

Dr Albert Schweitzer, October 1953.

Credit: Keystone / Stringer

# Albert Schweitzer

## Worthy to serve the suffering

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**A**lbert Schweitzer was a great man. In the domain of music he produced influential scholarly works on Johann Sebastian Bach, helped to develop new standards for organ building, and achieved worldwide renown as an organist. As a theologian he authored groundbreaking studies on the historical Jesus, and the mysticism of Saint Paul. As a philosopher he developed the idea that reverence for life should be regarded as humanity's defining principle. And as a physician he founded, and spent the better part of 50 years working in, a missionary hospital in what is now Gabon in west central Africa.

In recognition of his philosophy of reverence for life as expressed through his work as a medical missionary, Schweitzer received the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize. The story of Schweitzer's life, and in particular his calling to medical mission work provide deep insight into what it means to be worthy to serve the suffering.

Schweitzer, though a great man, was by his own admission not a perfect one. Some visitors to his African hospital protested that the medical care being provided was not as up-to-date as it should have been, and others argued that the philanthropic donations he received were not being put to the best possible use. And, although Schweitzer spent decades in Africa, he never acquired more than a rudimentary understanding of native languages, did not integrate himself into the local cultures, and did little to train locals to provide their own medical care.

Despite such shortcomings, Schweitzer was perhaps one the best known, and most admired, people of the 20th century, referred to by Winston Churchill as a genius of humanity.

### **Schweitzer's life**

Born in 1875 in the Alsace-Lorraine region along the long-disputed border between France and Germany, Schweitzer was the son of an evangelical pastor whose medieval church served both Catholic and Protestant congregations. After completing his secondary education, he studied the organ for eight years, followed by theological studies, and a term of compulsory military service. In 1899, he published his dissertation on the religious philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

Schweitzer became the principal of a theological school, and in 1906, he published a work on the historical Jesus, emphasizing Christianity's origin as a Jewish apocalyptic movement.



Albert Schweitzer holds his daughter, Rhena, 1923. Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images



Albert Schweitzer and his wife, Helene Bresslau, in Chicago 1949.

Credit: Jonathan Kirn / Contributor

At the age of 30, Schweitzer answered a call from Paris for medical missionaries by enrolling in medical school, completing his studies in 1911. In 1912, he and his wife, Helene, used their own money to organize a mission to Africa, where a year later they converted an old henhouse into a hospital.

With the outbreak of World War I, Schweitzer and his wife, who were Germans working in a French colony, were placed under the supervision of the French military. Four years later they were transported to France for health reasons.

In 1918, Schweitzer reclaimed his parents' French citizenship, and began raising money to return to Africa by giving lectures and organ performances.

In 1924, he had amassed enough funding, and with a small staff of health professionals, returned to Africa and built a new, larger hospital around which the village Lambarene developed and grew.

Except for short visits to Europe and the United States, Schweitzer spent the rest of his life in Africa, including the entirety of World War II. He worked primarily as a physician, but also helped run the village, and continued his scholarly research and writing. When he received the Nobel Prize, he used the award money to start a leprosanarium at the hospital in Lambarene.

Schweitzer died in 1965 at the age of 90, and is buried overlooking the river that runs along the village he founded.

### The work of atonement

In addition to being a great thinker and writer, Schweitzer was also a man of action who put his principles into practice. He turned away from the ease and security of his university post, the lecture circuit, and the concert halls of Europe to serve unknown people in a precarious part of the world, where his health, and that of his wife, suffered badly.

He effected change not by funds from a government or a large multi-national philanthropic organization, but by using his own money. He worked tirelessly to raise funds to support his mission. Schweitzer not only espoused the importance of being worthy to serve the suffering, he actually lived it, day in and day out, for decades.

In the 11th and final chapter of his 1922 book, *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, Schweitzer presents his views on service to the suffering. He opens with a vivid image of 1917 when he and his exhausted wife arrived at the mouth of the Ogowe River to spend the warm, rainy months at the seaside. He explored the abandoned huts around the house in which they would be living, when, opening the door of the last one:

I saw a man lying on the ground with his head almost buried in the sand and ants running all over him. It was a victim of sleeping sickness whom his companions had

left there, probably some days before, because they could not take him any further. He was past all help, though he still breathed. While I was busied with him I could see through the door of the hut the bright blue waters of the bay in their frame of green woods, a scene of almost magic beauty, looking still more enchanting in the flood of golden light poured over it by the setting sun. To be shown in a single glance such a paradise and such a helpless, hopeless, misery was overwhelming....But it was a symbol of the condition of Africa.

Schweitzer's writings are full of such stories from his life. As a child, he modeled his prayers on those of his mother, but instead of just praying for human beings, he included all things that have breath.

Because his father was a Lutheran pastor, he came from more privileged circumstances than many of his classmates, but his sense of justice prevented him from wearing nicer clothes than they. He could not accept privileges for himself that had been denied to others—since others had no over-coat he wore none; since others' mittens had no

fingers, his mittens lacked them as well.

In *Primeval Forest*, one story follows another. Upon his return to the hospital, he found locals being pressed into military service for the Cameroons, many of whom had contracted dysentery. As these unfortunate souls were being loaded on a steamer, the natives began to truly experience war. The vessel's departure was accompanied by the wailing of women, and it was only after its trail of smoke had disappeared in the distance that the crowd began to disperse. On the river bank sat an old woman whose son had been taken. She was weeping. Schweitzer sat down beside her, taking her hand in an effort to comfort her. She continued to cry as if she did not notice him. "Suddenly," Schweitzer wrote, "I felt that I was crying with her, silently, toward the setting sun, as she was."

To be worthy to serve the suffering means being willing to suffer with—not just to minister to—those who suffer.

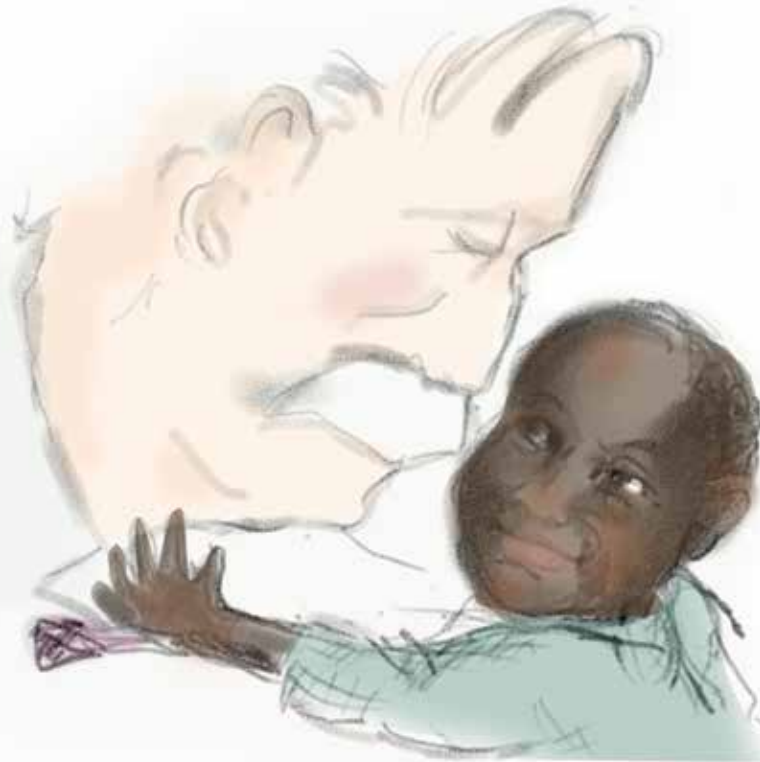
In his memoirs Schweitzer wrote, "Whoever is spared personal pain must feel himself called to help in diminishing the pain of others. We must all carry our share of the misery that lies upon the world."

Right, Albert Schweitzer with patient at Lambarene.

Credit: Pictorial Parade / Staff

Nurse at Dr. Albert Schweitzer's hospital village treating sores on lepers' feet. Photo by W. Eugene Smith/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images





Erica Aitken

Schweitzer's time in Gabon included WWI and WWII. He recognized that to the scourges of dysentery, leprosy, malaria, sand fleas, sleeping sickness, yaws, and other endemic diseases he confronted were being added the scourges of warfare. It was not only infectious microorganisms that were killing human beings. Human beings were one of the greatest sources of their own suffering.

Schweitzer could administer medications and apply dressings to treat infections, but when it came to the tide of warfare, he could only stand by and watch as local men were impressed. To the old woman whose son had been conscripted, he could offer little more than his own tears.

Schweitzer once read a magazine article declaring that there will always be wars—a manifestation, so its author claimed, of a noble thirst for glory in every human heart. From Schweitzer's point of view, such sentiments were born of nothing more than ignorance. The apologists for war, he said:

Would probably reconsider their opinions if they spent a day in one of the African theatres of war, walking along the paths in the virgin forest between lines of corpses of carriers who had sunk under their load and found a solitary death by the roadside, and if, with these innocent and unwilling victims before them, they were to meditate in the gloomy stillness of the forest on war as it really is.

Schweitzer had been told that the primitive people of Africa do not suffer, and do not experience pain, in the

same way as Europeans who argued, "They are never so ill as we are, and do not feel so much pain." But after more than four years living at the edge of the primeval forest, Schweitzer knew otherwise. He wrote, "The child of nature feels them as we do, for to be human means to be subject to the power of that terrible lord whose name is Pain."

Schweitzer asserted that millions and millions of people suffer every day from conditions that medical science could avert. He argued that coming to the aid of such people is a natural response of the sympathy that Jesus and religion generally call for, but it also dictates our most fundamental ideas and reasonings. It is a matter not just of good work, but of a duty that must not be shirked:

Anything we give them is not benevolence but atonement. For every one who scattered injury someone ought to go out to take help, and when we have done all that is in our power, we shall not have atoned for the thousandth part of our guilt.

This work of atonement cannot be the sole province of governments, Schweitzer argued, because governments can only do what society is already convinced needs to be done. No government alone can discharge the duties of humanitarianism, a responsibility that rests primarily with communities and individuals.

### Worthy to serve the suffering

Schweitzer called his most essential and transformative

idea, “the Fellowship of those who bear the Mark of Pain.” Its members include those who have learned firsthand the meaning of physical pain and bodily anguish. Regardless where they happen to be located around the world, these people are united by a “secret bond.” They know “the horrors of suffering to which man can be exposed, and they know the longing to be free from pain.”

Schweitzer proclaimed that those who have been delivered from such pain should not rejoice that they are free from it, but as people whose eyes are now open, they should labor to bring to others the deliverance they have enjoyed. Someone who has, with a doctor’s aid, recovered from a severe illness, should provide such help to another. A mother whose child has been saved should help to ensure that some other mother’s child is spared. Those who have been comforted at the bedside of a dying loved one should ensure that others enjoy the same consolation.

One noteworthy implication of Schweitzer’s perspective concerns the role of the experience of suffering as a precondition for responding to the suffering of others. Schweitzer did not call on everyone, but on those who have known suffering. He called on those whose experience of suffering—either firsthand or through contact with others in pain—has been relieved through the efforts of others. Why? Because before we know the suffering of others, feeling what they are feeling, we must be open to suffering.

Who is worthy to serve the suffering? From Schweitzer’s point of view, the answer is simple: anyone who has known suffering. Perhaps only a doctor can prescribe a curative medicine or perform a life-saving operation, and perhaps only a person of considerable wealth can afford to bankroll a foreign medical mission. But, no one lacks the means to do good. Whether through direct action or by supporting the efforts of others, every person can play some role in the relief of suffering. The limitations are not education and wealth but imagination and conviction.

Truth has no special time of its own. Its hour is now—always, and indeed then most truly, when it seems most unsuitable to actual circumstances. This is not just a new aid program, but an awakening from a kind of thoughtlessness, the calling into life of a new spirit of humanity.

Schweitzer believed that this new awakening could be expressed anywhere. It is not necessary to travel to Africa or a far-flung corner of the globe to serve humanity. The point is not to travel many miles but to touch many lives.

Schweitzer anticipated an objection, and knew some would ask, “What good could it possibly do to cope with the misery of the world simply to send a doctor here and

another one there?” Isn’t the effort to banish pain and suffering from the face of the earth an ultimately futile one that can only end in disappointment—itsself a kind of suffering? To this, Schweitzer demonstrated that even a single doctor with the most modest equipment means very much for very many.

No one should allow the fact that we cannot do everything to prevent us from attempting to do anything. Schweitzer professed:

The misery I have seen gives me strength, and faith in my fellow men supports my confidence in the future. I do hope that I shall find a sufficient number of people who, because they themselves have been saved from physical suffering, will respond to requests on behalf of those who are in similar need....I do hope that among the doctors of the world there will be several besides myself who will be sent out, here or there, in the world by “the Fellowship of those who bear the Mark of Pain.”

Although the questions Schweitzer raised are eternal, he believed that each generation of human beings must confront them anew. The conversation about life’s purpose must be renewed with each generation, and in the heart of every person. “Just as a tree bears year after year the same fruit, and yet fruit which is each year new, so must all permanently valuable ideas be continually born again in thought.”

For Schweitzer the ultimate question concerned not only worthiness to serve, but the very meaning of life. He said, “In religion, we try to find the answer to the elementary question with which each of us is newly confronted every morning, namely, what meaning and what value is to be ascribed to our life? What am I in the world? What is my purpose in it? What may I hope for in this world?”

It is our answers to these questions, Schweitzer believed, that render us worthy to serve the suffering.

## Reference

1. Schweitzer A. *The Primeval Forest*. Trans. Thomas Campion. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore (MD). 1998; 125–30.

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