

42. ANSGAR. (8 September 801 – 3 February 865)

It is dark. The people of Corbie, Germany, tired from their hard day's work, are asleep. In the local monastery near the Weser River, the monks are also sleeping.

In our thoughts, we wander through its deserted passages. In one of the many cells, a young monk is sleeping quietly.

Quietly? No, not at all! He tosses and turns restlessly on his plain bed. He kicks wildly, and his facial expressions change dramatically. One moment he's looking tired, but then he suddenly smiles. He raises his arms. Then the happy smile disappears, and a gloomy expression filled with disappointment covers his face. He sighs and restlessly tosses around again.

The young monk is dreaming. This dream had a powerful impact on him, and he never forgot it. Who is this young man? What was his dream? The young monk is *Ansgar*.

He was born in 801, and his mother died while he



Ansgar, wikipedia

was still quite young. Poor Ansgar. He missed his dear mother very much. His father sent him to the monastery, where the monks raised him. He attended the convent school and proved to be an excellent student. God had blessed him with a sharp mind, and it wasn't long before he was the highest achiever in his class.

However, Ansgar wasn't too serious

about his work. He saw life as an adventure and he pursued a life of fun and enjoyment and never gave death or eternity a thought.

ANSGAR'S DREAM

One evening, tired after a day of strenuous study, Ansgar was soon fast asleep. As he slept, he dreamt. In his dream, he is on a long journey on a wet and slippery path. His feet get stuck in the mud, and he constantly slides out. How annoying! Next to the path he is travelling on is another road. That route is smooth, firm and level, with no mud at all. Laboriously, he heads for that road. Suddenly he stops. On the level, well-paved street, a group of women, dressed in white, are approaching. Fascinated, he looks at the women as they come closer. Suddenly a shock passes through him. Among those women, he sees his mother, who was taken away from him in his youth! He wants to call her, but only hoarse unintelligible sounds come from his throat. He works very hard to reach his mother, but he makes no headway. Each time he slips back into the mud. All his efforts to get to his mother are in vain. Suddenly the woman at the front of the group stops. She raises her finger warningly and says to him:

"Do you want to get to your mother? Then you must abandon the way of sin and vanity. If you continue on *your* path, you will never succeed!"

The women walk on and finally disappear into the distance. He tries to reach out to his mother, but she disappears as well.

That was Ansgar's dream. No wonder he never forgot it!

The message was clear: forsake sin! From that moment, Ansgar changed. God gave him this dream to bring him to repentance. He became a quiet, serious young man who no longer enjoyed the vanities of the world.

It wasn't long before the monks began to talk about Ansgar. News of his changed attitude

spread to other monasteries too. He became an example to others.

Some time later, he dreamed again. In this second dream, he dreamt that the Lord appeared to him, saying:



Ansgar.
franciscanmedia.org

"Go, teach all the nations, baptising them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

This second dream also made a deep impression on him. Ansgar had no idea what this dream meant. Daily he asked: "Lord, what do you want me to do? Show me the way I must go." And the Lord did show him the way. But it was not an easy way. It was a way full of cares and difficulties, of disappointments, troubles, and sorrows.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

In the previous chapter, you read about the terrible destruction committed by the Vikings during their plundering expeditions.

Those Vikings were awful, savage, cruel, murderous people. They knew no pity. They were also full of unrestrained hatred towards Christianity. Odin was the only god they would recognise!

Willibrord (chapter 37) brought God's Word to the Danish people in 696. The hatred and enmity he experienced were so great that he soon had to return, disappointed. It seemed impossible to bring those headstrong pagans to repentance.

Charlemagne also thought of sending missionaries to them, but that powerful emperor also abandoned the attempts, and nothing happened.

When Louis the Pious took over the government from his father, the Viking raids began. During those years, the Danish king died.

A young man, Harald, succeeded him.

But one of Harald's brothers also wanted to become king.

His ambition resulted in a fierce quarrel between the two brothers.

They gathered their armies and went to battle. Harald's brother defeated him and threatened him with exile.

Seeing no other way out, Harald asked Louis the Pious, king of the Franks, for help. Louis was willing to help, but on the condition that Harald would permit missionaries to come into his country. Harald agreed. When Harald returned to Denmark, Ebbo, bishop of Reims, was with him.

Full of courage, Ebbo commenced his challenging task. In the beginning, it seemed as if his work was bearing fruit. Ebbo baptised several Danes. This progress made him very happy. He took several Danish boys into his house, where he cared well for them. He instructed those boys in the Christian doctrine. His aim was that they would turn to the Lord and become Christians. If that was successful, he planned to send them back to their tribes as missionaries. His plan worked well till the argument between Harald and his brother unexpectedly flared up again. For the second time, Harald's brother threatened to overthrow him and send him into exile.

And so, king Harald leaves Denmark and travels to Louis the Pious to ask for help again. Bishop Ebbo also had to leave

the country. He is profoundly disappointed and discouraged since many of his plans had not come to fruition. It seems nothing can conquer the Viking's hatred, enmity and aversion for the gospel.



Louis the Pious. The Viking raids began during his reign. Wordpress.com

This time Harald

travels to the German city of Mainz, where Louis the Pious lives. The young Danish king is king Louis' guest for quite some time. During that time, Louis and Harald have many discussions. Those conversations are more than just discussions about politics. Louis speaks to Harald about God, and the Lord blesses those conversations.

In 826, Harald repents. He rejects paganism and accepts the gospel. The priest baptises him in the city of Mainz. Louis is delighted! He fervently hopes that they can now bring Christianity to Denmark! He also hopes an added benefit will be that the horrific Viking invasions will decrease through this conversion.

ANSGAR BECOMES A MISSIONARY

When Harald is ready to return to his own country, he is happy to take a missionary with him. But that is easier said than done! No one wants to go to Denmark! Who dares take on such a difficult task?

No one... except Ansgar, the pious young monk from the monastery at Corbie! Hadn't the Lord Himself called him to that work? Isn't his daily prayer that God show him the way forward? And now, unexpectedly, that prayer is answered! When Emperor Louis asks him, he immediately consents! But now another problem arises. It was a custom in those days for missionaries to take along twelve assistants. Ansgar would gladly have



Ansgar preaching the gospel to the crusaders.
<http://har22201.blogspot.com/>

taken assistants with him, but no one dared to risk that. Only one monk from Ansgar's monastery is prepared to go with him. Ansgar's monastic brother Autbertus. Louis the Pious gives Ansgar and Autbertus a new ship to sail to Denmark. So, two boats head down the Rhine river: one for Harald and his followers and the other for the missionaries. Will they be successful this time? The emperor fervently hopes they will be! But at this stage, no one besides God knows the answer.

During the voyage to Denmark, Ansgar studies hard to learn the Danish language so he can speak to the Danes in their language. After an uneventful journey, they land in Denmark and step ashore. What will the future hold?

THE VIKINGS FIGHT BACK

A year later, somewhere in Jutland on the Danish peninsula, a sturdy but plain building stands in the middle of a forest. This building is the mission school founded by Ansgar. The brave missionary, faithfully assisted by Autbertus, has worked tirelessly and passionately for a whole year. Several Danish boys receive regular instruction at the mission school, where they learn about Christian doctrine. Ansgar also founded a few monasteries in Jutland. Indeed, it was a promising beginning.

But then...?

A savage cry fills the air.

"Odin! Odin!"

The threatening chant echoes through the forest. The wild Danes come charging in. Swinging clubs, axes, and bludgeons, they attack. With a thumping crash, a heavy axe smashes into the front door of the mission school. Again, and again they swing their axe down on the heavy door. Finally, the door splinters apart and falls open. The raving mob charges in, and in short order, everything is smashed to pieces and destroyed. The missionaries manage to save themselves by running for their lives, but their work is in ruins.

What caused this attack?

The quarrel between the two brothers had flared up again.

The pagan Danes are dissatisfied with Harald, their king.

They do not want a Christian King.

With the support of Harald's brother, the pagan priests stir up the people. They resent the introduction and progress of Christianity. Unified in anger, they go out and destroy the missionary school.

This time Harald is banished for good.

Both missionaries also flee.

The pagan Danes have destroyed all their work.

Again, the attempt to bring Christianity into Denmark has failed.

Will the devil win after all?

GOD USES EVIL DEEDS TO SPREAD HIS WORD

In 830, Louis the Pious received a request from Swedish king Bjorn to send a missionary to Sweden. Why? They weren't a very friendly bunch when it came to Christianity! They were also a nation of pagans, and they too had joined in with the Viking raids into Europe. They were also guilty of massacring the Christians. So why would the Swedish king ask for a missionary? And yet, Louis answers with a "Yes".

Why would Louis agree to such a request? With all the destruction caused by the Vikings' cruel raids as they sailed the seas in search of spoil, and their determination to exterminate Christianity, the Church suffered terribly. The prince of darkness filled those Vikings with Satanic hatred against the Church. He wanted to recapture lost territory, and at times it looked like he was succeeding!

However, God's ways are always excellent. He directed things so that the Church would not be destroyed but rather expanded through those terrible plundering raids! Through those abominable robbing and murdering attacks, the gospel finally gained a firm hold in the Scandinavian countries.

How is this possible? It seems so contradictory! It seems impossible that destruction can lead to expansion. And yet, that increase is precisely what happened. God's ways are far above our ways. His ways run in directions that seem impossible to us. God works everything for the

best. That's why God deserves all praise and honour. God accomplished His purpose through affliction and misery. This fact was true in history, and it is still true today.

When the Vikings returned from their raids, laden with gold, silver, ornaments and other valuables, they also brought slaves. Although the Vikings killed thousands and thousands of people, they took alive the strong young boys and prettiest girls and brought them home to be their slaves. These young slaves were not just any slaves; they were Christians! While living in slavery in foreign lands, those young people did not deny their Christian faith. Quite the opposite! They witnessed as they worked in the fields and homes of the Vikings!

They spread the seed of the gospel in the homes of those bloodthirsty pagans who spared nothing, who time and again set out to destroy and annihilate God's Church. Their wives and children heard, and that seed, scattered in all simplicity, very slowly germinated and finally began to bear fruit!

Many Christian slaves also came to Sweden. They did not join the pagan feasts, but they sought and found their strength in the Lord in the middle of the abuse and oppression they experienced. They visited each other as much as possible and comforted and supported each other.

In addition to the testimony of these poor slaves, Christian merchants also arrived in the Viking countries to trade. As merchants, they enjoyed a certain amount of protection and hospitality.



ANSGAR GOES TO SWEDEN

The Christian slaves, with the support of the Christian merchants, asked King Bjorn for a missionary, and God Almighty inclined the heart of the pagan prince so that he granted their request. That's how come King Bjorn asked Louis the Pious for a missionary.

This request takes Louis by surprise! Now he has the difficult task of finding a willing missionary. Who, after all these unsuccessful attempts, would dare risk travelling north again? Then Ansgar volunteers! He is willing to undertake that journey! Louis the Pious gladly accepts his offer. He provides a ship and all the other necessary equipment and sends Ansgar and his assistants on their way.

The devil tries to prevent this new attempt to bring the gospel north. As they travel, the Vikings attack. With great difficulty, they save their lives, but everything else the king provided is lost. Ansgar's assistants become so discouraged that they want to return. They believe they are heading for another failure, maybe even death! But Ansgar refuses to turn back.

After a long, dangerous, and challenging journey through the forests of Sweden, they finally reach the capital of King Bjorn without any further attacks.

Bjorn receives the weary travellers with great kindness. Soon many Christian slaves surround Ansgar, and they all greet him with heartfelt joy.

Full of courage, Ansgar begins his work. He did not limit his teaching to the slaves. He established a school where he instructed pagan boys. Every day he preached and brought many pagans to Christ. He even converts a chief to Christianity. This chief allows Ansgar and his helpers to build a Christian church on his property.

Louis the Pious recognises the great importance of Ansgar's work. He establishes a new bishopric in Hamburg, Germany, and appoints Ansgar as the bishop. Hamburg is geographically close to Sweden, and Ansgar relocates to Hamburg.

From Hamburg, Ansgar now regularly sends missionaries north into Denmark. At the same time, he builds a large cathedral in Hamburg and establishes a new school for Danish boys. Young Danish men sometimes ended up in prison. Ansgar ransomed them, brought them to the new school, and instructed them in the Christian doctrine.

Ansgar also established a library that the young men could freely use for their studies. Occasionally, Ansgar travelled north into Denmark for short stints to see how things were going there. However, he always returned to Hamburg to regulate and manage the mission work from

there. By God's grace, Ansgar's mammoth efforts bore fruit. Then in 840 Louis, the Pious died. That was a big blow to Ansgar because, in Louis, he had a great protector. Yet Ansgar continued with his work. But...



Ansgar preaching to heathen Danes. Painting by Wenzel Tornøe 1844-1907

THE VIKINGS ATTACK HAMBURG

Listen! A savage cry splits the air in the streets of Hamburg! Screams of distressed women and children echo through the city. A large Viking fleet has invaded Hamburg! People flee in mortal fear, trying to hide wherever they can. Danger lurks on every side. Death stares them in the face! Soon large hordes of robbing, murderous Vikings fill the streets. The streets are full of dead bodies of men, women, boys, and girls. The sky turns a bloody red from the fires - thick, suffocating clouds of smoke hang over the doomed city. The Vikings are destroying Hamburg! The beautiful cathedral goes up in flames and is soon a smoking heap of rubble. The fire reduces the school to a pile of ashes. The library, which Ansgar had built up with so much trouble and care, is completely lost. Years and years of Ansgar's dedicated, unwavering work is destroyed in one blow. Ansgar barely escapes death. He flees for his life, and in despair, he wanders around like a homeless beggar. It looks as if the prince of darkness is stronger than the God of the Christians!

Ansgar goes to the bishop of the city of Bremen, hoping to find help and support. However, the bishop sends him away. He is jealous and secretly does not mind at all that the Vikings destroyed Ansgar's work.

Finally, the homeless, wandering Ansgar finds a haven in Flanders. He rests there for three years.

The Vikings invaded Hamburg five years after the death of Louis the

Pious, in 845. Like wild beasts, they play havoc in the city of Hamburg. Then they leave in 848.

When Ansgar hears the news of their departure, he immediately heads back to Hamburg and starts all over again! We really must admire this missionary. He experienced so many setbacks. Again, and again the Vikings destroyed his work. Anyone else would have lost courage long ago. But not Ansgar. He dares to start again. What persistency! What perseverance!

And then the plague breaks out among the Vikings. Countless people die. Those who survive become afraid. They imagine that the God of the Christians is taking revenge because they have destroyed His churches. After Ansgar organised many things in the flattened city of Hamburg, he heads north into Denmark again. There he discovers that his previous work has not all been in vain. And the Vikings, in their hour of need, listen more eagerly than ever before to Ansgar's earnest preaching. Many abandon their pagan beliefs, and Ansgar is happy to baptise them! Finally, in 865, Ansgar lays down his weary head and breathes his last. He has completed his work on earth. Others may now carry on the task.

Indeed, God richly blessed the work of Ansgar. The last stronghold of paganism in the extreme

north of Europe, the final bastion of the prince of darkness which he so stubbornly defended, was overwhelmed by the power of the Gospel! God conquered gloriously! After many disappointments and setbacks, the pagan



Ansgar preaching in Finland. <https://popularhistoria.se/>

Viking nations became Christian countries.

Here we see the fulfilment of Psalm 22:27 – 28:

"All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and He rules over the nations."

Of Ansgar, who is rightly called 'The Apostle of the North', we may honestly say:

"The memory of the just is blessed."

QUESTIONS

1. How did Ansgar view life prior to his dream?
2. What warning did he receive in his dream?
3. What effect did this dream have on him?
4. What calling did Ansgar receive? How did he respond to this calling?
5. What early attempt to bring the gospel to the Vikings met with disappointment?
6. How did God use the civil war in Denmark to accomplish His purpose of introducing the Gospel to the land?
7. Identify Ebbo. Why did he become so discouraged?
8. What change occurred in the life of Harald? How did this happen?
9. What hopes did Louis the Pious have because of the change in Harald?
10. Why could Ansgar offer himself so freely for the work of a missionary?
11. Describe the missionary work of Ansgar and Autbertus.
12. Explain the opposition to the missionary work in Jutland.
13. Why were the Danes dissatisfied with Harald?
14. How did God use the slaves who were captured by the Vikings for the extension of His kingdom?

15. How did these slaves conduct themselves in their new land?

16. What role did the Christian merchants play in bringing Christianity to the land?

17. How did Satan try to prevent Christianity from being brought to Sweden? Did he only use the Vikings in his attempt? Explain.

18. Describe Ansgar's early work in the North.

19. Why did he leave this work? Show that the work received his continued support.

20. How did Satan oppose the work of Ansgar in Hamburg? How did Ansgar react to the destruction of Hamburg?

21. What was the result of Ansgar's labours?

FURTHER STUDY

1. Review the calling of Ansgar. What promise immediately follows the command given in Matthew 28? How was this promise fulfilled in Ansgar's life?
2. Read Romans 8:28. Show how this was true in the life of Ansgar.
3. While we focus our attention on the important work of Ansgar, we should not forget the work of Louis the Pious. What role did he play in this history?
4. Compare the story of the Christian slaves in Sweden with similar Biblical story. What story is this?
5. What lessons can we learn from Satan's failure to keep the Vikings under his power?