chief and several of his friends returned to John's house bringing their idols to be disposed of. Day after day people in small groups came to add to the pile of idols outside the mission house. To the accompaniment of loud sobs and tears, there was a great, excited burning of all the wooden idols. A deep pit was dug in which stone idols were thrown, and a few were loaded into canoes and dropped out in the deep sea.

After the initial grand disposal of their idols, two men were appointed to search out anyone who pretended to get rid of everything heathen but was still holding on to an idol. These men had the task of encouraging the undecided to be wholehearted in serving God. John Paton wrote in his diary at that time, "In these intensely exciting days we 'stood still and saw the salvation of the Lord.'"

There was a complete change in the way of life of the people on Aniwa. They began to say a prayer of thanks before every meal, they conducted family prayers in their homes morning and evening. The total population attended the Sunday worship service. One remarkable change was the increase of trust of each other regarding property. Before the mass conversion to Christianity everyone carried all their valuables with them; a brood of chickens or a litter of piglets would be carried in bags if the owner travelled any distance from his home. As a result there were some lively episodes during the Sunday services, with the chirping of chickens, the squealing of pigs and yapping of puppies accompanying the singing and preaching. The missionaries tolerated the interruptions rather than offend any of the people, until the time came when the people themselves voiced their objections.

"Surely now we are Christians we should be honest with everybody's property," the chiefs urged, "Couldn't we all leave our things at home, then there won't be

interruptions to the worship times and we will all learn to be honest and trust each other.” A meeting of all the people was called to discuss the problem. Dishonesty was soundly condemned and everyone agreed to leave their animals at home.

They agreed on a system of fines for those who stole someone else’s property, and the chiefs worked hard to enforce the law. John Paton also encouraged the chiefs to use the Bible teaching they had to develop other laws fitting for their village way of life, repressing crime and encouraging a Christian way of life.

Soon the schools were crowded, for the islanders were eager to learn to read and write and study the Bible in their own tongue. John Paton had lost the printing press he had on Tanna, but there was an old dilapidated one on Aneityum with parts missing. He was handy with tools, so he made replacement parts from scrap metal or wood and eventually had the press in working order. He soon had passages from the book of Genesis, a hymn book and other smaller books in the local language printed on the renovated press.

The teachers from Aneityum were wholehearted in their support of the school teaching program and as the Aniwans learned enough of the Christian way of living they in turn became teachers of their own people. One of the most helpful of these was the good chief Namakei who became very interested in how John Paton could ‘make books speak’ When the passages from Genesis were printed Namakei listened eagerly as John Paton read from it.

“It speaks my language! Give me the book!” Namakei grasped it eagerly, waiting for it to speak to him, then when it was silent he handed it back to the missionary, a look of great disappointment on his face.

“It will not speak to me. Show me how to make it speak!”

“My friend,” said John, “you don’t know how to read yet, how to make it speak to you; but I will teach you to read, then it will speak to you as it does to me.”

Paton realised that Namakei was straining his eyes in trying to see the print, and suspected that his eyes were affected by age, so he found a pair of glasses that suited his eyes. After an initial reluctance to put on the glasses, fearing some magic, he looked through them and exclaimed in delight, “Oh I can see it all now! This is what you told us about Jesus. He opened the eyes of a blind man. The word of Jesus has just come to Aniwa. He has sent me these glass eyes and I’ve got back the sight I had when I was a boy. Missi, please make the book speak to me now.”

John took Namakei out to the village public ground where he drew three large letters in the dust, A, B, C., then showed him those letters on the first page of the book. Soon he was back.

“I have lifted up A, B, C, They are here in my head and I will hold them fast. Give me another three,” he said.

This was repeated time after time until he had mastered the whole alphabet and then was spelling out some simple words. He was so keen to learn that he actually memorised the whole book just by hearing John Paton read it to him, before he could actually read all the words. When people came around him he would say, "Come, hear how this book speaks our Aniwan language. You say it is hard to learn to read, but be strong and try. If an old man like me can do it, it ought to be easier for you."

He had a very retentive memory so he quickly learned to read what Paton printed and was his right hand helper in the conversion of the Aniwan people.

Another source of wonder and a useful tool in teaching the Christian message was the organ which Mrs. Paton played. The people loved the 'singing bokis' and whenever they heard it being played they flocked around to enjoy the singing. No sooner did they hear a song played than they would insist on learning it by heart and singing it as they worked on their plantations.

After three years of building, teaching and ministering on Aniwa people were becoming Christians and being baptized. Whenever John had to leave the island he could depend on the island leaders to maintain their Christian worship and the Christian village way of life.

In 1883, when he was 59 years old, he left the work on Aniwa, his son succeeding him, and spent the next 24 years still working hard to further the work of missions. He visited Great Britain, his homeland Scotland, North America, Australia, speaking frequently to churches and mission groups, raising financial support, and most importantly, inspiring young people to volunteer for mission work, which expanded until every island of the New Hebrides group had been evangelised.

When he was 76 years old John Paton and his wife returned to Aniwa to spend a year among their beloved friends, but Mrs. Paton was in poor health so they returned to live in Australia. Mrs. Paton died in 1905 and John Paton a year later, at the age of 83, a grand old man with long white hair and long, flowing white beard, honoured and revered by Christians world-wide. An extract from some of his last writing speaks of the man he was:

"If God gave me back my life over again I would lay it on the altar to Christ, that He might use it especially among those who have never heard the name of Jesus.... God gave His best, His Son, for me, and I give back my best, my all, for Him.

Adapted from: *John G Paton, Missionary to the New Hebrides, 1824-1907*, J. Theodore Mueller, Zondervan, 1941