

Gladys Aylward

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 February 2025

Preacher: Rachel Ciano

[0 : 00] Thank you so much for having me here today. You don't know how much of a joy it is to bring the things that I love to the people that God cares and loves for.

This is a real joy for me. So we are going to look at this theme of steadfast in humility. And I think humility is a really good word that captures Gladys Alwood.

And I think she's going to help us wrestle with that pull that I think we can all feel about wanting to leave a legacy in this world.

We want to be remembered. We want people to know our names both now and after we're gone. We want to be people worthy of honour and known to be worthy of honour.

So I wonder as we start today what kind of legacy you want to leave. I have to think about this for my own life. How do I want to be remembered?

[1 : 08] Do I want to be remembered? What are the things that I want to be known for after I'm gone? And what's remarkable about Gladys Alwood is she's not a person that strives for this.

And that's going to come out in her story. She wasn't someone who wanted to be recognised in the circles that she moved in, which I find can be tempting for us, that temptation to be recognised in our communities, in our jobs, in our social circles.

Her world's no different. It's not a problem that just belongs to our generation. It's a perennial universal problem.

But I think for her it's her prayerful reliance on the Lord that allows her to be free of that need. It just doesn't have a hold on her.

She's just not interested in it. And so I'm going to tell you her story, her remarkable story.

[2 : 16] I'm going to tell you just some of it, but it's full of fascinating twists and turns. But it is the story of a person making decision after decision, prayerfully making decision after decision, to pursue God's will.

She's a woman of great spiritual momentum. She's very unimpressive outwardly. She's a tiny little thing.

But she has gravitas. She's got huge spiritual momentum. She didn't know where God would take her in this world, but she made prayerful choice after choice to live for him and not for herself.

So Gladys was born into a Christian family in London right at the beginning of the 20th century, so 1902.

Her dad was a warden at the local church. Her mum raised the siblings in her home, you know, according to Christian values. But they weren't really sticking for Gladys.

[3 : 21] She wasn't interested. It was in her teenage years that things really switch on for her spiritually. Soon after that, what we might call a conversion experience, for her it was the idea of millions of people in China dying without access to the gospel.

That's what really gripped her heart. Now, what she did about that is she tried to convince everyone else to go instead.

You need to go. No, you need to go. No, you need to go. And one day her brother got so frustrated with her in their kitchen at home that he just kind of had an outburst and said, Gladys, stop bugging us.

Why don't you go? And then he stormed out. So they got her thinking. I don't think she'd even thought that was a possibility. So she was 27 when she was accepted for missionary training with China Inland Mission.

I don't know if you've heard of that organisation. It was an organisation that Hudson Taylor had set up about 70 years before this. And he set it up because lots of the missionaries were staying on the eastern coast of China, but they weren't heading inland.

[4 : 43] So there was a vast interior that did not have access to the gospel. And so he sets up the aptly termed China Inland Mission. So that's who she goes and approaches for missionary training. She is accepted. But soon the wheels fall off. She had been educated up to a point of... at 14 years of age and then had stopped. She'd gone out and worked in a shop instead. And she wasn't demonstrating a proficiency in learning language. And so China Inland Mission deemed her unacceptable for missionary service because of her language acquisition skills were lacking. So she wasn't allowed to continue. She was heartbroken. She was devastated. Devastated. China Inland Mission said when they brought her in for kind of the exit interview, as we might call it, she did say to them that she had really learnt to pray in this time.

[5 : 50] She may not have learnt language, but she had learnt to pray at this time. I love what Tim Keller says on prayer.

He says, God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything he knew. So she keeps praying.

She ends up in the home as a housekeeper of a retired China Inland Mission couple. So they've returned from the field and she goes into their house to help them in their later years. And as she watches them, she sees their prayerful reliance on the Lord. And she continues hearing stories about China, about the work of the gospel there.

And she eventually finds out about a 73-year-old Scottish widow looking for someone to join her in ministry in northern China.

[6 : 54] So she asks if she could come. This Scottish widow, Jeannie Lawson is her name. She's quite very, she's very dow, she's very serious. And she says, basically, if you can find your way to me, you're welcome.

This woman had been looking for someone young to come and take over her work. She's widowed, she's elderly, she wants someone to come and take over the work. And so that's what Gladys is now trying to do.

So she saves up for a train ticket. I don't know if you've gone on like webjet.com and looked up flights. What are the cheapest flights? The ones that are like, you know, five stops around the world before you want to get to your destination.

For her, the cheapest train ticket that she could get to China would take her through Europe, Russia, Siberia, and into northern China.

So she put it on lay-by. She would go and make payments at the train station to pay off this ticket. She eventually got the money, pay for the ticket.

[8 : 03] The train teller said, you really shouldn't be going, sweetheart. You really shouldn't be going. Because there was war on at the time between China and Japan and on one of China's allies was Russia.

But she sets off. 1932, 30 years of age, she sets off. She considered later the cost that this would have been for her family.

Because really, if you're getting a train to China through Europe, Russia, Siberia, it's not easy to get your baby girl back, is it?

Right at the beginning of her journey, she meets the Dutch couple. So she's on the train. She meets a Dutch couple coming back from attending the Keswick Convention.

in England. So the Keswick Convention's like going to Katoomba or going to... It's one of those big things. And so they're getting the train back home to Holland, to the Netherlands, and they have a conversation.

[9 : 14] They talk with Gladys. They learn that she's off to China with the gospel. And the woman in the couple promises that at 9 o'clock, every night, she's going to pray for Gladys.

9 o'clock, every night, she's going to pray for Gladys for the rest of her life. She said, can we write one another's names in each other's Bibles so we can remember each other?

The man, I don't know if he felt awkward at this point. I don't know his motives, what he was doing, if he just wanted to help. But he gives Gladys a one-pound British note.

Now, this woman's not going back to a country where she can spend this, right? But she's got this one-pound British note from this guy. It's not a whole lot of money, but, you know, it's something, as they say goodbye.

So Gladys is perplexed. What am I going to do with this? That note is going to save her life. So because war between China and Japan had broken out the year before, she was rerouted through different parts of Russia.

[10:25] It gets very complex at one point. She has to get off the train because it won't go any further into, you know, a region where there's war going on.

She has to walk back to the last station, which is like a two-day walk, so she has to sleep in the snow overnight on her suitcase with the wolves howling. It's all going on for her.

She makes it back to the previous station and soldiers tell her the convoluted way that she has to go to get to the next spot to avoid the scenes of battle. As she's making that journey, Russian soldiers take her passport away.

That's a very vulnerable position, isn't it, to be a woman in the middle of Russia without a passport. They changed the profession on her passport from missionary to machinist because they wanted her to work on the new machines that they had in that city.

They wanted her to stay and work. She was trapped. She was trapped. Some locals at high cost to their own personal safety tried to think of a way to help her escape.

[11:47] There's a boat leaving for Japan. It's a Japanese boat leaving for Japan. Can they smuggle her onto it? She makes it to the boat.

She's on the gangway. Russian soldiers literally grab her. And what does she produce? The one pound note and they let go long enough to grab it for her to pull her arms back, jump on the boat and keep going.

So it saved her life. She said that moment was like escaping a bird catcher's net. I love how the Lord works in amazing ways like that. So she lands in Japan.

She was never supposed to go through Japan. She crosses into China. She still has a further train, bus, and two-day meal ride to reach the small town in the mountains of northern China where she would finally meet Mrs. Lawson.

So this is the story of just getting there, right? She hasn't even started ministry. This is the story of her getting there. Now, Jeannie Lawson, she lives in a very rough, large house full of rubbish, broken masonry everywhere.

[13:03] All the rooms don't have windows or doors. It's very rough. She plans to turn it into an inn for travellers. They're going to call it the Inn of Eight Happinesses.

And so on Gladys' first night, she's like, where can I get changed? And Jeannie Lawson says, don't get changed.

Just sleep with your clothes on. That way they can't get stolen. And lucky she did because when she woke up in the morning, it was to a sea of faces in at the window because the foreign woman had arrived.

News had got around. Now, why are they turning this rough house into a hotel and inn? Well, in that part of northern China, you might be familiar with it.

It's very rough mountain terrain. And so to have anything travel through, it was via mules. It was like a mule highway. So there was a need for these mule riders to find cheap, simple overnight accommodation and food.

[14:10] Gladys had stayed in some of them on her trip into this place. And so news soon spread around the area that, quote, the inn of the foreign ladies was clean, the food is good, and at night, they have long stories free of charge.

So what were these stories? They told stories from the Bible. And in the end, that's how Gladys picked up the language, which she says is one of the biggest miracles of all her time there was picking up the language.

She learnt it through learning off by heart these Bible stories and telling them. Within about a year, Jeannie Lawson had died.

And so young Gladys is alone, the only foreigner, not just the only woman foreigner, the only foreigner in that part of China. One day, a local magistrate comes to Gladys with a request.

Now, it would have been a very intimidating scene because he came in with armed guards, they've got big swords by their side, he's a very intimidating person with a lot of power.

[15:32] He comes to Gladys with a request. He says, he now has the personal responsibility to ensure that foot binding, which had been recently outlawed, was eradicated in his area.

And so, you may be aware, foot binding is where they break the foot and bind it in half underneath a young woman's feet. Sorry, yeah, yeah.

So Gladys, I said before, she's tiny, she's four feet, ten inches tall. She's got size three feet. Her feet were considered giant and the locals would often like lift the bottom of her skirt to look at her, like just marvel, this massive feet that she has.

And so the magistrate said that as a woman with big feet, he needed her to help inspect women's feet in the area because men weren't allowed to do that job and every other woman had her feet bound.

So what's Gladys going to do in this moment? She says to him, I've come to China to tell people about the God I worship.

[16:43] If I take the job, I'm going to use it as an opportunity to preach the gospel to these isolated villages. And he agrees because I says, I notice you Christian people don't bind your feet.

A man's gods are his own business. Yes, you can go and do that. So she's given government funding and essentially security to go into these isolated villages and towns with the gospel. And they would call out her name in Mandarin was Aiwede. That was the closest to Aylward, Aiwede, and it meant virtuous one.

And they would announce in the town that she had arrived and she became known as the storyteller. The storytellers arrived. And so she would tell these stories in all these isolated villages. And so Gladys strikes me as a woman who was as wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove when it came to opportunities to talk about Jesus.

[17:48] Yes. but Gladys feels awfully lonely as you can imagine she had expected at this point in her life to be married to have children she's just lonely because she doesn't have a co-worker let alone a husband she's praying God could you please send someone to help and preferably a man not necessarily to marry him but just you know I need a guy around to do some of the hard stuff can you just please send someone and God doesn't answer the prayer that way instead she's walking home one day and she this young girl lying in the arms of a woman on the side of the road this little girl is essentially a slave and she's probably hours away from death and Gladys offers to buy this little girl the woman in whose care this girl was saw it as an opportunity to you know make a few coins and so she sells her to Gladys for six pence that's probably like five

Australian dollars today so not much six pence and she takes her home and cares for her and she says she calls this girl six pence she says six pence helped fill that aching void in her and of course six pence wasn't alone in the circumstances she found herself in so she would bring other people to Gladys for help yeah other orphans or other vulnerable children to Gladys and so Gladys keeps accumulating more and more children over a hundred she ends up saying like I long for a moment to myself now she cares for them she feeds them she teaches them including bible stories she speaks the gospel to them now by this stage her town is repeatedly a war zone so soldiers would come in they would retreat things would be decimated they would return again to more and more rubble it would happen again and again and again and so really her city is crumbling around her she knows she needs to get these kids out she needs to get them to safety now there's a very powerful woman who is has a lot of funding at her disposal and she is helping care for what she calls them warfans war orphans and so she says to Gladys look I can help you you just need to get the kids to me in this in the safe zone now that safe zone is 350 kilometers north across the mountains in the middle of a war and so Gladys sets off on that mountainous mule track with over a hundred kids aged between three and sixteen and so gruelling dangerous journey they have to beg for food along the way which is obviously scarce in a war zone other villages would be completely abandoned as they made their way across they come to the wide expanse of the yellow river what are they going to do there's not ferries running anymore in a in a war zone there's no boats to be seen they can they cannot cross it i was listening to a talk that Gladys gave in Sydney in the 1960s this week not many of the people that i get to write about and study i actually get to hear their voices so it's amazing and she talked about this moment on the banks of that river they slept out in the open for a couple of nights trying to think about what to do as her breaking point that was her breaking point how could God deliver them from that could God be trusted in that situation on the banks of the yellow river she could not see a solution

God was not coming through could he be trusted she'd been teaching the bible stories to uh those children in her care and one of them that she must have taught them was the story of when israel leaves egypt leaving pharaoh behind pharaoh and his armies are chasing the israelites and of

course they come to the river that they can't cross the red sea what are they going to do what's God going to do in this situation and this is what a kid said about this moment he said when we got to the river we waited and waited for a boat they came to her with this story and so he said we prayed for the river to be opened so that we could walk across like the children of israel did across the red sea but

God knew we were tired of walking and so he sent a boat and that was far better and that's what he did a ferry finally came and i love this kid's words here because it wasn't that the parting of the sea of the yellow river was harder than a boat God was just more kind in sending a boat because their feet were really sore from walking they didn't have to want to walk across the river bed they got across the river they continued the trek going so high up sometimes up the mountains the clouds obscured them it was a long month it was an agonizing journey they finally arrived where they could get help and Gladys's body understandably completely shut down she went to hospital doctors fully expected her to die she had typhoid pneumonia malnutrition exhaustion she lay there for a month completely out of it unaware of her surroundings she recovered but it took years she can't really remember the next two years of her life when the chinese revolution began in 1949 she was forced to leave china and she returned to england and she never went back there she would eventually go to taiwan to head an orphanage in 1957 and she died there in 1970 the city aged 68 and on her tombstone are those words that were read at the beginning that unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground there won't be new life so i've told you some of the remarkable parts of her story and in many ways it's a memorable story a lot more happens on the way it's a wild ride but this is the part that's more remarkable to me her story nearly was forgotten because she was content for it to be forgotten she was a woman so bound up with christ her christ-shaped humility meant she didn't care if she was known or remembered it had no hold on her she didn't want or need to leave a legacy she didn't desire that her life story be honored that someone write a biography about her so let me tell you the story of how her story came to light and how it helps us reflect on that pull to be remembered by the world so gladys returns to england in 1949 and there's a few lines in the newspaper that report that she's returned home from being a missionary in china for 20 years and so a bbc journalist and writer he sees those few lines in a newspaper he's working on a project for bbc radio so think of it like modern podcasts he's doing a series uh called the undefeated so he's looking for stories that kind of match with that theme the undefeated and he thinks i re i reckon there's a story here so he goes to her home in london he asked gladys have you seen any adventures that map with the theme of the undefeated she says no nothing noteworthy has happened to me that that journalist alan recorded that conversation and he remembered it word for word because it had such an impact on him but surely he said in 20 years in china you must have had many strange experiences

others oh yes said gladys but i'm sure people would not be interested in them nothing very exciting happened it was at least 15 minutes more before she confessed that she had once taken some children across the mountains and slowly the story emerged and the rest is history it was turned into a book that he wrote a film which gladys hated hated she hated the attention she hated becoming a household name and so i marvel at her story it's an incredible one but more so i marvel at the fact that she didn't desire to be remembered she's she was not the center of her story she would have been much more comfortable being forgotten by the world why why is that for gladys well that journalist alan burgess helps us understand that woman that he met on that fateful day this is what he writes he goes it was not mock modesty on the part of gladys arwood the stories she had been telling were to her her the greatest in the world taken straight from the pages of the new testament that her own adventures might be worth setting down she had simply not considered so for gladys it was the stories that she told every night to those mule travelers to those children in her care to those townspeople as she was a foot binding inspector those were the stories that mattered everything else paled in comparison it was the legacy of jesus that she was in awe of not in awe of her own legacy she had no need to build a monument to her own pride and ego it's not false modesty too which can be a temptation her adventures seemed entirely remarkable in the shadow of the one in whose name she was doing these things and so in that way i think gladys arwood models for us christ-shaped humility christ-shaped humility it's not a white knuckling approach of getting through things it was a reliance on the lord a humility came from and demonstrated her daily dependence on her lord jesus captivated her not herself she didn't fill her own imagination her own life didn't fill her mind the lord jesus did and so i pray that she would be someone who encourages you on your journey with this same lord who's able to answer the same prayers in remarkable ways

that the one you serve is worthy of all honor and so in serving him we are completely free to have christ-shaped humility the world and its opinion of us and the desire to be remembered doesn't have to have a hold of us christ sets us free from that thank you so