

Steady in All Circumstances

Robert & Mary Moffat, Pioneer Missionaries to S Africa

By Lorella Rouster

Robert and Mary Moffat were amongst the earliest missionaries in South Africa. They served there for 54 years, showing an amazing steadiness in all kinds of difficult circumstances.

Robert and Mary had fallen in love when he worked as a gardener in her father's nurseries. Mary was willing to follow Robert any-where and was attracted by his sense of calling and duty. Her parents, although devout Christians, at first refused permission for them to marry. She was their only daughter and they could not bear the thought of the difficult life she would face in Africa. The couple determined to obey both her parents' wishes and the call of God on Robert's life, so they parted, writing brokenhearted letters that took long months to reach their destination. After two years, God convicted Mary's parents to let her go. She arrived after a sea voyage of many months, and they married a few weeks later.

Before Mary's arrival, Robert had traveled by ox-drawn wagon 600 miles across the scorching desert, at times traveling at night because of the heat. He went for three days unable to find water, till the oxen dropped and most of them were unable to move. His partner took the few remaining oxen to look for water, leaving Robert to safeguard the wagon in the burning heat, with no water or food.

Several times they were forced to drink muddy, polluted, and green frothy water. Once they collapsed into a mud hole with the animals in a desperate attempt to cool their steaming bodies. Again Moffat went for days without water till his mouth dried and he was unable to speak. His companion became delirious. When they finally came stumbling into a small settlement, they made desperate motions pleading for water.

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Cold nights also made life difficult while hiking to bring the Gospel to desert people. Sometimes Robert buried himself in the sand up to his head to keep himself warm at night.

Travel presented many challenges. Once they had to construct a raft in order to cross a river. This requiring chopping down trees, stripping the inner bark to make strong cords to lash the logs together, dismantling the ox cart, making several trips across the river, then reassembling the vehicle on the other shore. This process required several days and considerable labor. Another time he had to wade through mud that seemed determined to suck him in.

They were in danger from wild animals, frequently seeing lions on their treks. Once, an angry cobra suddenly wrapped itself around Robert's leg.

He also faced severe hunger. Sometimes Robert was so hungry that he bound his stomach with a thong to help him endure fasting when there was nothing to eat.

Robert was true to his promises. He hiked another 600 miles over mountains in a month-long trek, bypassing more pleasant and promising prospects to present the Gospel to a people group that seemed most resistant to the Gospel. He endured much opposition before King Afrikaner was won for Christ.

Another time he was caught in fierce fighting, attacked by Zulu warriors despite his best efforts to promote peace. He later learned that because he rode a horse, a creature the Zulu had never seen before, they believed he was a half-human, half-horse creature. In desperate fear of such an awful creature, they had believed they were fighting for their lives.

Robert and Mary had begun their lives together placing obedience to Christ first in their lives, allowing God to work in Mary's parents rather than forcing their own will. Later they were called upon several times to show that Christ had their absolute loyalty, even above the strong ties of family. Their oldest daughter, Mary, nursed David Livingston to health after a lion

badly mangled his arm. She later died of fever in Central Africa. The Moffats lost another of their children to smallpox during an epidemic, and their oldest son died hiking on one of his long missionary journeys. He had been a tireless worker for the mission.

Robert's own mother had prepared him well for such sacrifices by telling him many tales of the heroism of the early Moravian missionaries. In fact she gave him such a background that God could easily call him for missionary service just by allowing him a glimpse of a poster advertising a missionary meeting that had already taken place.

The Moffats labored on and on, looking to Jesus, steady in the face of innumerable obstacles. They labored even more in old age than they had in their youths. Not only did they establish a strong mission at Kuruman, but they opened several resistant tribes to the Gospel, learned the Sechwana language, reduced it to writing, taught the natives to read, translated the entire Bible working evenings, and prepared two hymnals in Sechwana. Mary opened a sewing school to provide clothing for converts. They fought entrenched heathen customs like leaving the old to die of exposure and burying children alive with the dead mothers. In fact, they saved two children from being buried alive by taking them home and raising them as their own. Both Robert and Mary tirelessly recruited other missionaries, including David Livingstone. When failing health forced them to return home in 1871, Mary caught cold and did not survive the winter. Robert labored on in Scotland for 12 more years, keeping the needs of Africa before the public—in old age as in youth, in Scotland as in Africa, in comfort as in hardship, steady in all circumstances.