

Salt and Light

My Father's World®

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Lilias Trotter

An Artist Who Could Truly See

Five-year-old Lilias sat back and smiled at her sketchbook. The London house she'd just finished drawing looked back at her, picture-perfect. The large house was decorated for Christmas—the time when her mother and father would return from their long trip to the United States. She couldn't wait to see them again, and she knew her mother would be interested in her drawings. Can you imagine the joyous Christmas when Lilias's parents arrived home?

Lilias grew up in a large family. She had eight brothers and sisters, six of them older than she. Her big family got a little smaller, however, when she was twelve. Her father, who had been sick for a couple of years, died. With no earthly father to love her anymore, Lilias turned to God, her Heavenly Father, in ways that she never had before. As hard and sad as her father's death was, God used it to help Lilias know she was God's daughter.

As Lilias grew up, she continued to get better and better at her art. Her mother recognized Lilias's talent was something special. Lilias was not the only artistic person in her family, but there was something about her art that was different.

She saw things more deeply than other artists. If she was going to paint a flower, she would sit and look at it before she started, trying to recognize the little details that made the flower beautiful—the quiet, unexpected colors in the leaves, or maybe the shape of the petals. And then, once she understood what made the flower beautiful, she was able to quickly capture that beauty almost in the way that people nowadays take a photograph. Except Liliias was drawing and painting!

Liliias often sketched and painted while she was on vacation with her family. When she was twenty-three, she and her mother went on vacation to a city in Italy called Venice. The old city was famous for its art, and we can imagine how excited Liliias was to draw and paint some of the things she saw.

What she didn't know, however, was that one of the most famous British artists of the time, John Ruskin, was also in Venice. More than that, he was staying at the same hotel as Liliias and her mother! Mrs. Trotter, knowing how talented her daughter was, arranged to have Mr. Ruskin look at some of Liliias's artwork.

The famous artist was very impressed. So impressed, that he offered to help Liliias get even better at her art. He started by taking Liliias and Mrs. Trotter around Venice, pointing out things that he wanted Liliias to sketch. When he asked her to draw a piece of marble, he was pleased to see that she took the time to really look at the different colors and textures in the stone before she started drawing it.

As an artist himself, Mr. Ruskin knew that Liliias's ability to truly *see* something was a very important skill, one that she excelled at. He continued to help Liliias with her art after they both returned to England, and he grew more and more pleased with the progress his student was making. The two of them became good friends.

At the same time as her art was improving, Liliias became more involved in serving other people. She had a particular love for the working women of London. Some poor working women needed affordable housing, so Liliias helped out at a Christian home just for them, called the Welbeck Street Institute. Other, not-so-poor working women didn't need a place to stay, but they did need to know Jesus and study His word. So, Liliias hosted Bible studies for them in her family's home.

Between art, ministry, and family, things were going well for Liliias. But when Liliias was 26, her mother died. Shortly after that, Liliias visited John Ruskin at his home in the English countryside. She had visited many times before, and Mr. Ruskin often helped her with her art. But this time, her teacher had something very specific to say to her.

He told her that she, Liliias Trotter, could become England's greatest living painter! He went on to say that this could only happen if she devoted herself fully to studying art. He did not disapprove of her service to London's women, but he knew that if she was to become a truly great artist, she would need to focus most of her time and effort on art and art alone.

With those words, Liliias faced a hard decision—perhaps the hardest decision of her life. Here was the chance of a lifetime. Should she take it? She loved art—it was a good gift from her Heavenly Father. But was art supposed to be the main thing in her life? Or did God have other things He wanted her to focus on, things like serving the women in London?



Liliias Trotter, from *Parables of the Cross*

Part Two

Would Liliias focus on art and become England’s greatest living painter? Or did God want something different for her? After praying and thinking and struggling with the decision, Liliias finally made up her mind about her art. “I see as clear as daylight now,” Liliias wrote. “I cannot give myself to painting in the way that [John Ruskin] means, and continue still to ‘seek first the kingdom of God’.”¹

When she told her friend her decision, Mr. Ruskin was very sad that Liliias would not become the great artist he had imagined. He tried to change her mind, even telling Liliias that he wanted to make her the principal for a girls’ art school that he hoped to open.

Despite all her art teacher’s efforts, however, Liliias had made her decision. Art was a gift to Liliias from God, and she continued to enjoy it and to visit Mr. Ruskin at his beautiful country home. But she focused first on serving the women God had called her to. For nearly ten years, loving the women of London was her main work, even branching out to the poorest of the poor women, who lived and worked in very unsafe places.

Then God called Liliias to something new. She was at a meeting, listening to a missionary from North Africa speak. At the end of the talk, the missionary asked if there was someone in the room that God was calling to take the good news about Jesus to North Africa.

Liliias stood up. “Yes, it’s me. God is calling me to North Africa.”

About a year later, after some difficulty, thirty-six-year-old Liliias and two other women arrived in Algiers, the capital city of the African country called Algeria. She fell in love with her new home almost immediately.

She wrote about how much she loved the native Arabs. And she described how beautiful she thought the city of Algiers was as she and her friends sailed into port for the first time.

Liliias's love of beauty definitely hadn't changed, and she was still herself in other ways, too. She and her fellow missionaries hosted meetings in their home, similar to the Bible studies Liliias had hosted in her family's home back in London. She still painted and sketched, although she had new scenes to work with now.

And Liliias still had a heart to love and serve women. The only problem was that women in Algiers didn't leave their homes very often, because of their Muslim culture. Liliias and her friends got around this by befriending the children who played in the streets. Often, the children would invite the missionaries home to meet their mothers, allowing Liliias and her friends to share God's love even behind closed doors.

Another thing about Liliias that didn't change was her love for travel. After she had been in Algeria for a while, Liliias was itching to go out into the desert to bring the good news about Jesus to the people living there.

Fortunately, new missionaries joined Liliias's team about six years into her time in Africa, allowing her and a friend to leave the capital city of Algiers and travel to desert villages and towns. Liliias would do this many times over the years, traveling by horse cart, train, and even camel to reach people, many of whom had never heard the gospel before.

Just like in Algiers, Liliias and the missionary with her would tell stories of Jesus to the men and children in the streets, and, when the children invited them, the missionaries would visit with the women in the houses.

Everywhere she traveled, Liliias sketched, drew, and journaled. Just as she had done so many years ago with that piece of marble in Venice, Liliias continued to truly *see*. She saw the beauty of the desert, despite the heat and the sandstorms she experienced. She saw the Arabs the way God did—not as people who needed to become like her, but as people who needed to be loved, respected, and shown God's truth. She saw that God's kingdom was what was truly important, and she wanted others to know that, too.

Sometimes, though, even Liliias had trouble seeing what God was doing. In 1901, the government in Algeria began opposing the missionaries, telling them that they must stop telling people about Jesus. This went on for years, making it very hard for Liliias and her fellow workers to talk to people and share the good news. Liliias became discouraged and couldn't see God's plan.