

David Livingstone

By Natalie Hanks, Lead Editor



'If a commission by an earthly man is considered an honour, how can a commission by a Heavenly King be considered a sacrifice?'

– David Livingstone

Every year the Trinitarian Bible Society distributes thousands of Bibles, New Testaments, Gospels, and calendars to people in Africa. These Scripture items travel thousands of miles to their destinations, eventually being carried on bicycles, canoes, and by foot to be delivered to remote areas. Two hundred years ago this would have been impossible, as vast areas of Africa were unexplored and inaccessible.

One of the first European people to explore Africa and cross it from east to west was a Scottish man named David Livingstone. One of his main aims was to find a 'highway' into Africa, such as via the River Zambezi, which would allow people to travel directly into the heart of Africa by boat, and spread the Word of God. Through his work, David opened ways

for future missionaries to travel to Africa and spread the Gospel, though this came at a huge personal cost. When David was asked why he became a missionary to Africa he simply replied, 'I was compelled by the love of Christ'.

A tough and hard-working childhood

David Livingstone was born in March 1813 in a mill town in Scotland. His parents, Neil and Agnes, lived in a single room of a tenement building for the workers of a cotton factory on the banks of the River Clyde.

Life was hard for the Livingstone family. The family of seven lived in one small room, and the building was also home to twenty-four other families. When David was ten years old he was employed by the cotton mill of Henry Monteith and Co. He and his brother worked twelve-hour days as 'piecers'. Their job was to tie broken cotton threads on the spinning machines in the mill to keep the machines running smoothly. Mills were loud, hot, and dangerous places, and the piecers ran the risk of getting their fingers caught in the machinery and injured. Work began at 6.00 a.m. and continued until 8.00 p.m., and they

walked up to twenty miles a day around the mill, often crawling and stooping under machinery.

By the end of the day, the children in the mill would be exhausted. However, young David Livingstone was a very determined boy, and, after work, he would make his way to school which held classes from 8.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. David's father, Neil, had taught him to read and write, and in his first year at school he learnt Latin. Any spare money he had left from what he gave his mother was spent on textbooks, and he often read until midnight, getting up six hours later to work in the mill. He would even prop his books on the machinery in the mill to try to learn while he worked, but the other children would knock them off. Any recreation time he had he spent roaming the countryside studying rocks and trees, having a great interest in science. This difficult and hard childhood taught David persistence and endurance which would be useful in his future life.

Conversion

David Livingstone grew up Presbyterian in the Church of Scotland until he became a Congregationalist as a teenager. He came from a devout Christian family, and when he was nine years old he memorised the whole of Psalm 119. When David was about twelve years old he became anxious about his unworthiness and spiritual state as a sinner. He said, 'I found neither peace nor happiness, which caused me (never having revealed my state of mind to anyone) often to bewail my sad estate with tears in secret'.¹ However, over time these concerns reduced as his mind was taken up with his work and his studies, but his heart was not completely



at rest due to nagging worries about his condition. When David was eighteen he was promoted to become a spinner at the mill. It was after this time that David came to a saving faith in Christ. He later wrote, 'A sense of deep obligation to Him for His mercy has influenced, in some small measure, my conduct ever since'.²

Training to be a missionary

After David's conversion, he was convinced that the salvation of men should be the chief desire of every Christian. When he was twenty-one he read a pamphlet about missionary work in China and felt the call to become a missionary himself. In particular, he wanted to be a medical missionary as he had always had a desire to study medicine. He said, 'In the glow of love which Christianity inspires, I soon resolved to devote myself to the alleviation of human misery'.³ For most young men in David's position this would have been impossible, as it meant going to university, but he knew Latin and was so widely read that he was accepted.

In comparison, less than ten per cent of the children working in the mills in the nineteenth century even learned to read or write.

David obtained a place at Anderson College, Glasgow to study medicine and chemistry while working at the mill during holidays to financially support himself (along with help from his family). In 1838 he was accepted as a probationary candidate by the London Missionary Society (LMS), before eventually going to Charing Cross Hospital Medical School to continue his medical studies. He was ordained to preach in November 1840.

David Livingstone initially wanted to go to China as a missionary, but the looming Opium War made the LMS cautious about sending new missionaries there. At first, LMS wished to send David to the West Indies, but he told the LMS directors that the West Indies already had plenty of doctors, and he would prefer to go to other parts of the world. He came into contact with a missionary named Robert Moffat who was visiting England from his work at Kuruman in South Africa. Robert wanted to expand the missionary work across Africa into unexplored territory. He said,

Many a morning have I stood on the porch of my house, and looking northward, have seen the smoke arise from villages that have never heard of Jesus Christ. I have seen, at different times, the smoke of a thousand villages—villages whose people are without Christ, without God, and without hope in the world.⁴

Robert was the first person to translate the Bible into the Sechuana language (today this language is called Tswana or Setswana and is spoken in Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe). This meeting led David to decide to go to Africa as a missionary, and he set sail in November 1840 along with two other missionaries, Mr and Mrs Ross.

Arrival in Africa

David Livingstone arrived in South Africa in 1841, where he would spend eleven years at various inland stations. Firstly, he travelled to Robert Moffat's mission station at Kuruman. The Moffats had established the mission station here in 1824. The family was still in England, so David and another missionary, Roger Edwards, further explored the area and decided to set up a new missionary station further north in Mabotsa, Botswana where many people were unreached by the Gospel. By the summer of 1842, David had already gone farther north than any other European into the difficult Kalahari Desert. He had also familiarised himself with the local languages and cultures in order to connect and preach to the people.

In 1844 the Moffats returned to Africa, and in January David travelled to greet them, meeting their daughter Mary for the first time. The following month, David was helping villagers near his mission station in Mabotsa defend their cattle from lions. In the process, a lion attacked him and broke his arm. David went to recuperate in Kuruman with the Moffats, where Mary tended to him, and they soon became engaged.

David Livingstone and Mary Moffat were married in 1845 and settled in their home at the new mission station in Mabotsa. Eventually, they settled at Kolobeng, Botswana.

Missionary endeavours

Kolobeng was the Livingstones home from 1847 to 1852, and they built a church and home there. The Kwene tribe of the Tswana people lived in the area, the chief was a man called Sechele. The Livingstones integrated themselves with the people. David, as well as preaching to them, helped them medicinally and practically such as teaching them

irrigation methods using the nearby river. After many discouragements Sechele was converted to Christianity in 1849. Sechele was an amazingly quick learner, learning the alphabet in two days, and was soon able to call English a second language. He even managed to translate the Bible in his native tongue. Sadly, Sechele found it difficult to reject some aspects of his former life, such as having multiple wives, although through him eventually the whole tribe became, at least nominally, Christian.

David, Mary, and their children explored Africa over the following years, with the aim of establishing more missionary stations. David made many trips north from their station at Kolobeng. David felt led to go further north, but he realised the climate and travelling were not good for his children, so in 1852 sent them back to England with his wife. This left him free to travel further, although he greatly missed his wife and family.

Crossing the continent

David Livingstone was greatly upset by the ongoing slave trade in Africa. He wanted it abolished, and had a theory that Christianity and honest trade would help this. His motto was 'Christianity, Commerce, and Civilisation', and thought that finding a way into the heart of Africa would help make this possible. He believed that navigating the River Zambezi (the longest east-flowing river in Africa, flowing into the Indian Ocean) would be the key to this, as it could open up a 'Christian commercial highway' to the interior of Africa.

David travelled to the village of Linyanti on the river, roughly midway between the east and west coasts of Africa. He eventually reached Luanda, a city in Angola on the west coast of Africa in May 1854. This 2,000 km journey had taken two years, today this journey takes just over thirty hours in a car. David recognised

that the route was too dangerous and difficult for traders, so he retraced his steps, east down the River Zambezi. On his way back, he was the first European to see the 'smoke that thunders' waterfall in Zimbabwe, which he named 'Victoria Falls' after the Queen of England.

Eventually, David reached Mozambique on the east side of Africa, becoming the first European to cross the continent and 'open up' Africa. The trip resulted in new maps and scientific data.

Return to England

In December 1856 David returned to Britain as a hero, in great demand as a public speaker, and was elected to the Royal Society. He published an account of his travels titled *Missionary Travels* in 1856. He also proposed to return to Africa for more exploration, to find other routes for trade into Africa. The London Missionary Society were reluctant to aid this because they could only aid plans directly connected to the spread of the Gospel. Therefore, David resigned in 1857 and was appointed by the British Government to explore the area. He also obtained funding for an expedition down the River Zambezi to explore the area around it.

The Zambezi Expedition

In 1858 David Livingstone was back in Africa for his government expedition. This expedition was much more official and organised than his other trips, and had a paddle steamer, stores, and six Europeans accompanying him. However, although David had many qualities, it would appear that sadly he was not a great leader, and the trip was met with many obstacles and arguments.

The explorers found that the River Zambezi

had impassable rapids; David had to find another way into the interior of Africa, so they investigated the Shire river (a tributary of the River Zambezi) and its source, Lake Nyasa (now called Lake Malawi). In July 1863 the expedition was recalled to Britain. While some people saw the expedition as a failure, scientific organisations benefited from a wide range of observations and discoveries.

Sadly, during the time of this expedition, Mary Livingstone, David's wife died in Shupanga, Mozambique in April 1862, aged just forty-one. Together they had three sons and two daughters, as well as a daughter who died as a baby.

The Source of the Nile

In 1866 David set out to find the source of the River Nile. His assistants deserted him and falsely informed authorities that he had died. His supplies and medicine were also stolen and his health was declining. Still, he kept travelling, arriving at Lake Mweru (on the border of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), and then travelled south to be the first European to see Lake Bangweulu. While his mission to find the source of the Nile was unsuccessful, he did find the source of the Congo River.

In 1869 David was ill in the jungle. Arab slave traders saved him and carried him to one of their outposts. In 1871, while at Nyangwe (a town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), he witnessed a horrific massacre of nearly four hundred local people by slave traders in a marketplace. The massacre horrified Livingstone and his accounts of it, which were later sent to Britain, shocked readers and led to lobbying for the abolishment of the slave trade.

In October 1871 David arrived in the Arab settlement of Ujiji in Tanzania. Henry Morton

Stanley, a reporter from the New York Herald newspaper, was sent to find David, and it was in November 1871 that he met him at Ujiji, anecdotally greeting him with the words 'Dr Livingstone, I presume?'

Final days in Africa

Stanley tried to persuade David to leave Africa, but he wanted to stay and complete his mission. In his journal on his birthday in March 1872 he wrote,

Lord, send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me. Sever any ties save the tie that binds me to Thy heart. My Jesus, my King, my life, my all, I again dedicate my whole self to Thee.⁵

On 1 May 1873, aged sixty, he died in at Chipundu, in present-day Zambia. His body was found kneeling by the side of his bed, with his head in his hands on his pillow. His loyal attendants removed his heart and buried it under a tree close to where he died, and then carried his body over 1,600 km to the coast, a journey which took sixty-three days. His body was then returned to Britain by ship where he was buried in Westminster Abbey. Part of the inscription on his grave reads,

For 30 years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize the native races, to explore the undiscovered secrets, to abolish the desolating slave trade, of Central Africa, where with his last words he wrote, "all I can add in my solitude, is, may Heaven's rich blessing come down on every one, American, English, or Turk who will help to heal this open sore of the world."⁶

Livingstone's legacy

Livingstone identified many geographical features, such as Lake Ngami, Lake Malawi, and Lake Bangweulu, in addition to Victoria Falls, and helped map large areas of Africa that had previously been unexplored. During his life he travelled around 47,000 km through Africa.

However, most importantly, David was a missionary. Although much of his strength and time was taken up with exploring, it was exploration with an aim, and he never ceased to preach and witness to the African people. Only the Lord knows how David was used to bring the Gospel to people in Africa. He was particularly instrumental in opening up Africa for other missionaries to travel into the interior of Africa and paved the way for future mission stations. He wrote in a letter, 'I place no value on anything I have or may possess, except in relation to the Kingdom of Christ. If anything will advance the interests of the Kingdom, it shall be given away or kept, only as by giving or keeping it I shall promote the glory of Him to whom I owe all my hopes in time and eternity'.⁷

A hunger for the Word of God

Today, there is still a great need and hunger for the Word of God in Africa. An example is where the TBS granted Bibles to a man in Mozambique, who travelled along the River Zambezi (like David Livingstone) to deliver them. He said,

I left again for Mozambique for the second time. We distributed Bibles and books. We used this opportunity to share tracts to our fellow passengers in the open lorry. We met many pastors in Caia. They have never heard about a library or book shop in their lives. Majority speak Sena, Portuguese, and Chichewa in this part of Mozambique. We had to cross

the Zambezi River leaving the car on the side of the river as there's no bridge for cars. There's only a railway bridge and a passage for pedestrians. This is normal in Africa as many areas are not yet well developed. We had to finish our journeys by motorbikes since the roads are too small for a car in some places.

TBS is working to bring the Word of God to as many people around the world as possible. Many of these are in areas where David Livingstone travelled, and we have several translation projects in these regions, such as Chichewa, Shona, Swahili, Bemba, Kisanga, Ndebele, and Xhosa. These translators and missionaries face many hardships like David Livingstone did and need our prayers that the Lord would sustain and uphold them and bless their labours to His Glory.

'So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it' (Isaiah 55.11).

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1. V. Christie, *David Livingstone, Missionary, Explorer, Abolitionist*, (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 2023).
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. H. K. W. Kumm, *African Missionary Heroes and Heroines*, (New York, USA: The MacMillan Company, 1917) p. 173.
 5. GFA Missions, gfamissions.org/david-livingstone/, last accessed 02.01.25.
 6. Westminster Abbey, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/david-livingstone/> last accessed 21.11.24.
 7. S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London, UK; Penguin Books, 1990), p. 31.