

The greatest accolade for a follower of Christ is his pronouncement: “*Well done, good and faithful servant!*” Noël Piper skillfully recounts the stories of women who have undoubtedly heard or will hear these words. Their lives call out from the pages of history to quicken our spirits, fanning the desire that we—like these sisters of old—may be found faithful.

Mary A. Kassian, author and speaker

Noël Piper brings to life ordinary women of generations past and present whose testimonies have catapulted them into extraordinary influence upon the women of subsequent generations. Noël’s timely insights may well prove to be timeless in their impact upon the lives of women today and for many generations to come. Any woman will delight in the way this look into the past brings inspiration and encouragement for tackling the challenges of today.

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FAITHFUL
WOMEN
& THEIR
Extraordinary
GOD

Noël Piper

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CROSSINGS

Introduction

Ordinary Women and Their Extraordinary God. That's what I wanted to call this book. But one husband reportedly said, "I could never give my wife a book with that title! She might think I think she's just ordinary." That's probably a good thing for a husband to feel, but I find it reassuring to know that God works with the *ordinary*.

With *Ordinary Women*, I had in mind something like what Jim Elliot said: "Missionaries are very human folks just doing what they're asked. Simply a bunch of nobodies trying to exalt Somebody."¹ Not all the women in this book are missionaries, but I think each would have been the first to tell you she was just an ordinary person.

So you might ask, Why would I want to bother reading their stories? There's just one reason: These ordinary women had an extraordinary God who enabled them to do extraordinary things. And he's the same today for us. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

That's why we discover unexpected crossings between our lives and the lives of these five women who lived and worked in six nations over a span of more than 250 years. Gladys Aylward, Liliias Trotter, and Esther Ahn Kim speak of their weakness and unsuitability for the tasks God has given them. Haven't we felt that? As Sarah Edwards fulfilled her tedious, humdrum responsibilities as wife and mother, she had little idea of the ongoing impact she would make for generations through her husband and children and others who came into her home. Don't we need that encouragement in our mundane days? Helen Roseveare struggled with the desire to do excellent work when her surroundings limited her to just "good enough." Haven't we felt frustrated when we thought our gifts and abilities weren't being used fully? Esther Ahn Kim learned to *live* for God in her prison, not just to sit and wait for "normal" life to resume. Don't we sometimes feel we are treading water until our "real" life and ministry begin?

¹ Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), p. 46.

Each of these women, in the midst of her ordinary life, lived through what we might call a defining experience. From our perspective now, we can see their lives beforehand preparing them for that turning point. And everything afterward is shaped and colored by it.

Sarah Edwards experienced the refining power of God when, for a few days, she was physically and spiritually shaken by his Spirit. Liliias Trotter discovered the joy of serving God wholeheartedly after she made the agonizing decision to turn away from a life devoted to the art she loved. Gladys Aylward simply took each next step, minute by minute, following God's leading after she had almost totally expended her strength and health to deliver 100 children to safety. Esther Ahn Kim learned that God is not handcuffed by the cruelty of people and prison after she, like Daniel's three friends, refused to bow to a false god. Helen Roseveare found God's presence and power precisely at the very moments when she needed them during weeks punctuated by rape, terror, uncertainty, and pain.

With one exception, these women didn't know each other. But I can almost picture each one passing the baton of faithfulness from her generation to the next.

In 1758, as Sarah Edwards lay dying in New England, "she expressed her entire resignation to God and her desire that he might be glorified in all things; and that she might be enabled to glorify him to the last."²

Not quite 100 years later in England, Liliias Trotter was born into a family of a similar social standing as the Pierrepoints, Sarah Edwards's family.

When Liliias died in 1928 in Algeria, Gladys Aylward was in London trying to persuade her brother and friends that someone needed to take the gospel to China. Soon she realized that God was calling *her*.

In 1940, as Gladys was trekking across Chinese mountains with 100 children, Esther Ahn Kim had already been a prisoner for the gospel's sake for a year in Korea.

Esther was released in 1945, the year that Helen Roseveare, a medical student in England, became a Christian.

And Helen Roseveare's life crosses the years of our lives, as she passes the baton of faithfulness to us, this generation.

More than chronology links these women. Only God knows all the

²Elizabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The Uncommon Union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards* (Laurel, Miss.: Audubon Press, 2003), p. 169.

crossings among their lives. But we do know that Helen Roseveare was touched by Liliias Trotter's writing and by her personal acquaintance with Gladys Aylward.

Liliias Trotter . . . is someone [I have] loved for many years. I was given a copy of her "Parables of the Cross" and "Parables of the Christ Life" (in one volume) before I went to the mission field in 1952/3, and this was a treasured possession—until the rebel soldiers destroyed all my library of precious books in the 1964 rebellion. I quote one of her lovely parables—the one about the sepals of the buttercup folding right back to release the flower, without the power to close again—in my new book.³ And Gladys Aylward stayed at our WEC Headquarters in . . . about 1950—before she returned to work with Chinese orphans in Taiwan. I can remember vividly some of the meetings she spoke at at that time!⁴

We can see other "crossings"—similarities of circumstances and feeling and faith. Frail health. Inner-city mission work among the socially "unacceptable." Significance of "insignificant" contacts and conversations. Lack of qualification to be accepted by a mission board. Recognition of death as a gateway to God. A spirit of "independence" that is really dependence on God.

May God give us eyes to see the crossings of these women's lives with our lives. And even more, may we see God more clearly in our own lives because of what we see in the lives of Sarah Edwards, Liliias Trotter, Gladys Aylward, Esther Ahn Kim, and Helen Roseveare.

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.
Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.
Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

HEBREWS 13:7-8

That's why I read biography. To remember people who've led the way on the path with God, to consider their lives, and to imitate their faith. Because we have the same God, and he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

³ See footnote 279.

⁴ Personal e-mail from Helen Roseveare, February 25, 2005.