

# Goh Hood Keng

The boy who disobeyed  
his parents  
but became a legend  
in his time



*Rev Goh Hood Keng*

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*Anglo-Chinese School, Singapore (late 1890s)*

## AMAZING GRACE

About a hundred years ago, a father threatened to disown his son and shoot him with a hunting gun because the boy had become a Christian. The teenager was Goh Hood Keng, who was to become the first locally ordained Pastor of the Straits Chinese Methodist Church (now Kampong Kapor Methodist Church). His one passion was 'to preach Christ and Him crucified'.

After his father's outburst, Hood Keng lived at home as a Christian for over a year, facing daily persecution without complaining. But, when finally his parents heard that he had been baptised, his mother said to him with tears in her eyes, 'Son, I wish you could be a Christian ten times over.' She had been impressed by how his life had

been transformed, yet remaining a filial Chinese son and had given up his awful habit of gambling. She was convinced that the young man had, indeed, found the Way. Shortly after, both parents were also baptised.

## TRIALS OF A FILIAL SON

Young Hood Keng, born 27 February 1888, was the eldest son of Goh Kim Swee who sent him to be educated at the ACS, Coleman Street, at the age of seven. He was taught by missionaries and attended chapel services held every day. Soon, he was curious to discover what it was that the American missionaries were sharing with people here. So, he began to study the New Testament at home and went to church on Sundays. Though

his parents did not object, they detested Christianity as this meant becoming a 'white man'.

From a very early age, his pious Buddhist parents had disciplined him to pray thrice daily to all 13 idols, in their correct order and with their proper names. This was common practice among the Baba Chinese.

But, as he studied the Bible and listened to the gospel at chapel, he was painfully conscious that he was not the man he ought to be, and was gradually convinced that what he needed most was some power outside himself to come into his heart, to blot out his sins, and to enable him to live the right kind of life. He found the Way revealed in Jesus Christ.

As he took the fateful step without his parents' consent, he was guided by one of his teachers, Tan Ah Lok, who was assistant pastor at the Middle Road Church.

## 'HERE I AM'

His conversion took place as he was completing his school education (Senior Cambridge) when he was just 17, anxious to start preaching. But, that had to wait and he joined his old school as a teacher, rejecting other job offers. He faithfully taught on week days and preached on weekends for the next 20 years, freely serving his church.

As a teacher, he was rapidly promoted, first as class master of Standard Seven, because his teaching methods had attracted wide admiration, and helped to raise the reputation of the school. He was next promoted Supervisor of the Serangoon English School which had become a branch of the ACS.

He preached daily to the boys lined up in the school yard, and taught a Sunday School class which attracted many students whom he directed to the Baba Church at Middle Road. His pupils were inspired by his teaching and preaching, many remembering him with fondness and respect, even as they became leaders in modern Singapore.

His ambition to do God's work in the church

was given a boost when he was appointed assistant to Rev F.H. Sullivan, Pastor-in-charge of the Middle Road Church. He was to remain with this congregation until he retired in 1952, a record of 39 years, but continued to teach until 1927.

To prepare himself for church work, he completed a course of theological studies in 1919, and could now be referred to as 'Rev' Goh Hood Keng. He took on more responsibilities in the Church, mainly because of a shortage of missionaries. Being fluent in both English and Baba Malay, he was quite capable of filling the vacancy.

As President of the church's Epworth League (later MYF) that he had earlier revived, he was involved in street preaching and tracting, visiting hospitals and the leper colony. He worked extremely hard, especially with the young people whom he led and influenced, never complaining as preaching the gospel was, for him, 'meat and drink'.

Amidst his busy schedule, two personal crises challenged him in 1924. After a short illness, his wife returned to the Lord, and shortly after, he was diagnosed with Hansen's Disease (leprosy). Sent to Calcutta for treatment, he stayed for nearly two years under specialist treatment. But, even in illness, he continued to preach and teach the Word, first among European inmates, then at the Thoburn Church in Calcutta where his preaching touched many hearts.

Miraculously, he was completely cured of the disease which could have lingered indefinitely. God's plan for him was continuing to work.

## 'SEND ME'

When he returned to Singapore, he decided to resign his teaching to do full-time church work, a brave and sacrificial decision, as his income was reduced to less than half. But, his determination to preach resulted in a remarkable ministry. It included constructing a new building for his church at Kampong Kapor and three evangelistic trips to Malaysia and Java, besides being pastor

of the Straits Chinese Methodist Church, the largest Methodist Church with the largest Sunday School in Singapore and Malaysia at that time.

When Goh Hood Keng met his Master, he had been 'faithful over a few things'. For Methodists, he had been a living legend, worthy of emulation.

## BEING A CHRISTIAN

We remember Goh Hood Keng's personal walk with the Lord because he believed that being a Christian means:

\* *SURRENDERING* your heart and life to Jesus when the Holy Spirit convicts you of your sins and you feel a great load in your heart;

\* *LETTING GOD SPEAK* through his Word, "... that it may indeed become food for your soul ... *TALKING with Jesus* awhile, *TELLING HIM* your needs, ... *ASKING* for grace and strength to live the Christian life."

\* *LIVING* "the highest, largest and fullest life ... so that your fellow men will know that you belong to Christ ... (and) *DOING* ordinary things in Christ's way (because) ... God attaches great importance to the things of ordinary life."

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ACS Boys