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The Glory of the Impossible

Samuel Zwemer

When Robert Wilder visited Hope College in 1887 on behalf of the Student Volunteer Movement, Samuel Zwemer was completing his senior year. Responding to Wilder’s appeal, Zwemer became a volunteer and soon organized a mission to Arabia with other students.

After 23 years with the Arabian Mission in Basrah, Bahrain, Muscat, and Kuwait, and service as the first candidate secretary of the SVM, Zwemer began a career of speaking and writing that radiated out to the Muslim world from an interdenominational study center in Cairo. A prolific and gifted author, Zwemer wrote books and articles to challenge the church in Muslim evangelism, provided scholarly studies on historical and popular Islam, and produced writings and tracts in Arabic for Muslims and Christians in the Middle East.

*For 36 years he edited **The Muslim World**, an English quarterly review of current events in the Muslim world and a forum for missionary strategy among Muslims, complementing this service with personal evangelism among the students and faculty of Al-Azhar, Cairo’s famous training center for Muslim missionaries.*

Zwemer was an outstanding evangelical leader, an honored speaker in SVM gatherings, and the driving force behind the Cairo 1906 and Lucknow 1911 conferences which inaugurated a less confrontational and more positive approach to Muslims.

James Hunt observed of this statesman, “He may be said to have been a man of one idea. While his interests and knowledge were wide, I never talked with him ten minutes that the conversation did not veer to Islam.” “The Glory of the Impossible” is taken from an SVM publication of 1911.



The challenge of the unoccupied fields of the world is one to great faith and, therefore, to great sacrifice. Our willingness to sacrifice for an enterprise is always in proportion to our faith in that enterprise. Faith has the genius of transforming the barely possible into actuality. Once men are dominated by the conviction that a thing must be done, they will stop at nothing until it is accomplished.

We have our “marching orders,” as the Iron Duke [Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington] said, and because our Commander-in-Chief is not absent, but with us, the impossible becomes not only practical but imperative. Charles Spurgeon, preaching from the text, “All power is given unto Me... Lo I am with you always...” used these words: “You have a factor here that is absolutely infinite, and what does it matter as to what other factors may be. ‘I will do as much as I can,’ says one. Any fool can do that. He that believes in Christ does what he can not do, attempts the impossible and performs it.”¹

Frequent setbacks and apparent failure never disheartened the real pioneer. Occasional martyrdoms are only a fresh incentive. Opposition is a stimulus to greater activity. Great victory has never been possible without great sacrifice. If the winning of Port Arthur required human bullets,² we cannot expect to carry the Port Arthurs and Gibraltars of the non-Christian world without loss of life.

Does it really matter how many die or how much money we spend in opening closed doors, and in occupying the different fields, if we really believe that missions are warfare and that the King’s glory is at stake? War always means blood and treasure. Our only concern should be to keep the fight aggressive and to win victory regardless of cost or sacrifice. The unoccupied fields of the world must have their Calvary before they can have their Pentecost.

Raymond Lull, the first missionary to the Moslem world, expressed the same thought in medieval language when he wrote:

Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink, but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.

I beg to direct your attention to Africa. I know that in a few years I shall be cut off in that country, which is now open; do not let it be shut again! I go back to Africa to try to make an open path for commerce and Christianity; do you carry out the work, which I have begun. I leave it with you.¹⁵

End Notes

- ¹ Sermon on “Our Omnipotent Leader,” in *The Evangelization of the World* (London, 1887).
- ² *Human Bullets*, a novel by Tadayoshi Sakurai. The experience of a Japanese officer at Port Arthur and a revelation of Japanese patriotism and obedience.
- ³ Raymond Lull’s “Liber de Contemplations in Deo,” in Samuel M. Zwemer’s *Raymund Lull: first missionary to the Moslems* (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1902), p. 132.
- ⁴ P.T. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church: Sermons and Addresses* (New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1908), p. 36.
- ⁵ Mrs. J.W. Harrison, *Mackay of Uganda*, pp. 417-430.
- ⁶ S.M. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam; studies in one geography people and politics of one peninsula with an account of Islam and mission work* (New York: F.H. Revell, 1900), p. 350.
- ⁷ Charles H. Brent, *Adventure for God* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1905), pp. 11-12
- ⁸ Robert E. Speer, *Missionary Principles and Practice: a discussion of Christian missions and of some criticisms upon them* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1902), p. 541.
- ⁹ Letter to Commission No. 1, World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910.
- ¹⁰ Arthur Judson Brown, *The Foreign Missionary: an incarnation of a world movement* (New York: Fleming H. Revell), p. 374.
- ¹¹ Speer, op. cit., p. 526.
- ¹² Report of World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910, Vol. 1.
- ¹³ Brent, op. cit., p. 135.
- ¹⁴ Phillips Brooks, *Twenty Sermons* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1903), p. 330.
- ¹⁵ William Garden Blaikie, *Personal Life of David Livingstone* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1895?), pp. 243-244.

Bishop Phillips Brooks once threw down the challenge of a big task in these words:

Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle.¹⁴

He could not have chosen words more applicable if he had spoken of the evangelization of the unoccupied fields of the world with all their baffling difficulties and their glorious impossibilities. God can give us power for the task. He was sufficient for those who went out in the past, and is sufficient for those who go out today.

Face to face with these millions in darkness and degradation, knowing the condition of their lives on the unimpeachable testimony of those who have visited these countries, this great unfinished task, this unattempted task, calls today for those who are willing to endure and suffer in accomplishing it.

☞ **No Sacrifice, But a Privilege** ☞

When David Livingstone visited Cambridge University, on December 4, 1857, he made an earnest appeal for that continent, which was then almost wholly an unoccupied field. His words, which were in a sense his last will and testament for college men, as regards Africa, may well close this book:

For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege.

As a hungry man makes dispatch and takes large morsels on account of his great hunger, so Thy servant feels a great desire to die that he may glorify Thee. He hurries day and night to complete his work in order that he may give up his blood and his tears to be shed for Thee.³

☞ **“An Inverted Homesickness”** ☞

The unoccupied fields of the world await those who are willing to be lonely for the sake of Christ. To the pioneer missionary the words of our Lord Jesus Christ to the apostles, when He showed them His hands and His feet, come with special force: “As my Father hath sent Me, even so I send you” (John 20:21). He came into the world, and it was a great, unoccupied mission field. “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not” (John 1:11). He came and His welcome was derision, His life suffering, and His throne the Cross. As He came, He expects us to go. We must follow in His footsteps.

The pioneer missionary, in overcoming obstacles and difficulties, has the privilege not only of knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection, but also something of the fellowship of His suffering. For the people of Tibet or Somaliland, Mongolia or Afghanistan, Arabia or Nepal, the Sudan or Abyssinia, he may be called to say with Paul, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill to the brim the penalty of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake which is the Church” (Greek text, Col. 1:24; cf. Luke 21:4 and Mark 12:44).

What is it but the glory of the impossible! Who would naturally prefer to leave the warmth and comfort of hearth and home and the love of the family circle to go after a lost sheep, whose cry we have faintly heard in the howling of the tempest? Yet such is the glory of the task that neither home-ties nor home needs can hold back those who have caught the vision and the spirit of the Great Shepherd. Because the lost ones are His sheep, and He has made us His shepherds and not His hirelings, we must bring them back.

Although the road be rough and steep
I go to the desert to find my sheep.

“There is nothing finer nor more pathetic to me,” says Dr. Forsyth,

than the way in which missionaries unlearn the love of the old home, die to their native land, and wed their hearts to the people they have served and won; so that they cannot rest in England, but must return to lay their bones where they spent their hearts for Christ. How vulgar the common patriotisms seem beside this inverted home-sickness, this passion of a kingdom which has no frontiers and no favored race, the passion of a homeless Christ!⁴

James Gilmour in Mongolia, David Livingstone in Central Africa, Grenfell on the Congo, Keith Falconer in Arabia, Dr. Rijnhart and Miss Annie Taylor in Tibet, Chalmers in New Guinea, Morrison in China, Henry Martyn in Persia, and all the others like them had this “inverted homesickness,” this passion to call that country their home which was most in need of the Gospel. In this passion all other passions died; before this vision all other visions faded; this call drowned all other voices. They were the pioneers of the Kingdom, the forelopers of God, eager to cross the border-marches and discover new lands or win new empire.

☞ The Pioneer Spirit ☞

These forelopers of God went not with hatchet and brand, but with the sword of the Spirit and with the fire of Truth they went and blazed the way for those that follow after. Their scars were the seal of their apostleship, and they gloried also in tribulation. Like the pioneer Apostle, “always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus,” and approving themselves “as ministers of God in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in watchings, in fasting.”

Thomas Valpy French, Bishop of Lahore, whom Dr. Eugene Stock called “the most distinguished of all Church Missionary

of the world have, therefore, a claim of peculiar weight and urgency. “In this twentieth century of Christian history there should be no unoccupied fields. The Church is bound to remedy the lamentable condition with the least possible delay.”¹²

☞ Make a Life, Not a Living ☞

The unoccupied fields, therefore, are a challenge to all whose lives are unoccupied by that which is highest and best; whose lives are occupied only with the weak things or the base things that do not count. There are eyes that have never been illuminated by a great vision, minds that have never been gripped by an unselfish thought, hearts that have never thrilled with passion for another’s wrong, and hands that have never grown weary or strong in lifting a great burden.

To such the knowledge of these Christless millions in lands yet unoccupied should come like a new call from Macedonia, and a startling vision of God’s will for them. As Bishop Brent remarks,

We never know what measure of moral capacity is at our disposal until we try to express it in action. An adventure of some proportions is not uncommonly all that a young man needs to determine and fix his manhood’s powers.¹³

Is there a more heroic test for the powers of manhood than pioneer work in the mission field? Here is opportunity for those who at home may never find elbow-room for their latent capacities, who may never find adequate scope elsewhere for all the powers of their minds and their souls.

There are hundreds of Christian college men who expect to spend life in practicing law or in some trade for a livelihood, yet who have strength and talent enough to enter these unoccupied fields. There are young doctors who might gather around them in some new mission station thousands of those who “suffer the horrors of heathenism and Islam,” and lift their burden of pain, but who now confine their efforts to some “pent-up Utica” where the healing art is subject to the law of competition and is measured too often merely in terms of a cash-book and ledger. They are making a living; they might be making a life.

Gospels or burnt them, or brought them back again — now they buy them, kiss the books, and touching it to the forehead and pressing it to the heart, they show the highest honor that a Moslem can show a book.⁹

But the pioneer husbandman must have long patience. When Judson was lying loaded with chains in a Burmese dungeon, a fellow prisoner asked with a sneer about the prospect for the conversion of the heathen. Judson calmly answered, “The prospects are as bright as are the promises of God.”¹⁰ There is scarcely a country today which is not as accessible, or where the difficulties are greater, than was the case in Burma when Judson faced them and overcame.

☞ Challenge of the Closed Door ☞

The prospects for the evangelization of all the unoccupied fields are “as bright as the promises of God.” Why should we longer wait to evangelize them? “The evangelization of the world in this generation is no play-word,” says Robert E. Speer.

It is no motto to be bandied about carelessly. The Evangelization of the World in this Generation is the summons of Jesus Christ to every one of the disciples to lay himself upon a cross, himself to walk in the footsteps of Him who, though He was rich, for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich, himself to count his life as of no account, that He may spend it as Christ spent His for the redemption of the world.¹¹

Who will do this for the unoccupied fields?

The student volunteers of today must not rest satisfied until the watchword, peculiarly their own, finds practical application for the most neglected and difficult fields, as well as the countries where the harvest is ripe and the call is for reapers in ever increasing numbers. The plea of destitution is even stronger than that of opportunity. Opportunism is not the last word in missions. The open door beckons; the closed door challenges him who has a right to enter. The unoccupied fields

Society missionaries,” had the real pioneer spirit and knew the glory of the impossible. After forty years of labors abundant and fruitful in India, he resigned his bishopric and planned to reach the interior of Arabia with the Gospel.

He was an intellectual and spiritual giant.

To live with him was to drink in an atmosphere that was spiritually bracing. As the air of the Engadine [a favorite tourist ground in Switzerland] is to the body, so was his intimacy to the soul. It was an education to be with him. There was nothing that he thought a man should not yield — home or wife or health if God’s call was apparent. But then every one knew that he only asked of them what he himself had done and was always doing.

And when Mackay, of Uganda, in his remarkable plea for a mission to the Arabs of Oman, called for “half dozen young men, the pick of the English universities, to make the venture in faith,”⁵ this lion-hearted veteran of sixty-six years responded alone. It was the glory of the impossible. Yet from Muscat he wrote shortly before his death:

If I can get no faithful servant and guide for the journey into the interior, well versed in dealing with Arabs and getting needful common supplies (I want but little), I may try Bahrein, or Hodeidah and Sana, and if that fails, the north of Africa again, in some highland; for without a house of our own the climate would be insufferable for me — at least during the very hot months — and one’s work would be at a standstill. But I shall not give up, please God, even temporarily, my plans for the interior, unless, all avenues being closed, it would be sheer madness to attempt to carry them out.⁶

“I shall not give up” — and he did not until he died. Nor will the Church of Christ give up the work for which he and others like him laid down their lives in Oman. It goes on.

☞ The Apostolic Ambition ☞

The unoccupied provinces of Arabia and the Sudan await men with the spirit of Bishop French. For the ambition to reach out from centers already occupied to regions beyond, even when those very centers are undermined and in need of reinforcement, is not Quixotic or fantastic, but truly apostolic. “Yes, so have I been ambitious,” said Paul,

to preach the Gospel not where Christ was already named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation; but as it is written, they shall see to whom no tidings of Him came, and they who have not heard shall understand” (Romans 15:20–21).

He wrote this when leaving a city as important as Corinth, and goes on to state that this is the reason why he did not yet visit Rome, but that he hopes to do so on his way to Spain! If the uttermost confines of the Roman Empire were part of his program who had already preached Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum in the first century, we surely, at the beginning of the twentieth century, should have no less ambition to enter every unoccupied field that “they may see to whom no tidings came and that those who have not heard may understand.”

There is no instance of an Apostle being driven abroad under the compulsion of a bald command. Each one went as a lover to his betrothed on his appointed errand. It was all instinctive and natural. They were equally controlled by the common vision, but they had severally personal visions which drew them whither they were needed. In the first days of Christianity, there is an absence of the calculating spirit. Most of the Apostles died outside of Palestine, though human logic would have forbidden them to leave the country until it had been Christianized. The calculating instinct is death to faith, and had the Apostles allowed it to control their motives and actions, they would have said: “The need in

Jerusalem is so profound, our responsibilities to people of our own blood so obvious, that we must live up to the principle that charity begins at home. After we have won the people of Jerusalem, of Judea and of the Holy Land in general, then it will be time enough to go abroad; but our problems, political, moral and religious, are so unsolved here in this one spot that it is manifestly absurd to bend our shoulders to a new load.⁷

It was the bigness of the task and its difficulty that thrilled the early Church. Its apparent impossibility was its glory, its worldwide character its grandeur. The same is true today. “I am happy,” wrote Neesima of Japan,

in a meditation on the marvelous growth of Christianity in the world, and believe that if it finds any obstacles it will advance still faster and swifter even as the stream runs faster when it finds any hindrances on its course.⁸

☞ Hope and Patience ☞

He that ploweth the virgin soil should plow in hope. God never disappoints His husbandmen. The harvest always follows the seed time. “When we first came to our field,” writes missionary Hogberg from Central Asia,

it was impossible to gather even a few people to hear the glad tidings of the Gospel. We could not gather any children for school. We could not spread gospels or tracts. When building the new station, we also had a little chapel built. Then we wondered, “Will this room ever be filled up with Moslems listening to the Gospel?” Our little chapel has been filled with hearers and still a larger room! Day after day we may preach as much as we have strength to, and the Moslems no longer object to listen to the Gospel truth. “Before your coming hither no one spoke or thought of Jesus Christ, now everywhere one hears His name,” a Mohammedan said to me. At the beginning of our work they threw away the