

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

WILLIAM KNIBB BAPTIST LIBERATOR



Who: William Knibb

Where: From England to Jamaica

When: 1803-1845

What he did: Helped bring freedom to slaves in Jamaica

Many Baptists do not know the name of William Knibb, but Baptists should know his amazing story. As a missionary to Jamaica in the early 1800s, William worked for the rights of all people. Thanks to William's preaching of the gospel, his influence with the English government, and his concern for the well-being of people, over 300,000 slaves were freed in Jamaica. How did this Baptist hero do it?

William's story began in 1803 in England. He grew up with a twin sister, two other sisters, and three brothers. His father did not attend church or show any interest in religious faith, but his mother was a Christian believer who made sure that her children attended Sunday School and church. When William was twelve years old, he joined his

brother, Thomas, in learning from a printer. The two boys worked in a print shop together.

As a teenager, faith was important to William. He was baptized and joined Broadmead Baptist Church in Bristol, England, where he taught a Sunday School class and preached in poor areas of the city. At the print shop, William read the reports of the Baptist Missionary Society that were printed there, and he learned about mission work.

William's brother, Thomas, also grew interested in mission work and went to Jamaica as a missionary. Baptist missionaries had been working in Jamaica since 1814. William expressed his interest in serving as a missionary with his brother, but mission society leaders thought that he lacked Thomas's gifts of preaching and teaching.

One day in 1823, William's pastor told him that Thomas had contracted yellow fever and died only three months after arriving in Jamaica. Saddened by this news, William's desire to be a missionary grew stronger. He married Mary Watkins, who agreed to go to Jamaica with him, and he studied to be a missionary. In 1825, William, who was then twenty-one years old, took his brother's place in Jamaica. At that time, blacks were slaves in Jamaica. William was assigned to teach slave children at the same school where his brother had taught.

When they arrived in Jamaica one month after their marriage, the Knibbs found the schoolhouse in poor condition. William rebuilt the wrecked schoolhouse and built another school for girls nearby. He reopened his brother's

chapel at Port Royal and began to preach there. The crowds who attended worship services grew so large

that the chapel was expanded. William also traveled the island to encourage Baptists to work together in a group called the Jamaica Baptist Association.

As William worked with the slave children, their stories opened his eyes to the ways that the slaves lived. He saw that the slave owners mistreated their slaves. The owners beat them and literally worked them to death so that the owners could make more money. Slave owners resented the missionaries and their concern for the well-being of the slaves. The owners wanted their "property" to hear nothing of the gospel. They feared that the slaves would hear the gospel message of love and equality and would demand freedom. Despite the hostility of the slave owners, William continued preaching and teaching. He soon realized, however, that teaching the slaves to follow Christ was not enough. Preaching the gospel meant that he would have to work to get rid of slavery on the island.

William began speaking out against slavery. He claimed that slavery was unchristian and should be abolished. The Baptist Missionary Society had warned him before leaving England not to interfere with "civil



or political" affairs. Now, the slave owners told him that missionaries should keep the slaves happy and satisfied, not aggravate them. William faced a difficult decision in how he would relate to the slaves and slave owners.

In 1831, several slaves revolted against their owners, refusing to work without pay. The owners put down the slaves' uprising. After that incident, owners did not allow slaves to gather or attend religious services or activities, one of the deacons in William's church was arrested and



whipped. When William protested, he was accused of contributing to the revolt. He admitted his disagreement with slavery but explained that he was not responsible for the riots, because he was opposed to use of violence as a way to gain freedom. Even so, William was arrested and jailed. His opponents destroyed slave

schools and chapels, and his mission closed. While he waited in prison, William thought of a plan of action. He would go to England to have a law passed that would free all slaves on the island. After seven weeks in prison, he was tried in court and freed upon a lack of evidence. He made plans to return to England.

In England, William worked with two Methodist missionaries to influence Parliament, the English lawmakers, to pass a law to free slaves. William attended many meetings, and he told of the slaves' mistreatment. His opponents argued that the slaves would refuse to work if they were free. They thought that the slave owners in Jamaica would not make any money without slave labor. William argued that the issue was a moral, Christian one, and not only about money. At a meeting in London, he declared,

I look upon the question of slavery only as one of religion and morality. All I ask is that my African brother may stand in the family of man; that my African sister shall, while she clasps her tender infant to her breast, be allowed to call it her own; that they both shall be allowed to bow their knees in prayer
to God who has made of one blood all nations.

Because of William's pressure, Parliament enacted a law to end slavery in the British colonies in the West Indies, including Jamaica. They set the hour of midnight on July 31, 1833, as the time when slaves would be free.

They also voted to send money to rebuild the slaves' destroyed chapels, schools, and churches.

William wrote that when he and Mary arrived in Jamaica after the slaves' freedom, they "were nearly pushed into the sea by kindness. Poor Mrs. Knibb was quite overcome. They took me up in their arms, they sang, they laughed, they wept, and I wept too."

Even after their freedom, the former slaves still suffered

When the Emancipation Act was finally passed in 1833, it did not automatically give the slaves their freedom. Because the slaves were not used to being independent, lawmakers thought that they needed help and training to be free men and women. Slaves therefore became "apprentices" and continued to work for low wages under their old masters. Supposedly, they were being trained to be free. The **apprentice system** was seen by many as another form of slavery. True freedom came in 1838, when the apprentice system was abolished. But even then, many of the freed slaves had no option but to continue working for their old masters for low wages.

through the **apprentice system**. William worked hard against this system. By 1838, the former slaves were fully freed. As midnight approached on the night before the apprentice system was scheduled to be abolished, William gathered with the slaves at the chapel in Falmouth to celebrate. When the clock struck midnight, William shouted, "The monster is dead! You are free! Thanks be to God!" The following day was spent in celebrating the new freedom. The peaceful way in which

this freedom was achieved made William very happy.

Although the slaves were freed, they still faced challenges. Planters paid black people low wages so that they could barely afford the basic necessities for life. William saw their struggles and realized that something must be done for the freed slaves or they would not survive. He borrowed money and bought land to sell to the former slaves at a low cost. The slaves could then build homes and grow crops to feed their families and to sell for income.

In addition to his work with the slaves, William founded Calabar Theological College in Jamaica. He founded thirty-five churches, twenty-four missions, and sixteen schools, and he baptized over 6,000 new Christians. He translated the Bible into Creole, the language of the slaves. While William was not thought to be as “gifted” as his brother, Thomas, he proved his God-given talent through his leadership and his devotion to what he believed.

Not long after the liberation of the slaves, William came down with yellow fever. He grew very sick and died in 1845 at the young age of forty-two. Those who knew him from the surrounding villages came to his funeral. They were thankful for one who had been so meaningful and influential in ending their slavery.

In his short life, William Knibb accomplished much. This Baptist hero used his gifts and his passion to work for justice for those around him. He helped to free people who were mistreated by others because he saw the worth

and dignity that God had given each of them. He helped raise money to offer them ways of earning a decent living. He encouraged a law to be passed in England to free all slaves in British colonies. This act influenced other English Baptists to encourage Americans to overthrow their own system of slavery. William Knibb painted a new portrait of a better life in Jamaica, both for the slaves and for a healthier society. His courage to act on behalf of others and his commitment to freedom make William Knibb a Baptist hero!

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Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.