

## God Knows What He is Doing

### Beautifully Exemplified in the Life of Sarah Hall Boardman Judson

Psalm 138:1-8

**Intro.** Sarah Hall Boardman Judson (1803-1845) was a remarkable Christian missionary who faithfully served King Jesus in Burma (modern Myramar) for over 20 years. She married and buried one missionary husband (George Boardman) and then remarried and was buried by another (Adoniram Judson). Her life was a marvelous witness both to the grace of God and the wisdom of God. Her life testifies to the truth that our God knows what He is doing, even in the midst of the greatest difficulties and trials. It is also a beautiful commentary on a thanksgiving psalm of King David, Psalm 138, a psalm with Messianic overtones as well (Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms*, EBC, 955).

We will examine the psalm in four movements (vv.1-2, 3, 4-6, 7-8). It will be a journey of joy and sorrow to see the life of Sarah B. Judson reflected in its truth. Sarah's life was one of absolute confidence in a sovereign Savior; a confidence that enabled her to pen this hymn:

“Proclaim the lofty praise of Him who once was slain,

But now is risen, through endless days, to live and reign.

He lives and reigns on high, who bought us with His blood,

Enthroned above the farthest sky, our Savior, [our] God.” (Sarah B. Judson, 1803-1845. By Henry S. Burrage in *Wholesome Words Home*, Missionary Biographies; used from *Baptist Hymn Writers and Their Hymns*: Brown Thurston & Co., © 1888).

### **I. Thank God for who He is before the nations 138:1-2**

David sounds the praise of thanksgiving from the beginning of this psalm, “I will give you thanks with all my heart.” And where will David herald his thanksgiving? “I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings” (v.1). This last phrase is not clear as to its meaning and is also translated as “before the gods” (ESV) or “before judges” or “before kings” (see the translation note in the *CSB*). Allan Ross favors the translation “before the gods” and writes, “Other passages in this part of the Psalter refer to pagan gods as well (Pss. 95:3; 96:4-5; and 115:38). The psalmist praises the greatness and glory of Yahweh “in the face” – so to speak, of false gods” (*Psalms*, vol.3, 804). We prefer this understanding. Verse 2 expands the thought of verse 1 explaining just how David will testify and sing his thanksgiving of the LORD before these false gods. He will “bow down towards [God’s] holy temple (or tabernacle)” in Jerusalem. There he will “give thanks to [the LORD’s] name for your constant love [Heb. *hesed*] and truth” [Heb. *emeth*, ESV “faithfulness”]. And why will he bow down and sing of the LORD’s love and truth, his “steadfast love and faithfulness?” Because you (the LORD) have exalted

your name and your promise (ESV, “your word”) above everything else.”

Commenting on this verse Charles Spurgeon writes,

“The name of the Lord in nature is not so easily read as in the Scriptures, which are a revelation in human language, specifically adapted to the human mind, treating of human need, and of a Saviour who appeared in human nature to redeem humanity. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but the divine word will not pass away, and in this respect especially it has a pre-eminence over every other form of manifestation. Moreover, the Lord lays all the rest of his name under tribute to his word: his wisdom, power, love, and all his other attributes combine to carry out his word. It is his word which creates, sustains, quickens, enlightens, and comforts. As a word of command it is supreme; and in the person of the incarnate Word it is set above all the works of God’s hand. ... Let us adore the Lord who has spoken to us by his word, and by his Son; and in the presence of unbelievers let us both praise his holy name and extol his holy word.” (*TOD*, vol.3, 244-245)

If ever there was a follower of the Lord Jesus who praised the name of the Savior and extolled his gospel before the lost and their false gods, it was Sarah B. Judson. Sarah was born on November 4, 1803 in Alstead, New Hampshire. She was the oldest of 13 children in a family that was extremely poor. At the age of 17 she was converted, professed Christ and was baptized. She felt the call to missions

immediately and wished “to follow in the footsteps of her heroine Ann Judson, who visited America in 1823” (Rosalie Beck, “More than rubies”). In the book *Missionary Biography. The Memoir of Sarah B. Judson, Member of the American Mission to Burmah*, Emily Judson (penname Fanny Forester), the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last wife of Adoniram Judson, includes an entry from Sarah’s journal written less than a month after her baptism. There Sarah writes,

“While I have this day had the privilege of worshipping the true God in solemnity, I have been pained by the thoughts of those who have never heard the sound of the gospel. When will the time come that the poor heathen, now bowing to idols, shall own the living and true God? Dear Saviour, haste to spread the knowledge of thy dying love to earth’s remotest bounds!” (p.11)

Her passion for the lost would continue to grow. She became involved in tract distribution and established a prayer meeting. All but one who attended became Christians. However, her heart for the nations would not wane. In a letter to a dear friend she would write,

“It is my ardent desire ... that the glorious work of reformation may extend till *every knee* shall bow to the living God. For this expected, this promised era, let us pray earnestly, unceasingly, and with faith. How can I be so

inactive, when I know that thousands are perishing in this land of grace; and millions in other lands are at this very moment kneeling before senseless idols!””

And in her journal—“Sinners perishing all round me, and I almost panting to tell the far *heathen* of Christ! Surely this is wrong. I will no longer indulge the vain foolish wish, but endeavor to be useful in the position where Providence has placed me. I can *pray* for deluded idolaters, and for those who labor among them, and this is a privilege indeed.” (Arabella Stuart, *Lives of the Three Mrs. Judsons*, 135)

Sarah, however, could not shake loose of her concern for the lost far away. Her heart for international missions would find a companion in a man named George Boardman. Moved by a poem he read on the death of a missionary named Colman, who died in Chittagong after only 2 years on the field, Boardman tracked down its author who just happen to be Sarah Hall. He proposed to her almost immediately and she accepted. Initially her friends and family discouraged her in this, with her parents withholding their consent. Eventually they gave their permission, and George and Sarah wed on July 4, 1825. They would leave for Burman the same month. The voyage would take 127 days. The moving scene of their departure, never to return, is one of the most heart wrenching in all of missionary lore. Fanny Forester (Emily Judson) records it this way:

“We recollect that when she left her paternal home, to reach the ship which was to convey her ‘over the dark and distant sea,’ after she had taken her seat in the stage coach with her chosen companion ... and had bestowed her last farewell upon the family group-as though she felt that she had not obtained that free and full consent to her abandonment of home and country which her filial heart craved, she looked out at the coach window and said, ‘Father, are you willing? Say, father, that you are willing I should go.’ ‘Yes, my child, I am willing.’ ‘Now I can go joyfully!’ was the emphatic response; and the noble wanderer went on her way with cheerful composure.

Of this scene [Sarah] writes to her husband's parents, ‘My mother embraced me as tenderly, when she whispered, ‘Sarah, I hope I am willing,’ as she did one month before, when she wildly said, ‘Oh! I cannot part with you!’ . . .”

Fanny then adds to this sorrowful scene,

“And so the fond child's heart was made glad even in the moment of its agony; for something of the previous reluctance of the sorrow-stricken parents to resign their treasure may be gathered from such pleadings as these [from Sarah].

Let us, my dear parents, go to Calvary; let us behold for a few moments, the meek, the holy Lamb of God, bleeding for our transgressions. Then let us inquire, 'Shall I withhold from this Saviour any object, however dear to my heart? Shall I be unwilling to suffer a few short years of toil and privation for his sake? Let us call to remembrance those days of darkness through which we passed before Jesus lifted upon us the light of his countenance. We have, I trust, each of us, seen our lost and ruined condition by nature, have seen ourselves exposed to the righteous indignation of our Creator, have felt ourselves sinking into endless despair and ruin, and all this is merited. But oh, amazing love! at that desperate moment the Saviour smiled upon us. He opened his arms of compassion, all polluted as we were with iniquity, he received us, forgave our sins, and bade us hope for joy unutterable beyond the grave. Did we not, then, surrender all into his hand? Was not this the language of our hearts,

' Had I a thousand lives to give,

A thousand lives should all be thine !

'And has not the precious Redeemer as strong claims upon us now as he had then?" (Pg 25-26)"

Oh let us like David, like Sarah, thank God and proclaim His love and faithfulness before the nations and their false gods that they too may worship and sing praises to our Lord!

## **II. Thank God that He answers prayers as we witness 136:3**

Verse 3 naturally flows out of verses 1-2. David praised and thanked God for his constant love and faithfulness because at an unspecified time when David sought the Lord (“On the day I called”), “you answered me.” Furthermore, the answer included “increased strength within me.” Alec Motyer writes, “you invigorate me with strength in my soul” (*Psalms by the Day*, 396). Within his inner being the Lord gave David strength, courage and boldness as he rejoiced in the Lord before pagan gods and their idolatrous followers. This is certainly something God did for Sarah Boardman Judson.

Unsurprisingly, Sarah would experience many hardships on the mission field. More than once she nearly died from severe sickness. Giving birth to 3 children with George, only one (George) would survive infancy. On more than one occasion her life was put in danger by robbery of her home, riots, and rebellions. Indeed she was warned by an English general of a “double danger from savage beasts and savage men” in Burma. Yet in her journal Sarah would write, “we trembled when we thought of the disturbance in Burmah, and there was only one

spot where we could find peace and serenity of mind. That sweet spot was the throne of grace. [There] we would often [go] and lose all anxiety and fear respecting our dear friends, our own future prospects, and the missionary cause in Burmah. It was sweet to commit all into the hands of God....We considered it our duty to supplicate for grace to support us in the hour of trial, and for direction in time of perplexity..." (*Lives of the Three Mrs. Judsons*, 147).

And, on the occasion of the robbery in their home while they lay in bed at night, Sarah would recount the kind provision and protection of God in their lives. She writes:

"I saw the assassins with their horrid weapons standing by our bedside, ready to do their worst had we been permitted to wake. Oh how merciful was that watchful Providence which prolonged those powerful slumbers of that night, not allowing even the infant at my bosom to open its eyes at so critical a moment. If ever gratitude glowed in my bosom, if ever the world appeared to me worthless as vanity, and if ever I wished to dedicate myself, my husband, my babe, my all, to our great Redeemer, it was at that time..."

Yes, my beloved friend, I think I can say, that notwithstanding our alarms, never did five months of my life pass as pleasantly as the last five have done. The thought of being among this people who we have so long desired

to see, and the hope that God would enable me to do some little good to the poor heathen, has rejoiced and encouraged my heart. I confess that once or twice my natural timidity has for a moment gained ascendancy over my better feelings ... But these fears have been transitory, and we have generally been enabled to place our confidence in the Great Shepherd of Israel who never slumbers or sleeps, assured that he would protect us . . . And we have also felt a sweet composure in the reflection that God has marked out our way; and if it best accord with his designs that we fall prey to these blood-thirsty monsters, *all will be right.*” (*Lives*, 154)

### **III. Thank God that He blesses the humble but rejects the proud 138:4-6**

Verses 4-6 contain what Allan Ross calls “a prophecy concerning the nations” (*Psalms*, vol. 3, 806). I call it a “missionary promise!” All the nations, represented by their kings, “will give you thanks LORD, when they hear what you promised” (v.4; See also Ps 68:29-32; 72:10-11; 102:15-16). This language anticipates and echoes Isaiah 52:15 and the great Suffering Servant song (Isa. 52:13-53:12). When the kings of the earth hear of the great salvation of God on their behalf through His Servant, “they will sing of the Lord’s ways,” joyfully acknowledging that “the LORD’s glory is great” (v.5). Here is salvation (v.4) and adoration (v.5) beautifully woven together.

The glory of the Lord is further made known when you consider that “though [He] is exalted” (cf. Phil 2:9-11), “He takes note of the humble” (v.6). The down and out, the nobodies of this world, are seen by the Lord and become the objects of His saving goodness and grace. In contrast, “He knows the haughty from afar.” God is great and the arrogant only think they are great. The humble He knows lovingly and intimately. The arrogant, the prideful, the self-righteous, He keeps at arms length. “A glance from afar,” says Spurgeon, “reveals to him their emptiness and offensiveness...he has no respect unto them, but utterly abhors them” (*TOD*, vol.3, 246).

The Burmese, awash in pagan religions, were proud and self-righteous. It would take a patient, steady stream of gospel truth to break through this barrier. God sent the Judsons and Boardmans to do just that!

God brought a notorious Karen criminal and murderer (it is reported he was involved in more than 30 murders) Ko Thah-Byoo to faith in Jesus. George Boardman would baptize him and he would become a famous and successful evangelist among the Karen. The gospel began to go forth in great power. It appears God had prepared the Karen for the day of their salvation. In their tradition, “They believed in a God who is denominated Yu-wah.” Though they recognized that their wickedness had separated them from this God, they believed “God will again have mercy upon us, God will save us again.” And, when will that

day come? In one of their traditional songs we read this verse, “When the Karen King arrives, Everything will be happy; When Karens have a king, Wild beast will lose their savageness” (*Lives of the Three Mrs. Judsons*, 160). Reflecting upon the grace of God among the Karen, but recognizing there was still much work to be done, Sarah would write to a beloved sister in 1828, “We have to suffer many little inconveniences in this country; but have no disposition to complain. We rejoice in the kind providence that has directed our steps, and would not exchange our condition. Our desire is to labor among the poor heathen until called to our eternal home” (Ibid., 163). God would indeed answer this desire of Sarah’s heart. Both George and she would die on the mission field never having returned to America. Thank God He blesses humble servants.

#### **IV. Thank God that He will fulfill His Purpose in your life** 138:7-8

This psalm concludes with a powerful confession of confidence in the providence, protection and grace of a sovereign God. Five affirmations are made concerning the God who is with us, “If I walk into the thick of danger” (v.7 ESV, “I walk in the midst of trouble”), the God “who will not abandon the work of his hands” (v. 8). What does David declare in terms of his confidence in the Lord?

- 1) “You will preserve my life from the anger of my enemies.”
- 2) “You will extend your hand” (i.e. your power and strength).

- 3) “Your right hand will save (ESV, “delivers”) me.”
- 4) “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me.”
- 5) “LORD, your faithful love endures forever.”

How these faithful promises applied so appropriately and beautifully in the life of Sarah Boardman Judson.

- 1) God would spare her life on more than one occasion from serious illness.
- 2) God would sustain her heart upon the death of her little daughter Sarah on July 8, 1829 at the age of 2 years 8 months.
- 3) She would watch her husband slowly descend into death from tuberculosis. Of this time she would write to her mother, “Oh, my dear mother, it would distress you to see how emaciated he is! --- and so weak, that he is scarce able to move. God is calling to me in a most impressive manner to set my heart on heavenly things. Two lovely infants already in the world of bliss -- my beloved husband suffering under a disease which will most assuredly take him from me – my own health poor, and little Georgie [their son] often ill” (Fanny Forester, 82-83). George Boardman would die in February 1831. Of her first husband Sarah said, “He exhibited a tenderness of spirit, a holy sensibility, such as I never witnessed before. He seemed to see the goodness of God in everything. He would weep while conversing on the love of Jesus; and words cannot describe to you the depth of feeling

with which he spoke of his own unworthiness” (Ibid., 86). As he neared death, Sarah reports him saying,

“You know, Sarah that coming on a foreign mission involves the probability of a shorter life than staying in one’s native country. And yet obedience to our Lord, and compassion for the perishing heathen, induced us to make this sacrifice. And have we ever repented that we came? No; I trust we can both say that we bless God for bringing us to Burmah, for directing our footsteps to Tavoy, and even for leading us hither.” (Ibid., 90).

George Boardman would die on February 11, 1831 at the age of 30. At first Sarah considered returning to America with her young son, but her love for the Burmese compelled her to stay. I will let Sarah speak of all of this for herself:

“When I first stood by the grave of my husband, I thought I must go home with George. But these poor, inquiring, and Christian Karens, and the schoolboys, and the Burmese Christians, would then be left without any one to instruct them; and the poor, [ignorant] Tavoyans would go on in the road to death, with no one to warn them of their danger. How then, oh, how can I go? We shall not be separated long. A few more years, and we shall all meet in yonder blissful world,

whither those we love have gone before us. I feel thankful that I was allowed to come to this heathen land. Oh, it is a precious privilege to tell idolaters of the Gospel; and when we see them disposed to love the Saviour, we forget all our privations and dangers. My beloved husband wore out his life in this glorious cause; and that remembrance makes me more than ever attached to the work, and the people for whose salvation he labored till death.” (Forester, 106-107)

- 4) Three years after her husband’s death, Adoniram Judson would marry Sarah Boardman. She had not returned home to America, as many friends counseled her to do, though she would, with a broken heart, eventually send her young son George back to America because of health concerns. He would become the much respected pastor of FBC Philadelphia (1864-94) and a well known opponent of slavery.

Sarah would remain in Burma, continuing the work, making evangelistic tours, preaching the gospel to men and women when no qualified man was available, and supervising the numerous schools she helped establish. She would translate *The Pilgrim’s Progress* into Burmese. She would translate tracts, *The Life of Christ* and the New Testament into Peguan. Concerning her preaching to both men and women, a point of controversy in her and our day, her biographer Fanny Forester puts things in their proper perspective:

“But now she sat in the zayat, which had been erected for her husband, at the foot of the mountain, and in others, wherever a little company of worshippers could be collected, and performed even weightier offices than those of Miriam and Anna;...but meek, and sometimes tearful, speaking in low, gentle accents, and with a manner sweetly persuasive. In several instances she thus conducted the worship of two or three hundred Karens, through the medium of her Burmese interpreter; and such was her modest manner of accomplishing the unusual task, that even the most fastidious were pleased; and a high officer of the English Church, which is well-known to take strict cognizance of irregularities, saw fit to bestow upon her unqualified praise. These acts, however, were not in accordance with her feminine taste or her sense of propriety. The duty, which called her to them, was fashioned by peculiar circumstance; and, as soon as opportunity offered, she gladly relinquished the task in favor of a person better suited to its performance.” (Forester, 122).

## **Conclusion**

Sarah Boardman Judson would be married to missionary Adoniram Judson for 11 years. She would love him and labor alongside of him faithfully as she had her first husband George. She would have 8 children with him. Five would survive into adulthood (Richard Pierard, “The Man Who Gave the Bible to the Burmese,”

*Church History and Biography* Issue 90, p.21). In her obituary her husband's opinion of his 2<sup>nd</sup> wife is faithfully captured:

“The Memoir of his first beloved wife [Ann] has been long before the public. It is, therefore, most gratifying to his feelings to be able to say in truth, that the subject of this notice was, in every point of natural and moral excellence, the worthy successor of Ann H. Judson. He constantly thanks God that he has been blest with two of the best of wives; he deeply feels that he has not improved those rich blessings as he ought; and it is most painful to reflect, that from the peculiar pressure of the missionary life, he has sometimes failed to treat those dear beings with that consideration, attention, and kindness, which their situation in a foreign heathen land ever demanded. (Forester, 174-175).

Sarah became deathly ill and the plan was to go home to America with the hope she might recover. It was not to be. Adoniram, Sarah, and three of their small children set sail. Though she briefly rebounded, she lapsed in health once again and it was obvious she would soon die. Sarah went to be with the Savior she so dearly adored and loved at St. Helena in the South Atlantic on September 1, 1845. She was not quite 42 years old. Biographer Fanny Forester records the final words shared between Adoniram and Sarah. No commentary is needed.

“A few days before her death, [Adoniram], called her children to her bedside, and said, in their hearing, ‘I wish, my love, to ask pardon for every unkind word or deed of which I have ever been guilty. I feel that I have, in many instances, failed of treating you with that kindness and affection which you have ever deserved.’ ‘Oh!’ said she, ‘you will kill me if you talk so. It is I that should ask pardon of you; and I only want to get well, that I may have an opportunity of making some return for all your kindness, and of showing you how much I love you.’

This recollection of her dying bed leads me to say a few words relative to the closing scenes of her life...Her hope had long been fixed on the Rock of Ages, and she had been in the habit of contemplating death as neither distant nor undesirable. As it drew near, she remained perfectly tranquil. No shade of doubt, or fear, or anxiety, ever passed over her mind. She had a prevailing preference to depart, and be with Christ. ‘I am longing to depart,’ and ‘what can I want besides?’ (Forester, 175-76).

A few days later the time of her departure to go be with Jesus arrived. Her husband provides the details of their joyful and sorrowful separation:

“At two o’clock in the morning, wishing to obtain one more token of recognition, I roused her attention, and said, ‘Do you still love the Saviour?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she replied, ‘I ever love the Lord Jesus Christ.’ I said again, ‘Do you still love me?’ She replied in the affirmative, by a peculiar expression of her own. ‘Then give me one more kiss,’ and we exchanged that token of love for the last time. Another hour passed, ---life continued to recede, --- she ceased to breathe. For a moment I traced her upward flight, and thought of the wonders which were opening to her view. I then closed her sightless eyes, dressed her, for the last time, in the drapery of death, and being quite exhausted with many sleepless nights, I threw myself down and slept. On awaking in the morning, I saw the children standing and weeping around the body of their dear mother...” (Ibid., 177).

Sarah would be buried in St. Helena next to another missionary from Ceylon, a Mrs. Chater.

I would be remiss if I did not note that Sarah was an accomplished poet. Thinking in her last days that she might yet cheat death again, it was determined that she would proceed to America with the children and her husband would return to the work in Burma. Contemplating their forthcoming years of separation, perhaps their permanent separation in this life, she wrote the last words she would ever pen to her husband on a scrap of broken paper. Thankfully they survived and have become quite famous in the history of missions.

“We part on this green islet, Love,  
Thou for the Eastern main,  
I, for the setting sun, Love –  
Oh, when to meet again?

My heart is sad for thee, Love,  
For lone thy way will be;  
And oft thy tears will fall, Love,  
For thy children and for me.

The music of thy daughter’s voice  
Thou’lt miss for many a year,  
And the merry shout of thine elder boys,  
Thou’lt list in vain to hear.

When we knelt to see our Henry die,  
And heard his last faint moan,  
Each wiped the tear from the other’s eye –  
Now, each must weep alone.

My tears fall fast for thee, Love, -  
How can I say farewell?  
But go; - thy God be with thee, Love,  
Thy heart’s deep grief to quell!

Yet my spirit clings to thine, Love,  
Thy soul remains with me,  
And oft we'll hold communion sweet,  
O'er the dark and distant sea.

And who can paint our mutual joy,  
When, all our wanderings o'er,  
We both shall clasp our infants three,  
At home, on Burmah's shore.

But higher shall our raptures glow,  
On yon celestial plain,  
When the loved and parted here below  
Meet, ne'er to part again.

Then gird thine armour on, Love,  
Nor faint thou by the way,  
Till [Buddha] shall fall, and Burman's sons  
Shall own Messiah's sway."

"In all the missionary annals," says the editor of the 'New York Evangelist,' "there are few things more affecting than this." (Forester, 169-170).

And the fruit of her labor:

- Today there are 1.6 million Baptist in Myanmar (Burma)
- Today there are almost 5,000 churches in Myanmar

- Today Myanmar one of the world's largest Baptist communities in the world  
(*Asian Review*, 12-14.17, online)

Yes, our God knows what He is doing!