Persia’s first American missionaries

Justin Perkins and Charlotte Bass suffered multiple losses during their missionary years. Was it worth it?

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Charlotte Bass and Justin Perkins

The border between Russia and Persia is cut by the Aras River, which rises in Turkey and empties into the Caspian Sea. In winter months the river is ravenous; it sweeps

away footbridges and embankments, swallowing entire villages in its path. The poet Virgil, who knew it by the ancient name Araxes, called this “the stream intolerant of any span.” By the late summer each year, the water is calm and brown and easily fordable.

In 1834, Justin Perkins and his wife, Charlotte Bass, stood at the Aras River with Persia staring at them from across the muddy waters. Young, newly married, and full of zeal for the Lord, they were the first American missionaries ever assigned to preach the gospel in Persia. They left two decades later—Charlotte feeble and broken, Justin an empty shell of a man.

Born in 1805 on a small family farm in Springfield, Massachusetts, Justin came of age in the peak years of the Second Great Awakening. All across New England, bands of mostly young, mostly White, mostly female Christians had begun abandoning the chapels of their parents and congregating instead in large, outdoor “camp meetings,” where they cast off the staid formality of a traditional church service in favor of an emotionally charged, intensely personal religious experience.

Travel was no small matter in those days, and so these young worshipers were often forced to stay at the gatherings for days at a time. They arrived in wagons and carriages and slept in tents pitched in clearings or by a river—hence the term “tent revival.” Freed from their labors back home, they plunged into an uninterrupted frenzy of worship and exultation, as one sweat-soaked preacher after another strode upon a makeshift stage, hollering at them to repent and rejoice.

Those wild worshipers who gathered in the thickets of New England were convinced that it was their duty as faithful Christians to do whatever it took to carry the gospel to the unreached masses in the Far East and Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, to convert both the ignorant heathen untouched by the Good News and the halfhearted believer unwilling to abandon everything for Christ.

Even as a young boy, Justin felt this urgent need to Christianize the world. He dreamed of traveling to the farthest reaches of the globe, bringing salvation to whatever dark and savage land needed it the most. After graduating with honors from Amherst College in 1829, he entered Andover Theological Seminary, where he was ordained as a minister in preparation for a life as a missionary.

While Justin was completing his degree at Andover, Charlotte was doing the same about 20 miles west of him at Ipswich Female Seminary in Massachusetts. One of

the most fascinating aspects of the Second Great Awakening is that it was an overwhelmingly female affair. The vast majority of tent revivalists in New England were young, single women; by most counts, there were at least three female converts for every two males.

Evangelical Christianity's extreme emphasis on individual salvation offered women of the time a sense of independence and autonomy that they simply did not experience in other aspects of their lives. Tent revivals gave young women the opportunity to express publicly and without fear of judgment their fears and anxieties, their sins and shortcomings, and to receive not just forgiveness but also sympathy and support from their peers. And because the evangelical ideal compelled converts to signify their conversion through action (in the words of one historian, it made "each proselyte a proselytizer as well"), it encouraged women to pursue other avenues of work beyond spinning, weaving, and needlework—the chief means of female employment in the early 19th century.

Evangelical women became teachers, preachers, and public servants. They established schools, universities, and benevolent organizations. They even enjoyed nominal leadership roles in the church as Sunday school teachers, an evangelical innovation created by and almost wholly staffed by women.

Teaching led evangelical women to more public activities and a larger role in propagating the faith beyond America's borders. There was a sudden influx of missionary applications filed by young, unmarried women who saw in the mission field an opportunity to travel and pursue goals and activities that were closed off to them at home. An urgent need arose to establish schools of higher learning that could train such women for the important work of spreading the gospel to all nations. Ipswich, founded by two pioneers of female education, Zilpah Grant and Mary Lyon, was one of the earliest and most influential of these all-female seminaries.

Charlotte entered Ipswich in 1832. Twenty-four years old and still unmarried, she was among the first class of students at the seminary, which had been founded only four years earlier. The primary focus of the school was to prepare women for careers as teachers and missionaries: the curriculum included a heavy emphasis on grammar, rhetoric, and composition, as well as advanced arithmetic, geography, history, and the natural sciences. Students were encouraged to think critically, to question and debate.

Yet they were also forced to adhere to the strict ideals of womanhood that were still prevalent at the time. Piety and domesticity were key. The women were required to perform all housekeeping functions at the school and were purposely given almost no free time on their own. They were not allowed, in Lyon's words, "to make themselves prominent in any public place" or to "expose themselves at windows & doors." Still, this was freedom, for it allowed women like Charlotte to cast off the expectations of their families, to challenge the traditional gender roles imposed upon them by their communities, and, most of all, to pursue a life of meaning and adventure.

Justin and Charlotte were married on July 21, 1833. Nearly two months later, the newlyweds sat together on a wooden pew in the Andover chapel, having accepted a commission from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions—an independent Protestant missions society established nearly three decades before the denominational Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions—to become the first American missionaries assigned to Persia.

Christianity, of course, had long had a foothold in Persia, having first been brought there, according to legend, by the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew. By the second century AD, it was already firmly established as the largest religious minority in the overwhelmingly Zoroastrian empire. But it wasn't until the arrival of Portuguese Jesuits in the 16th century that Persia became fertile mission ground. For the next 200 years, Catholic missionaries maintained a monopoly on the region.

The first Protestants did not show up until 1747, when two young missionaries from Germany crossed the Black Sea into Persia. They did not last long. They were robbed twice and badly beaten before reaching their final destination. After a few days, they gave up and returned to Germany, having barely escaped with their lives.

The most successful Protestant missionary in Persia was Henry Martyn, a member of the British Church Missionary Society, who traveled on his own initiative to the country in 1811 from his post in India. Martyn made the conversion of Muslims his primary goal. Considering that such conversions were technically punishable by death under Islamic law, he did not have a great deal of success. Nevertheless, he was the first person to translate the New Testament into Persian, completing the task a year after his arrival, just before he died of disease, an all too common fate for foreign missionaries in the Middle East.

In contrast to Martyn, Justin and Charlotte were specifically instructed not to evangelize to Persia's Muslim community; it still wasn't feasible at the time. Instead, their efforts would be focused on what the ABCFM referred to as "the degenerate churches of the East"—which included Armenians in Constantinople, the Greek Orthodox in Smyrna and Athens, and Syrian Arabs in Beirut.

These ancient Christian communities were located in the lands from which Christianity as we know it today evolved, and many of them could trace their lineage to the apostles themselves. Yet the American evangelicals considered them misguided and unsaved. Their rituals were thought to be primitive and obsolete, their beliefs peppered with superstitions. In short, they weren't really Christians, according to the spirit-filled evangelicals of the Second Great Awakening. What they needed was spiritual instruction from the New World. What they needed was revival.

In Persia, the "degenerates" were known as Nestorians, followers of the fifth-century bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, who was branded a heretic and exiled by the early church councils for his heterodox views on the dual nature of Christ. This was part of a theological controversy that, while quite literally a matter of life and death at the time, has been rendered purely academic today. The argument hinged on whether Christ had a single nature that was simultaneously human and divine or two separate and distinct natures: one human, the other divine. Nestorius was punished by his fellow bishops for aligning himself with the latter view. After his exile in AD 431, his followers, fleeing persecution, scattered across the lands of the Middle East, the largest bloc settling in northwest Persia, where they remain active to this day.

The existence of the Nestorians—who refer to themselves as Assyrian Christians—was completely unknown to the ABCFM until the spring of 1830, when two American missionaries, H. G. Dwight and Eli Smith, happened to make a stop in Urmia while on a missionary tour through Armenia. No American missionary had ever ventured this far east before; there were no Americans at all, and very few Westerners, east of Constantinople.

To avoid undue attention, Dwight and Smith dressed in robes and wore turbans. They shared one packhorse between them and were at times forced to eat bread cooked over dried cow dung and crawling with vermin. Smith caught cholera and nearly died twice. Yet their hardships paid off when, in Urmia, they were surprised to find a large community of Christians who welcomed them with open arms.

Encouraged by the response, Dwight and Smith sent a report back to the ABCFM, asking it to dispatch full-time missionaries to live and work among the Nestorians of Persia. “This field is white and ready for the harvest,” Smith wrote. “In all my journeys I have seen no people as willing to accept the gospel.” It took three years to find the right couple for the job.

On the night of September 8, 1833, Justin and Charlotte—their bags already packed, their hearts bursting with excitement—received their final instructions at the Andover chapel. “Your particular field of inquiry and labor is to be the Syrian church, and especially that part of it, denominated Nestorian,” the eager couple were told, “and your residence, for the present, will be in Oroomiah, just within the western borders of Persia.”

Although Justin and Charlotte were expressly told to focus their activities solely on converting Persia’s Nestorians, the ABCFM made it absolutely clear that these efforts were designed to serve as a back door to the primary goal of converting Persia’s Muslims. “Your main object will be to enable the Nestorian church, through the grace of God, to exert a commanding influence in the spiritual regeneration of Asia.” In other words, the conversion of the Nestorians was part of a long-term strategy to create Indigenous missionaries who could evangelize to their Muslim countrymen throughout the region.

Having received their final instructions, Justin and Charlotte bowed their heads for God’s blessing. “May you and your beloved partner be long spared for the work on which you are about to enter,” the board members prayed. “It is self-denying, but delightful and glorious work. Be faithful unto death; then will you never regret your self-consecration to the missionary service, nor the solemn designation of this evening, nor the parting scenes of the approaching embarkation, nor the residence for life in countries remote from home and native land. Nor will you be forgotten.”

Imagine the thrill the young couple felt walking out of the chapel that sabbath evening, drunk with images of lost souls brought to Christ. For Justin, who probably never thought he’d be anything but a small-plot farmer with a sixth-grade education, and Charlotte, who had shaken loose the chains of her gender to pursue a life of her own making, the night was electric. They would leave for Boston the next morning and board a ship bound for Constantinople, the first leg of a romantic adventure into the unknown that would double as their honeymoon. They had already said their goodbyes to loved ones.

In those days, a journey of such magnitude could very likely be permanent. They were fully prepared never to see their friends or families again, not in this life anyway. So full of zeal was Justin that he found he could barely walk back to his lodgings. He collapsed onto his bed, burning with the spirit of the Lord.

It wasn't the spirit. The following morning, Justin awoke with a violent fever. He was semiconscious and shaking, unable to rise from his bed. The ship remained docked in Boston for a couple of days, but the fever would not break. It was finally decided that they would sail without him; the mission to Persia would be abandoned.

When Justin heard the news, he forced his doctors to lift him out of bed, dress him, and dump him in a wagon headed for Boston. Charlotte was worried and evidently tried to talk her husband into returning home. But he was steadfast and encouraged her to be steadfast, too. "Her fortitude, which was destined to encounter still severer tests, was adequate to the trial," he recounted in his memoirs.

At the dock, Justin was carried aboard half-dead and placed in a tiny cabin in the belly of the ship, along with Charlotte and the aforementioned Eli Smith and his wife, who were returning to their mission work in Syria. When the ship's captain saw Justin's condition, he told his first mate, "we shall very soon have to throw that man overboard."

The voyage lasted a little over two months. Justin's fever eventually broke, though even then the couple spent much of the journey prostrate and wracked with seasickness, huddled below deck in a tiny, crowded cabin (Justin uses the term "prison") that they were forced to share with several fellow passengers, including the Smiths. "The last vestige of romance will soon be expelled," Justin wrote in his diary.

The ship docked in Constantinople on December 21, 1833. Yet the hardships of the journey had only begun. After a delay of five months for winter to pass and the passage east to reopen, Justin and Charlotte said goodbye to the Smiths and booked an English vessel across the Black Sea to Trabzon in northeast Turkey; Charlotte became the first American woman to cross those waters.

From there, they began a 700-mile journey on horseback across rugged mountainous roads, dodging thieves and bandits along the way, everywhere pursued by plagues and pestilence. The first third of the journey led across mountain paths so steep and narrow that Charlotte could barely stay seated in her saddle.

(She rode sidesaddle, as decorum dictated.) One wrong step would have plunged them into a bottomless chasm. At night they pitched their tent on the cliff's edge, high enough to watch the clouds drift lazily beneath them. They used their travel trunks as tables and chairs but more often than not ate upon the hard ground, where they slept. It seemed never to stop raining; the roads were always dark and slick with mud.

When they finally reached the Aras River at the Russian-Persian border, they were detained by Russian border guards who seized all their possessions as contraband and informed them that their passports were no longer valid. Unable to proceed across the river to Persia or retreat back into Russia, they pitched their tent on a sandbank and waited.

A week passed. It was August, the hottest month of the year. The temperature rose to 110 degrees in the day. At night, the hot winds from the Caspian Sea filled their flea-ridden tent with fine grains of sand. They were kept under constant watch by border guards, forbidden from venturing out in search of provisions. On the verge of starvation, they had to barter for bread and melons, bought from a village four miles away. They both grew gaunt and frail. Charlotte fell ill.

One day, Justin glimpsed what looked like a government courier crossing the river into Persia. He burst out of his tent and flagged the man down. He begged him to deliver a letter to the British consul stationed at Tabriz, informing him of their dreadful plight. (There was no American government presence in Persia at the time.) The man agreed.

A few days later help arrived, but not before Charlotte lost consciousness. She was ferried across the river, placed in a litter, and carried all the way to Tabriz, where a doctor informed Justin there was no hope of recovery. She would not wake except to vomit and shake with convulsions. And then, to the surprise of everyone, Charlotte, still in a daze, gave birth to a daughter. The young couple had no idea she was pregnant. Charlotte herself was unaware she had given birth until three days later, when she suddenly awoke.

They named their first child Charlotte Nisbet Perkins. She was born August 26, 1834. She died a few months later. Two years later, Justin and Charlotte welcomed their second child, a son named William; he died before his fourth birthday, likely of cholera. So did their next child, Justin, who survived a mere 11 months. Another

daughter, Fidelia, named after Charlotte's mother, made it just past her first birthday. A third son, Jonathan, lived barely two months.

Judith Perkins, their third daughter, was born in 1840 and grew into a beautiful, inquisitive young woman—a "Persian flower," Justin proudly called her. She was the light in her father's eyes: a wild girl who absolutely thrived in the wilderness of Persia. She made it to her 12th birthday before dying of cholera.

In all, Justin and Charlotte buried six of their seven children in Persia. The grief became too much to bear for Charlotte. She had never really recovered from that original illness in Tabriz, but the tragedy she lived through in Persia, as she watched one child after another die in her arms, left her in pieces. In a letter to the ABCFM, Justin claims his wife was suffering from epilepsy. That was probably a polite euphemism: a medical term to couch what was, reasonably, her descent into madness. "My pen refuses to tell the desolation of our home," Justin wrote.

After more than two decades of toiling in Persia, Charlotte at last abandoned her missionary life and returned to America with their sole surviving son, Henry, in 1857; Justin followed one year later. But he would not stay long. The mission field kept beckoning, and he simply could not refuse the call. Four years later, he set out for Persia again, this time by himself. Charlotte was too fragile to be left on her own, so Justin had her committed to the McLean Asylum for the Insane in Somerville, Massachusetts, where she spent the next few years pleading with her doctors to be released.

Just how long Charlotte was kept in the asylum is difficult to know. But she was out and waiting at the docks when Justin returned from Persia for the final time in 1869, frail, sick, and on the verge of death. And she was by his side when he died soon afterward, gripping his hand, just as she had that warm sabbath night in 1833, inside the old, stone chapel at Andover, when they were bright-eyed newlyweds about to embark on a lifetime of adventure.

Charlotte lived for another 28 years after Justin's death. Born when Thomas Jefferson was president, she died at the age of 90, with Henry and her beloved granddaughter, Judith (named after the "Persian flower" she had tragically lost), at her bedside. Her legacy as the first female missionary in Persia lived even longer: within a decade of her death, female missionaries outnumbered their male counterparts in Persia by four to one, and nearly half of all missionary doctors were

single women.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the celebrated Lutheran theologian hanged in 1945 by the Nazis, once wrote: “It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.” During their more than two decades in Persia, Justin and Charlotte experienced more than their fair share of suffering. Still, together, they built a flourishing mission from the ground up.

Before their arrival, not a single Nestorian woman in Persia could read or write. By the time they left, proud Nestorian mothers walked their daughters to school—one of 12 Justin and Charlotte opened in West Persia just in their first three years—often lingering by the entrance for a moment to hear them read aloud from their common texts.

The Nestorians, though technically a protected group, were brutalized by the broader Persian population and ignored, or worse, by the state. They were miserably poor and terribly oppressed. Their lands were repeatedly stolen from them, their homes plundered for sport. Justin and Charlotte not only documented the crimes perpetrated against this community but also fought an unsympathetic government in hopes that some measure of justice would prevail.

Urmia was a provincial town at the edge of the Turkish border. It was a dangerous, isolated place, and on more than one occasion Charlotte and Justin came close to being violently killed. Yet they never hesitated to enter the wildest, most mountainous parts of the region, repeatedly putting their lives at risk in order to serve the people. Again and again cholera swept through the area. The year after they arrived, it killed 3,000 people in Tabriz in a single month. The year 1840 became known as the “children’s holocaust” because of the large number of cholera cases that took the lives of the young and enfeebled. Justin and Charlotte, together with their fellow missionaries, helped build hospitals and clinics to provide free medical services for the sick and dying, even as their own children succumbed to the disease one by one.

Yet despite all the good they did in Persia, one cannot lose sight of why they were there in the first place: to save souls. Justin and Charlotte believed that this world and all its concerns were transient; the real world was the one to come. They believed they were privy to a wondrous truth, without knowledge of which people would be doomed to an eternity of pain and suffering. This belief filled them with

such compassion for the souls of strangers living thousands of miles away that, to save them from this wretched fate, they were willing to sacrifice not only their own lives but also the lives of their children.

One can ask whether their sacrifice was worth it. But perhaps the more important question—the one all missionaries must ask themselves—is this: What is worth sacrificing everything for? How far should one go to rescue someone, either from the presumed torments of the next life or from the actual hell of this one?