

The Power of a Life Lived Fully for God: A Tribute to David Wilkerson

"Jesus said, unless a grain of wheat fall to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed but if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24, NIV – UK)

On the afternoon of April 27, on a Texas highway about 95 miles southeast of Dallas, a 79-year-old man died in a car crash.

Like many others around the world, I was saddened to hear the news. I first met this man when I was in my early 20s, and the example of his life and ministry has long been an inspiration to me.

He achieved great things in his life and his story is a powerful lesson of what can be achieved when a young person fully commits his life to God.

His name was David Wilkerson. He was the author of the best-selling book, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, which was made into a Hollywood movie.

It's

a powerful and true story of how many drug addicts and gang members

became Christians when Wilkerson first went to New York City.

Years

later he had the faith to buy one of the biggest theaters on Broadway

and found the non-denominational Times Square Church. David Wilkerson

also founded Teen Challenge, which uses a biblically based recovery

program for drug addicts.

Today

and every day, approximately 24,000 men and women are experiencing

the saving and delivering power of Jesus Christ from life-controlling

issues in Teen Challenge centers all around the world.

My

first meeting with him was when he came to speak at the Royal Albert

Hall, London where my dad was chairman of his meeting. I later met

him on his bus when he was doing a tour of America.

He

was a very down to earth and humble man who never lost his love for

God and people.

Wilkerson was just 26 years old

when his ministry started to move to another level.

I

want to make some observations to make on Wilkerson's life and ministry.

1.

He was a man who prayed and obeyed

He'd

been brought up in a Christian home and was a pastor of a small rural

church. But then he made a decision which was to change his life and

ministry and end up touching millions of people around the world.

On

February 9, 1958, Wilkerson felt the Holy Spirit prompting him to

spend late evenings praying rather than watching the Late Show on TV.

Two

weeks and two days later, during his late night time of prayer, he

felt prompted to pick up the February 24, 1958, edition of *Life*

magazine. When he reached pages 30-31, he wept as he looked at an ink

sketching of seven members of the Dragon Gang on trial for killing

15-year-old polio victim, Michael Farmer. He felt the Spirit say to

him, 'Go and help those boys.'

Although

Wilkerson had never been to New York City, 350 miles away, he found

himself three days later in a courtroom where the gang members were

on trial.

The

judge threw Wilkerson out of the courtroom. The press photographed the skinny preacher being physically detained by court officers, and by the next day the picture made the front page of New York's papers. One unexpected—but as it turned out, providential—result was that Wilkerson became accepted by New York's toughest and most blood-thirsty street gangs as the preacher who was arrested for trying to help other gang members.

That late night time of prayer opened up the global ministry Wilkerson founded. Great movements of God always start small. They invariably begin in the hearts of an individual or small group who get real with God and who are quick to obey Him.

2.

He had a powerful compassion for people that motivated him to reach out to people

The

Cross and the Switchblade tells how compassion for the lost of New York caused Wilkerson to resign as a church pastor in his safe town and reach out to the toughest street gangs in New York.

At

times he stood face to face with New York's murderers, heroin addicts and the worst of criminals in his quest to bring hope to the inner cities.

As

news of what Wilkerson did became well known, his ministry became

global and he traveled around the world, spending a lot of his time

in church circles and conferences. But the love God had put in his

heart would not go away.

Nearly

30 years after Wilkerson wept in his study, the Lord touched his

heart again. In 1986, while walking down 42nd Street at midnight,

Pastor Wilkerson's heart broke over what he saw.

At

that time, Times Square was populated mainly by prostitutes and

pimps, runaways, drug addicts and hustlers, along with strip clubs

and X-rated movie houses. Wilkerson cried out for God to do something—anything—to help the physically destitute and spiritually dead people he saw.

Recalling

that life-changing night, Wilkerson said,

"I saw 9-, 10- and 11-year-old kids bombed on crack cocaine. I walked down 42nd Street and they were selling crack. Len Bias, the

famous basketball player, had just died of a crack overdose, and the

pusher was yelling, 'Hey, I've got the stuff that killed Len.'

I wept and prayed, 'God, you've got to raise up a testimony in this hellish place ... The answer was not what I wanted to hear: 'Well, you know the city. You've been here. You do it.'"

Wilkerson once more obeyed God and opened Times Square Church in October of 1987.

Wilkerson's

last mission on earth was to be an advocate for the poorest of the

poor—to provide relief and support for hungry children and widows

and orphans. After founding Teen

Challenge, World Challenge

and Times Square

Church, he sought to feed starving children in the most

impoverished countries in the world. Today,

Please Pass the Bread is saving the lives of thousands of children, through 56 outreaches in 8 countries.

This

compassion for the lost and hurting people marked Wilkerson's ministry. He had the heart of Jesus. When the Lord saw the hungry

multitudes, "He was moved with

pity and sympathy for them, because they were bewildered (harassed

and distressed and dejected and helpless), like sheep without a

shepherd,")Matthew 9:36, AMP).

It's

only when our hearts start to break for people that we can begin to

minister to the countless broken people of our world.

3.

He believed that people's lives could be powerfully changed by an encounter with Jesus Christ

He

believed that people who came in touch with the crucified and risen

Christ could and would have their lives radically changed for the

better.

He

believed that no one was so hopeless that they could not be saved. He

believed God could change the lives of gang members and transform the most desperate drug addicts.

He

believed that if people repented of their sins and turned to Christ,

then the blood of Jesus shed 2,000 years ago at Calvary is still the

only effective remedy to cleanse people and 'wash them white as snow.'

He

believed in the words of the great old hymn "To God Be the Glory"

that the "vilest offender who

truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives."

And

he believed that the presence and power the Holy Spirit would enable

each newly born believer to live a victorious life of freedom and

fulfillment.

In

other words, he believed in the amazing **saving grace** of Jesus Christ. But he also believed in the **sustaining grace** of Christ in all circumstances.

These

are the very last words he wrote in his final blog: "To those going

through the valley and shadow of death, hear this word:
Weeping will
last through some dark, awful nights—and in that darkness you
will
soon hear the Father whisper, ‘I am with you. I cannot tell
you why
right now, but one day it will all make sense. You will see it
was
all part of my plan. It was no accident. It was no failure on
your
part. Hold fast. Let me embrace you in your hour of pain.’
Beloved,
God has never failed to act but in goodness and love. When all
means
fail—his love prevails. Hold fast to your faith. Stand fast in
his
Word. There is no other hope in this world.”

4.

He shaped messed up people into outstanding leaders

Nicky

Cruz was a leader, but very messed up. The son of parents who
practiced witchcraft, he was the teenage leader of one of the
most
dreaded street gangs of New York known as the Mau Maus.

But

through the ministry of Wilkerson he not only committed his
life to
Christ, but went on to become a famous evangelist and author
of the
book *Run Baby Run*.

In

turn, Nicky Cruz was instrumental in the conversion of Sonny
Arguinizoni, a gang member and drug addict. Arguinizoni
was inspired to start Victory Outreach International. Today it

has
grown to a fellowship of over 700 churches and ministries in
33
countries. Most of its growth has taken place in the toughest
inner
cities on the planet.

It
was at a Nicky Cruz meeting that another prominent Christian
leader,
A.R. Bernard,
a former Muslim, came to Christ.

The
church he started in Brooklyn now has 30,000 members.
His church, the
Christian Cultural Center, is the largest church in New York
City and
has one of the fastest growing congregations in America. He
has
gained the respect of national and world leaders alike.

When
you give your life fully to God, you have no idea who you will
reach
and how many lives you will touch for God.

5.

Wilkerson was a man of faith and initiative

He
dared to believe that God worked miracles when people dared to
believe God. He believed that a dynamic church could be
launched in
the heart of Times Square, New York City.

In
1987 in an area of Manhattan that was then riddled with X-
rated movie

houses, strip clubs, prostitution and drugs, he started Times Square church.

At first the church occupied rented auditoriums, later moving to the historic Mark Hellinger Theater, which the ministry bought in 1989 and in which it has operated ever since. TSC later expanded when it bought 65,000 square feet of space in a building on Broadway adjoining the former theater.

Wilkerson told *Charisma*: "We originally came here to find a holy remnant who would welcome repentance and set an example that people could live a righteous life in the midst of Babylon or Sodom."

For nearly a quarter of a century, the church has faithfully ministered right across the racial and socioeconomic spectrum of life in the Big Apple. Over 60 nationalities are represented in the congregation. Today thousands continue to pack into multiple services.

When I travel to the United States, I try to stay over on a Sunday night in New York whenever possible. This past freezing January I quickly made it through customs and took a cab straight to Times Square.

I
left my bags at the hotel reception and rushed past the
flashing
multicolored images of leading brands and top shows. I glanced
up at
a huge display of the latest media Messiah, my fellow
countryman
Piers Morgan, and then arrived a few minutes late for the 6
p.m.
Times Square Church gospel service.

Outside
it had seemed very cold, naturally and spiritually. The moment
I
stepped inside with choir and congregation fervently
worshipping the
Lord, I felt the warmth of the Holy Spirit so suddenly and so
strongly that I began to cry.

The
fires of God, I quickly realized, are still burning strongly
on the
altar that Wilkerson first built many years ago.

6.
He lived a godly life and believed in the power of holiness
Wilkerson
always believed that a holy life was the secret of knowing the
blessing of God. He didn't just believe in the Spirit. He
believed
in the *Holy* Spirit.

His
teaching was unashamed, old-time gospel and straight down the
line.
He was full on for righteous living. He often seemed like a
biblical

prophet in the way he spoke out against sin, both inside and outside the church.

I heard firsthand how he was invited to speak at a major television ministry, but he refused to go. He believed, correctly as events turned out, that there was sin and wrongdoing at the highest level of the ministry.

He prophesied that God's judgment would fall. "Within a year the birds will be flying through an empty building," he told a friend of mine.

He was right. The televangelist concerned was exposed for a wrong sexual relationship and he went to jail for financial crimes. The buildings that had attracted such huge crowds were empty within the year.

But there was also a less publicized and gentle side to the holiness represented in the life of Wilkerson. He loved his family and lived faithfully as a family man. He and his devoted wife, Gwen, had four children and 11 grandchildren. Who knows what fruit is yet to come from them?

7.

He stayed faithful to God and his calling

All

his life he served the Lord. His son Gary has quoted Acts 13:36 which

says: "David served the purposes of God in his generation, then he died."

Gary

wrote: "Dad lived life to the fullest, obeying God with devotion and loving Jesus radically. Like

King David of old, after having served God's purpose, he died. I

know if my father were able to encourage you with his words today, he

would invite you to give your all to Jesus, to love God deeply and to

give yourself away to the needs of others."

Today

Wilkerson is like a seed that has fallen into the ground. But I

believe that both his death, as well as his life, will yet produce

many other seeds. You can be one of them. Follow the example of David

Wilkerson. Choose to live a life fully committed to God.

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