

What Really Happened Behind the Scenes on 'Finger of God 2'

It all began with a very unlikely friendship.

Will Hacker and I couldn't be more different to the casual observer. He's gregarious and outgoing, always the life of the party. I'm introverted and somewhat guarded, content to sit on the side and observe. But when we first met a few years ago, back when we both lived in Chicago, something clicked between us almost immediately, and we knew we would most likely be friends for life.

At the time, WP Films had a pretty large team of people on staff, and there wasn't really any room for Will in our studio or our budget. But I knew we were supposed to work together, and I was pretty sure I had found the person I'd been seeking for years. I knew I needed to start thinking about training others up in what I do, to mentor someone in this strange new genre of "God-umentaries" that I did so we could be even more fruitful with what God had entrusted to us, and also to do our best in advancing God's kingdom even more.

When I met Will, I immediately saw that rare combination of hunger for more of God, a fearlessness to do what He said no matter what and a love of telling stories in new, creative ways. He also had what I call that "sliver in the spirit," that thing in your spiritual life that needs to be itched, examined and made available for the world to see. Ultimately, it's that sliver—that irritation that there has to be more than what you already understand about God that eats away at you until you deal with it—that is most important in the life of an artist.

This, more than anything, is what drew me to Will and first

planted the idea of commissioning him to make the follow-up to my first film, *Finger of God*. My team and I had started kicking around the idea of creating something for the 10th anniversary of the release of *Finger of God* a few years prior (these movies take a long time to develop and create), but we were split on how to do it. One idea was to return to some of the same places I filmed for *Finger of God* and see what had happened over the last 10 years. Though this would have been fairly easy to pull off, I didn't feel it would be compelling enough. The story would be stunted from the outset, and I've never been a big fan of looking back anyway. So the only other option was to make a completely new movie, trying to combine a few elements from the first one to tie them together spiritually in some way. But when I thought about making this the next big film I would direct, I realized I had absolutely no desire to tackle it.

When I made the original *Finger of God*, I was barely holding onto my Christian faith. I was a skeptic, especially of the charismatic movement, and I spent most of my time either judging other Christians or critiquing every decision made by whatever church I was attending. I'd check out mentally as soon as the sermon started, and I really only did the whole church thing because I knew it was "the right thing to do." But I certainly didn't enjoy it at all.

Then I had a radical encounter with God and an angel. It was my own Damascus Road experience. And yes, things sort of changed after that.

Fast forward 10 years, and I was hopelessly in love with Jesus and had been forever changed by what I had experienced and captured in a decade. I simply didn't have the same mentality that I did when I made the first film, and I felt like it would have been disingenuous to try and drum up the same skepticism, fear and viewpoint I brought to *Finger of God*. So I knew I couldn't make this movie, but then who could? I put it in the Lord's hands, believing that if He wanted this movie

made, He'd bring me the right person.

So there I sat with Will Hacker in a Starbucks on a cold winter day in 2015. I wanted to talk to him about something I was sure he would say no to, but I had to ask. The Lord had made it clear to me, after all. I told him there was no easy way to ask this, so I was just going to do it.

"So I think you're supposed to make *Finger of God 2* with me, but that's not something that can probably happen for a while. In the meantime, I think you need to move down to South Carolina with me (we were moving our company to Greenville at the time) and I want you to help me create a new TV show I'm working on. The only problem is, I can't promise you much money, and I have no idea how long it will be before we make *Finger 2*." It was probably the worst pitch ever.

Little did I know that just a week before this conversation, the Lord had told Will to "listen to Darren and do whatever he asks you to do." Needless to say, this conversation wasn't an incredibly joyous one for him! He now had to decide if he was going to be obedient to the Lord when obedience looked terrifying. He was the head children's pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel, a conservative megachurch in the Chicago suburbs, and his wife was a very successful nurse. If they moved to Greenville with us, it would mean throwing all of their security away on a whim and (literally) a prayer.

Will chose obedience, and what followed was probably the worst two years of his life. Their house took forever to sell, and they wound up having to move into my basement for five months—a family of six living in one room. Meanwhile, a massive pruning happened for my company, and when the dust settled, WP went from eight full-time employees to two. I released two seasons of my TV show, *Adventures With God*, on fumes. Will and his wife wondered if they had made a massive mistake.

But then the Lord told me it was time to make *Finger of God 2*, and the whole scene began to shift. Will went on a 40-day fast, and by the end of it, we had raised all the money needed to make the film, and he was already on his way to his first film shoot.

The film shoot itself is probably Will's story to tell, since he lived it, not me. I helped set up relationships and shoots, but he's the one who walked it all out. When filming was finished, I helped him get his story structure down, and then Will sequestered himself away in his new home of Reno, Nevada (his wife, Jamie was able to get her dream job out there during filming), and began putting the movie together. He had done some editing of my TV show, but nothing to this scale. The question on all of our minds was, "Can he pull it off?" For these documentaries, the story is essentially written during the editing process. A month later, he flew back to Greenville to show me the first version of the film, what is called a "rough cut."

I'm not going to lie; I was nervous as we started watching. If this thing stank, I wouldn't be able to sugar-coat it, and Will and I had even talked about what might entail if I needed to take the movie from him to shape and finish it if it was really bad. That is not something I wanted to have to do to my best friend.

Two hours later, the screen went dark, and I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. With a smile on my face, I turned to him and said, "Will, it's *really* good." I think even he teared up at that moment, because we both knew that not only had he done what we dreamed about three years ago, but we also had something with the potential to be truly extraordinary on our hands.

The next few months were a blast for me and torturous for Will. I stepped into the post-production process with 30 years of storytelling experience and had no problem identifying the

areas that needed more, needed less, and what had to just be cut completely. Unfortunately for Will, who had grown quite attached to his “baby,” each change, however minor, was like a fresh cut. At one point, when I explained that he needed to cut out an entire 17-minute section of the film (of an adventure he had filmed in Germany), he likened it to lopping off one of his arms. But with each change, each edit, each shift in tone or wording, we could both see the film transforming into something amazing. It still carried Will’s heart, his ideas and his experience, but through teamwork, we were making it a powerful, moving and captivating film.

And then Will was on tour, traveling across the U.S. in an RV with his four children, traveling to 35 cities over three months, showing the film to hundreds, sometimes thousands of people at a time, and he began to see the fruit of his obedience on the tear-stained faces of those who came up to hug him afterwards. In Atlanta, I watched as 18 people gave their lives to Jesus after watching a 90-minute movie made by a guy who put everything on the line, walked through the toughest season of his life and persevered even when he wondered if he’d made a giant mistake.

And now thousands around the world are getting touched by God’s love for them in new and fresh ways simply by pressing the play button. At the world premiere in Redding, California, I was sitting next to Will and his wife. As the movie started, I leaned over and whispered to Will what I’d been waiting to say for months.

“You did it. buddy. You made it to the finish.”

As he hugged me and we both cried, another thought crossed my mind: *Will’s finish line was the starting line for everyone else.* Countless thousands would watch this film, and hardly anyone would ever know what it took to reach them. They would never know that the only reason they were watching this movie, the only reason they were getting rocked by God’s love, was

because of a simple choice.

A choice that is sometimes the hardest choice for any of us to make.

A choice of obedience over comfort. {eoa}

To find out more about Finger of God 2, visit .