

Harry Allen Ironside

by Ed Reese*
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BORN:

October 14, 1876

Toronto, Canada

DIED:

January 15, 1951

Cambridge, New Zealand

LIFE SPAN:

74 years, 3 months,

1 day

Ironside was one of the greatest Bible teachers the world has ever known. For some 50 years he went up and down America teaching and preaching the Word of God. He was the ultimate in his field. Coupled with this was his successful ministry as pastor of Moody Church from 1930 to 1948 which made him the most known Christian leader of his era, outside of Billy Sunday whose funeral he preached. He was affectionately known as "the archbishop of Fundamentalism." John and Sophia (Stafford) Ironside were a godly couple with his occupation being that of a bank teller. They were both tremendous soul-winners. The father spent evenings at street meetings, in halls and in theaters, and on Sundays held services in the park. His mother likewise testified everywhere. They were identified with the Plymouth Brethren. The father was known as "The Eternity Man," because every time he met someone he asked them, "Where will you spend eternity?" In the providence of God this amazing soul-winner died at age 27 from typhoid when Henry was two years old.

Henry's birth was almost a casualty. The child was thought to be dead, so attention was given to the dangerously ill mother. Forty minutes later a nurse detected a pulse beat and at the doctor's order put the baby in a hot bath which soon produced a demonstration of his vocal chords.

Following the death of the father, the 26-year old widow, who also had a new baby along with two-year old Henry, began to sew trying to hold the family together.

Harry had religion but not Christ. He was memorizing Scripture from three years of age and up, starting with Luke 19:10. Ironside read the Bible through 14 times by his 14th year. Two frequent visitors were Scotch evangelists, Donald Munro and John Smith. They would always ask Harry "are you born again?" He always replied that he passed out tracts, memorized Scripture, went to Sunday School. He was quite relieved when he heard his mother make plans to go to Los Angeles in 1886 when he was ten years old. At least they would not be bugging him anymore, he mused.

A train ride from Toronto to Los Angeles was an adventure for an adult, let alone a child of ten. They arrived on December 12, 1886. Harry was surprised to find out there was no Sunday School in his neighborhood, so at age 11 he started one. He called together boys and girls and talked to them about his purpose. He sent out the boys to collect sacks and burlap bags and he organized the girls into a sewing club. They sewed the burlap together and soon a burlap tent was made that could accommodate 100 people. There was no teacher, so Harry taught, and the average attendance was 60 including a few adults. Harry would always revert to Isaiah 53 when he couldn't think of anything else to say. People would say, "God bless this little preacher" and Harry assumed himself saved. In 1888 [Dwight L.] Moody came to Los Angeles for a campaign. Meetings were held in Hazzard's Pavilion which seated 8,000. Finding no seat he climbed up on a trough-like girder that extended from the second gallery up to the apex of the roof. Moody excited Harry and he prayed, "Lord, help me some day to preach to crowds like these, and to lead souls to Christ." Forty-two years later he became pastor of the church Moody founded. In 1889 his mother said happily one day after school, "Guess who's here?" Harry thought it to be some lost relative, but it was evangelist Donald Munro. As he arrived it was, "Well, well, Harry lad, how you have grown! And are you born again yet, my boy?" His Uncle Allan, who was in the room said, "Oh, Harry preaches himself, now." Undaunted Munro said, "You are preaching, and yet you don't know that you're born again! Go and get your Bible, lad." Young Ironside was really challenged. Within a few weeks Harry gave up his Sunday School, for he felt he had no right to open his mouth for God if he were unsaved. For six months he battled this problem. Then in February, 1890, he went to a party, and Proverbs 1:24-32 came to his mind. As soon as he could, he hurried home. After midnight, he fell on his knees and said, "Lord, save me." He wondered about a lack of some new emotion, but soon claimed the promise, rose from his knees - saved at age 13. He later said, "I rested on the Word of God and confessed Christ as my Saviour."

Two nights later he attended a Salvation Army street meeting and could not wait for a chance to say something. He asked if he could testify and fire away he did. He preached from Isaiah 53:6 for one-half hour forcing the Captain to pull his coattail, because they were late for the meeting at the hall. The next day he won his first convert to the Lord -- a 70-year old Negro. He was taunted at school but held firm. In June he graduated from grammar school. The year 1890 also saw his mother, Sophia, marry William D. Watson, and young Ironside found a part-time job with a shoe-cobbler. Young Ironside decided he needed no more education, and never attended school again. His only eighth grade education was later regretted, but the Lord never held it against him. He took full time employment with the Lamson Photo Studio, and every night would attend one of the Salvation Army meetings. He spoke so often he was called, "The Boy Preacher." He began to educate himself with books. When not attending Army meetings, he would be giving out tracts or holding his own street meetings. Soon Ironside was identified with the Salvation Army. His zeal matched theirs, and

soon he was put in charge of children's work. At age 16 he was urged to become a cadet, and he decided to accept. He left the photography business for the preaching business -- full time.

He entered the Oakland (California) Training Garrison preparatory to becoming an officer in the Salvation Army. He finally was commissioned and made a Lieutenant in the Army. He went forth to San Bernardino, California, somewhat a believer of sinless perfection in 1892. Ironside was switched around to several southern California cities to assist in the various Army outreaches. Soon he was preaching over 500 sermons a year, dealing with countless individuals. So thoroughly did he enjoy his work and so busy did he keep himself that it was not until he was [about]19 that he had any real chance to analyze "the second blessing" doctrine. He soon began to see this "holiness" teaching was leaving many a spiritual person derelict. He himself had to convince himself of his "holiness" before he went to a "holiness" meeting, and to tell himself upon leaving that now, at last, he was ready to receive "the blessing." He soon began to see it was not the study of the Scriptures, but the lack of knowledge of them that was causing many casualties. Now a captain at about 18 he submitted his resignation to the Salvation Army. He was sent to the Beulah Rest Home near Oakland, utterly worn out from five years of work. There were 14 others, broken in health, trying to regain strength while contemplating their futures. Counseling with others he soon discovered the problem. He was looking within to the wrong person and wrong place for holiness, instead of without.

Ironside had met a Charles Montgomery, a Brethren believer who gave him living quarters and access to his own large library, in San Francisco. Soon he was asked to address a meeting of the Brethren, and again he used Isaiah 53 which continued to evidently be his favorite preaching spot. In 1896 (now 20 years old) he began "to break bread" with the Brethren.

Henry Varley, British evangelist, came to San Francisco in 1897 and Ironside helped in many ways during the campaign. He held street meetings, ushered, ran the book table, and was a great help to the campaign. The pianist for most of the services was another ex-Salvation Army member, Helen Schofield, daughter of a Presbyterian pastor in Oakland. Love blossomed and on January 5, 1898, Ironside and the young lady married. He was 21 and had been living by faith for some years now. The cupboards were often bare in their small apartment in San Francisco. His mother's death in 1898 also added to his trials. Joy came into their home on February 10, 1899, when the first child - a son, Edmund Henry was born. The Ironsides moved to a home in Oakland in 1900 and Harry continued with his ministry as doors were opened, speaking in some place nearly every night, and often two or three times a day. He was beginning to be in greater demand among believers who were helped by his expository preaching. When he had no meetings, he would go to the street corners and preach to the passersby. Oakland became their headquarters until 1929. He preached in tents, Missions, Bible conferences and churches whenever he was

invited. More than once the small family was without funds and had to depend wholly upon God to do something for them.

It was in 1903 that he received his first invitation from the East, from believers in St. Cloud, Minnesota. On their way home they only had funds to take them as far as Salt Lake City, Utah. So they disembarked, obtained accommodations in a very inexpensive hotel. For 10 days Harry spent every day and night visiting, distributing tracts from door to door and street preaching. Ironside had little response spiritually and none financially, so he sold a set of his books to a Baptist preacher to pay his hotel bill. The 40 cents a day allotted for food ran out. Harry grabbed his wife's hand and prayed, "O Lord, we claim this promise. We two agreed to ask for this forty cents. If we do not receive it, I shall never believe this verse again." He went into the streets, preached for forty minutes to a good crowd of 300. After the service, discouraged, he was on his way to the hotel, when two men ran after him, asked him how he lived, was told he just trusted the Lord. They put coins in his palm and left. He was going to return the coins when he found out they were Mormon elders, but they hurried off. He counted the coins - 40 cents. The next morning he got a letter with \$15 from some who felt impressed that they needed money. They could now go home to Oakland.

In 1904 an unusual conversion happened as the family was traveling through northwestern Canada on a train. A Franciscan priest joined Ironside and the conversation began. It was a marvelous conversion before it was all over that Ironside often related.

A second son, John Schofield, was born on August 18, 1905, and thereafter the mother, and firstborn who had traveled with him almost all the time, was confined to their home to rear the children.

He already was beginning to write: his first expository notes appeared in 1900, Notes on Esther. Notes on Jeremiah in 1902, Notes on the Minor Prophets in 1904 and Notes on the Book of Proverbs appeared in 1906. His writings would make him one of the most prolific authors in the Christian field in the 20th century.

Soon he was teaching at the Mount Hermon Bible Conference each summer.

Then in 1911 he began his annual summer ministry to the American Indians - at the Southeast Missionary Bible Conference near Flagstaff, Arizona.

He continued to write; in 1910 came his Notes on Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, in 1911 Lectures on Daniel the Prophet came out and in 1912 his famous book - Holiness, the False and the True.

On June 1, 1914, he rented a store and started the Western Book and Tract Company. His books were not being in much demand, and he needed some sort of headquarters for them. This went well until the depression [in] the late 1920s. From 1916 to 1929, Ironside was constantly on the move, preaching nearly 7,000 times to some 1¼ million people. No vacations, always busy, even in sickness and weariness. In 1918 he preached at the Old Tent Evangel in New York City for George McPherson, which opened up further doors of contact. In

1924 he began to accept meetings under the direction of the Moody Bible Institute.

This relationship deepened through the years. In his "free" months he was engaged by the Brethren assemblies or by other local congregations. In 1926 Dallas Theological Seminary asked him to come for seven months a year as a full-time faculty member, but it had to be turned down, although he was visiting lecturer from 1925 to 1943. A daughter, Lillian, was born to Edmund [Ironsides's son] in 1920, but because of the illness of the mother who died of tuberculosis not long afterwards, was adopted by the grandparents - the Harry Ironsides. The father later remarried, served the Lord as Superintendent of the Southern Bible Institute, a school for colored people in Dallas. In December of 1929 Ironside held his third series of services at Moody Memorial Church, and after 11 months absence arrived home in Oakland on December 22nd to see his family. In two weeks he was gone again. He now began his ministry at the Moody Founder's Week Conference in February, 1930. On February 17th his diary states, "Then downtown for a conference with Thomas S. Smith and another elder of the Moody Church, relative to possibly being called to be the minister there." He had preached there in 1925 and 1926 plus the above mentioned time. He had already been approached in 1929 since the resignation of Dr. P. Philpott. He finally agreed that if he got an unanimous call he would come for a one-year trial period. On March 5, the call was unanimous. On March 8th he accepted. On March 16th he preached his first sermon there - his diary speaks:

My first Lord's Day as pastor of Moody Church

At 9:15 a.m. a few of us broke bread in the feast of remembrance in church study.

At 10:45 I preached on I Cor. 2:2. 3500 present and there was a serious impression.

Dinner with the Herrings

At 5:50 I spoke briefly to the C.C. Club in Torrey Hall, on "Life at Best."

At 7:30 I preached on "God's Salvation and the Scorners' Doom." 2 Kings 7, to about 3700 people.

Five confessed Christ.

He would wind up his affairs in Oakland in late August, and on December 31, 1930 Mrs. Ironside and Lillian were finally able to join him. They took up their residence in the Plaza Hotel, right across from the Church.

There was hardly a Sunday that went by from that time on that did not have decisions or a capacity audience to hear Ironside. A pattern set that continued until he left the Church. Ironside would leave Chicago by train late Sunday night to minister in some other city, returning usually on Saturday morning for the Sunday services at Moody Church. This would be 40 weeks a year, traveling 30,000 miles annually. Frequently Saturdays and whatever few other days in Chicago were taken up with callers, committee meetings and correspondence. In 1932 he took his first trip outside the USA as he ministered on a boat cruise from Bermuda to Nova Scotia. In 1933 there was a Century of Progress

Campaign held in the summer. In November, 1935, Ironside preached the funeral of Billy Sunday at Moody Church. His sermon was, "Billy Sunday's Spiritual History - Without Christ; In Christ; For Christ; With Christ." In February, 1936, he took his first overseas trip - to Palestine. Thirty days were spent preaching in the British Isles, and the Ironsides arrived back at New York on April 30th. Three more trips to the British Isles followed, in 1937, 1938 and 1939. Britain was participating in the Moody Centennial in 1937, and Will Houghton, MBI President asked Ironside and Mel Trotter to go to Europe. Leaving January 29, they had great meetings. On the night of their arrival of February 5th, Ironside preached on Romans 1:16 to 10,000 at Royal Albert Hall. He was to speak 62 times in his 32 days there. He arrived home on March 14th. Beginning with the first week of 1938, Ironside became the writer of the International Sunday School Lessons, published in the Sunday School Times. In the fall of 1938, he left again, this time from Montreal on August 19th, accompanied by Stratton Shufelt, music director of Moody Church. This was a tour of Ireland, Scotland, and England. Ironside spoke 142 times. They were in Glasgow for nearly a month, with crowds averaging 3,000 per night, with many saved. A ten-day series in London in Kingsway Hall finalized the stay. Crowds of 2,000 attended each night. He left for home on November 12th. In 1939 the purpose of the trip to England was 1½ months of well needed rest, and then to be one of the speakers at English Keswick. They left New York May 24th and returned August 1st. From 1939 to 1944 he continued his travels in every direction averaging some 500 sermons per year. His son Edmund died July 25, 1941, with the father preaching the funeral service. In 1942 he became president of the Africa Inland Mission.

When Ironside took the pastorate of the 4,000 member Moody Church in 1930, the indebtedness was \$319,500. At the Watch Night Service, December 31, 1943, the last note of indebtedness was burned, during which time the home outreach and foreign missions programs increased - amazing for the fact that he was only home two days a week. When he was gone on Sundays, the crowd would be down. His daughter that he raised, Lillian, married Gilbert Koppin on June 10, 1944. A crowning evangelistic campaign was held February 10-27, 1944, back "home" in Oakland, California. Services were held in the Oakland Civic Auditorium Theatre. Crowds started at 1,300 and ended with 2,500 with many saved. Ironside was now beginning to tire as he approached 70, not that the age was so great, but simply keep in mind that he had been preaching continually since age 14 with hardly any break.

Pastor and Mrs. Ironside were able to celebrate their Golden Wedding Anniversary together, January 5, 1948, to be soon followed by the death of Mrs. Ironside on May 1, 1948. Dr. Ironside resigned as pastor on May 30, 1948, and his farewell services were held at the church, October 27th and October 31st. During his first 14 years there, only two Sundays went by without seeing

somebody saved. He had been a member of the faculty of Moody Bible Institute in later years as well.

He then retired to Winona Lake, Indiana. He married Mrs. Ann Hightower on October 9, 1949, who became his constant companion and helper during his few remaining months of failing eyesight. An operation restored his vision and he set out for New Zealand on November 2, 1950. He visited with his sister, Mrs. Robert A. Laidlaw and planned a preaching tour, but death claimed him and at his own request was buried there. His other son John died January 19, 1957.

His books poured forth through the years, too numerous to mention here. Over 80 volumes have come from his pen. A D.L. degree had come from Wheaton in June 1930, and on June 3, 1942 Bob Jones University granted him an honorary D.D. degree. Many pulpits would not consider a boy with an 8th grade education, but little is much - when God is in it.

His writings included addresses or commentaries on the entire New Testament, all of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, and a great many volumes on specific Bible themes and subjects. Some of his later titles include Things Seen and Heard in Bible Lands, Lamp of Prophecy, Changed by Beholding, The Way of Peace, and The Great Parenthesis.

Almost lost in the seemingly more important phases of his ministry is the fact that he is the author of the well known hymn, Overshadowed.

*The above is one of 46 booklets by Ed Reese in the Christian Hall of Fame series. These short biographies provide good material for Sunday School lessons, family devotions, and reading for young people and adults. Order/information from: Reese Publications, Attn: Kay Griffin, 8824 Northcote Avenue, Munster, IN 46321; Fax: (219) 838-4695; E-mail: Kgreese@aol.com - Used with permission, 7/13/99.