

John Paton of Vanuatu

Part 1



John Paton of Vanuatu

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.”