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The Love Story of Rufus and Marian Gray: 1937-1942

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Introduction

The call of God on a person to be His missionary overseas is a call to live out the gospel. However, sometimes the call is to die for the sake of the gospel. Most Christian missionaries are able to go overseas and share the gospel and return home safely. Yet there are some who have followed the call and died in obedience to God. The Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention had eighty-eight missionaries under the captivity of the Japanese during World War II; of these, only one person was killed. This man, called by the Lord to serve in China, was Rufus Franklin Gray.³ Rufus was married to Marian Peeler Gray for less than three years before his death. 4 Rufus and Marian Gray loved each other greatly, and loved their Lord Jesus even more. His love for God can be seen throughout his life. into college, in his marriage, and even in death. Likewise, it can be seen in Marian's life, into college, in marriage, and even after Rufus' death. They were instruments used in the praise of God, their lives were a glorious song of joyful praise to their heavenly Father, and the song resounds into the present.

Rufus' Early Years

Rufus was born in June of 1915, in Titusville, Florida.⁵ However, he grew up further south in Fort Pierce.⁶ During the summer, when he was eleven or twelve years old, he became saved and was baptized at First Baptist Church of Ft. Pierce.⁷ In St. Lucie County High School he played tennis doubles and single matches.⁸ He was possibly the best on his team, winning many matches and receiving several awards.⁹ It is evident from his report cards that he was an average student throughout his schooling.¹⁰ He was part of the graduating class of 1934¹¹ and chose to attend Furman University to continue his education.¹²



Marian's Early Years

Marian Peeler was born the same year as her future husband Rufus in September of 1915 in St. Matthews, South Carolina.¹³ Her family moved to Tampa, Florida, in 1924¹⁴ and she was saved in 1929, and baptized on September 22nd at First Baptist Church Tampa.¹⁵ She graduated from Hillsborough High School four years later in 1933.¹⁶ She made a decision to go to Furman University,¹⁷ where she would later meet Rufus.¹⁸

College Years

Rufus began his college career at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. He attended from 1934 to 1937. The four-year bachelor program took him just three years and he worked his way through without accumulating debt. He worked hard, doing many different jobs, including photographer, book store manager, canteen manager, and other little jobs like stringing tennis rackets. It is important to mention his financial situation in this period was desperate as he was living through the Great Depression. Despite how awful the period was he still managed to pay for school. He reminded himself and his mother, "God is good to his children."

Rufus not only paid his college bills, he loved his mother dearly and often sent money and other things back home to her. He even sent her chickens one time for her to raise. As is the very sad case, Rufus had to help support his mother because his father did not support her. His father was a drunk and a gambler. Rufus pleaded with his father by letter to quit drinking and reminded his father he would maker, [and at that point] it will be too late to stop,



for the alcohol...will only make the eternal fire hotter."²⁷ He wrote strongly to his father. His reprimands were not out of hatred or bitterness; rather, he spoke truth to his father in love. It hurt Rufus to see his mother struggling to make ends meet and he longed for his father to turn from his sin and reconcile with his family.²⁸

Along with his classes, work, and family, Rufus also spent much time ministering to the community. He began by doing social research in a slum district in Greenville.²⁹ He and another student ran an after school program, taught the kids in their Sunday School, and received support from local churches to provide for the children in the slums.³⁰ Two months later in a letter to his mother he said "The little church is getting along fine." He wished he could do more, but wrote with hope, "[God] has said that if you use the few talents that you have that He will give you more."³¹ How true this would be for him in the years to come! Rufus graduated from Furman University on August 19, 1937.³²

Throughout his undergraduate years Rufus made many friends, including several girls.³³ His mother affirmed him and wrote, "Anybody has but to know you to like you. (now, that isn't just mother talk either)."³⁴ Through college he had three to five girls he was considering, but none seemed to stand out more than the others initially. His mother and sister warned him about girls. Mrs. Gray said,

"Hope they are not treating your heart like it was a football,"³⁵ and his sister Olga cautioned, "...don't fall for the girls too hard."³⁶ The following exact quotation is typical of his tongue in cheek communication with his mother on the subject: "Speaking of girls, I am in a real pickle because there are three girls who I like real well but some how they wont agree to let me date all three of them. It seems like all three think a lot about yours truly but they are such swell girls that I can't decide just who I should choose. But some how

and some way some day I hope to marry one of the three."³⁷ One of those three was Miss Marian Peeler, and "some how and some way some day," he married her.

Marian Peeler also attended Furman University from 1934-1937.³⁸ She worked closely with Rufus while at Furman, beginning in their freshman year.³⁹ Marian did not feel a call to missions until after starting at Furman.⁴⁰ Her ministry at Furman included working at a local church, colored settlement work, and other Christian work.⁴¹ She, like Rufus, worked through college⁴² without debt,⁴³ and graduated in 1937.⁴⁴

Graduate School

After graduating from Furman, Rufus and Marian each moved to Louisville Kentucky to continue their educations. ⁴⁵ Rufus attended Southern Baptist Theological Seminary ⁴⁶ and Marian attended the Woman's Missionary Union Training School. ⁴⁷ Marian graduated in 1939, ⁴⁸ and Rufus graduated in May 1940. ⁴⁹ Rufus was ordained on June 1, 1938 ⁵⁰ and pastored two half-time churches in Southern Indiana. ⁵¹ During graduate school Rufus and Marian began talking much more, ⁵² started to date, ⁵³ and were married in 1939. ⁵⁴ Marian, being the one who was closest to Rufus – in Louisville, ⁵⁵ wanted to be a missionary, ⁵⁶ and having caught Rufus' attention, won out above all the other girls who tried to get his attention. ⁵⁷

Marriage and Ministry: Hand in Hand

Rufus and Marian had been friends since their freshman year at Furman University.⁵⁸ It is apparent he had her on his mind on and off as a potential wife throughout his college years from the letters between him and his mother.⁵⁹ In 1937 Marian came to realize how important their friendship was and expressed her desire to always be his prayer mate.⁶⁰ It seems he was won over not long after that letter as he decided in December of 1937 to give her a diamond ring for Christmas.⁶¹ There is no specific mention of their engagement date, but it was likely on the day he gave

her the diamond ring. They waited until nine days after her graduation from the WMU Training School⁶² and got married on May 10th, 1939.⁶³ They had a small wedding in Louisville, attended mainly by local friends and neither of their parents were able to attend.⁶⁴ They very much enjoyed each other and being married; they wrote to his mother in November and concluded the letter: "Well the little love birds are very happy together. We truly are enjoying our work this year together."⁶⁵



Applying to Serve

As graduation neared for Rufus, he and Marian worked on their applications for appointment as missionaries with the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. They both submitted their applications on November 21st, 1939.⁶⁶ Initially they stated interest in Brazil,⁶⁷ but ultimately were open to serving in China or "wherever the Lord leads."⁶⁸ They were accepted and appointed as missionaries to China in April of 1940.⁶⁹

This time in history was particularly turbulent in Asia as Japan was at war with China and other Asian countries beginning around 1937.70 This made it more difficult for Rufus and Marian to get passports to China because of the danger involved and the risk of being caught up in the war.⁷¹ But, they persisted and received their passports, 72 making arrangements to sail in September of 1940.73 They spent their last few months in Fort Pierce before setting sail and they said goodbye to "Mama Gray" on August 28th. 74 That was the last time Rufus would ever see his mother. Rufus and Marian traveled across the country to San Francisco to set sail on the 6th of September.⁷⁵ The voyage lasted about 17 days with several stops along the way. 76 They wrote that they enjoyed the company of the fifty missionaries onboard the S.S. President Cleveland, some of whom were Southern Baptists they would be working alongside in China.⁷⁷ They also spent much time meditating on Scripture and wrote while onboard: "We are happier than ever because we are going to China. We are praying that the Lord shall use us to help bring His Kingdom in there and that we shall be made a blessing to the people at Chefoo for His sake."78 On their way to China they stopped in Japan, and as they left many young men from the Japanese army departed on the same ship, as their mothers cried from the dock; Rufus wrote about this to his mother, and said, "I sure did feel sorry for them all. So the Prince of Peace will come and there will be no more wars or broken hearted mothers."79 After many more stops they finally arrived at their temporary home,

Getting Started in China

Peiping.80

As is normal for missionaries, the Grays began their work in China by attending language school and getting accustomed to the local culture. They arrived at the College

of Chinese Studies on October 1^{st81} and began their lessons on October 9th, 1940 in the capital of China, then known as Peiping or Peking.⁸² They wrote home frequently and shared about life in Peiping, China and the College of Chinese Studies.83 The happy couple bought two bicycles after settling in so they could explore the city and see all the interesting sights.84 As is typical of learning a new language they got a lot of laughs while practicing on the locals.85 He mentioned the potential of war troubles arising and the necessity for evacuation, but stated they were not worried and signed off his letter with the reference Romans 8:28.86 In another letter to his mother, he said, "The more I stay in China the better I like the place."87 Within the same letter he mentioned the brutality of the Japanese who were slowly taking over the city and attacking the natives.88 But he told her they would stay as long as the American Marines were there or when they were called to leave by the Foreign Mission Board.⁸⁹ The happy couple joyfully worked to study the language and explored the country; Rufus took many pictures and sent them to his mother, along with many souvenirs and gifts.90

Threat of War

The first mention of moving to the safety of the Philippines with the College of Chinese Studies was made on November 30th 1940 as Japanese brutality against the natives worsened in Peiping. He told his mother about many other missionaries fleeing to different places for safety, including the Lutheran missionaries, the Northern Baptist missionaries, the Presbyterians, and others; leaving the Southern Baptist missionaries as some of the last students remaining at the College. During their time studying the language Rufus also taught Sunday School in English at the church they attended. Rufus said in a letter to his mother: [Christians should have] faith enough not to ask God to make our way an easy one, but to pray that God will help us in every situation to trust on Him." He talked of how Jesus did not shirk his call to death on the cross, "But he suffered and died

that we might have life."⁹⁵ Surely the road ahead for Rufus, Marian, and their relatives would not be an easy one; but Rufus faced it head-on, with a resolve to pray as fervently as Hudson Taylor and with a mindfulness of Paul's words in Romans 4:20.⁹⁶ He learned these truths throughout college and they would be especially important for all the missionaries and their relatives to remember as the following months would hold many trials.

Moving to Safety

The missionaries were called to the Foreign Mission Board headquarters for China in Shanghai to discuss what to do in light of the imminent danger of war with Japan on the horizon.⁹⁷ They left their home in Peiping on March 13th, having spent only five and a half months there. 98 On their way to Shanghai they stopped over in Laiyang, where Rufus was able to preach for the first time in China. 99 Rufus and Marian were able to travel down further to Chefoo, where they were assigned to work after they completed their language studies, and look over the current Baptist work.¹⁰⁰ Rufus even spoke in Chapel for the boys' and girls' schools.¹⁰¹ Afterward they were on their way again to Shanghai to meet with Dr. Rankin, the president of the entire Foreign Mission Board, and to talk over plans for moving to safety. 102 Rufus and Marian heard Dr. Rankin preach in Shanghai on Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God," and Rufus wrote to his mother: "with the world in such a torn condition it would be wise for us all to read this Psalm and abide by it."103 Dr. Rankin made the decision to move the missionaries and the College of Chinese Studies from Peiping to the mountains of the Philippines in the city of Baguio. 104 The group left Shanghai on the 25th of March and arrived in Manila on the 28, th 105 arriving at their new home in Baguio on the 31. st106

Life in Baguio

Rufus and Marian, though displaced, were able to settle down and continue their schooling in safety; and, once settled, they wrote to Rufus' mother that in September she would be a grandmother!¹⁰⁷ Their baby boy Billy was born on September 8th, 1941 in Baguio¹⁰⁸ and his parents were overjoyed and thanked God for him.¹⁰⁹ Rufus and Marian continued to work hard in their language studies in Baguio and adjusted, with the big change of a new baby to raise.¹¹⁰ Rufus also was able to continue ministering



while in the Philippines, including preaching in churches, at a conference, and much evangelistic work near Baguio.¹¹¹ This was typical for Rufus as he was constantly ministering throughout his life wherever he was living. However, Rufus and Marian longed to return to China because they saw a desperate need for the gospel of salvation, and Rufus wrote the reference: "Genesis 28:15."¹¹² In regard to the danger of war coming to the Philippines, Rufus said he was "not worried about that matter."¹¹³

War in the Pacific

The world continued to be war-torn as World War II was picking up and Japan became increasingly unhappy with the United States for hindering their supply lines. 114 On December 7th, Japan attacked the US Navy at Pearl Harbor to keep them at bay while invading several Pacific islands to commandeer their resources, including the Philippines. 115 The missionaries in Baguio heard about the invasion and began preparing for the Japanese to come to Baguio. 116 Twenty-one days after the initial invasion of the Philippines, Japanese soldiers arrived in Baguio and took the Americans into custody and interned them at Camp John Hay. 117 The men, women with young children, older children, and the elderly and infirm were separated and forced to live in different areas of the camp. 118

Life and Death in Captivity

The Japanese were angry at the US, and suspected that the students of the College of Chinese Studies were



spies for the US government.¹¹⁹ They took 17 missionary men out of the camp to be questioned,¹²⁰ and brutally beat many of them to get a confession.¹²¹ Rufus was questioned right after a Lutheran minister, Rev. Hinderlie,¹²² but was not returned with the others.¹²³ There is no definitive answer about how Rufus died or why none of the others did, but there are several possible things

that could have worked together to bring about his death. According to Rev. Hinderlie, it was thought that one of the other internees disliked Rufus and falsely told the Japanese Military Police Rufus was a spy in order to gain freedom. 124 Another likely possibility is the Japanese believed he was a spy because of his multiple cameras and numerous pictures from Japan, China, and other places, including three photos. which were removed from his collection, which were of Chinese men who were, unbeknownst to Rufus, thought to be connected to an anti-Japanese organization. 125 A final thought from Rev. Hinderlie was Rufus may have been questioned, as Rev. Hinderlie had, about his faith. 126 He said the interrogator asked him if God loved the Japanese. "Certainly," Rev. Hinderlie said, and the Japanese man would not accept the affirmation of that truth. 127 He said, "I am sure [Rufus] gave a full confession for his faith, and, as such, was treated with physical punishment,"128 which likely resulted in his death. This report was corroborated by another internee who told Marian after her release about the day he and Rufus were beaten, and explained how Rufus probably died from excessive, aggravated torture. 129 For months while in captivity, Marian searched for any information about Rufus. The Japanese told her Rufus died on March 15th, 1942130 of "a broken heart." All of the evidence, however, pointed to his death being on the day of interrogation, which she later reported as being January 25th, 1942.132

Mourning Rufus: Praising God

Rufus was dearly loved by many because of the great impact he had on their lives. His life had a special effect on his wife, mother, and son. Marian, having for so long wondered if Rufus was still alive, was comforted by looking through the verses he underlined in his Bible just before he was killed.133 She praised God for "[delivering] him to a far more glorious world than this one."134 His mother was comforted by the memory of Rufus and his counsel and support through the years, along with the fact that "he was doing his chosen field of work and was at his Master's business."135 His son Billy, who never knew his father personally but certainly heard many great stories about him, leaned over to Ione Gray and "whispered with intense earnestness: 'I'm going to be a medical missionary. You see my father was killed by the Japanese and I want to do his unfinished work as well as my own." Rufus Gray left behind a great legacy which impacted many lives and inspired those around to him to be more like their heavenly Father.



Conclusion

Rufus and Marian Gray were faithful servants, living their lives to honor God and to take the gospel to the Orient. Rufus persevered to his death; and, although he did not survive past language school, he has inspired others to go overseas with the good news of eternal life in Christ. Marian

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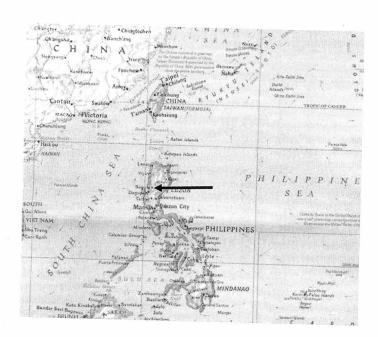
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