

How She Overcomes

Priscilla Shirer was stunned when Alex and Stephen Kendrick asked her to star in their film *War Room*. Though Shirer was well-known as a powerful Bible teacher and a best-selling author, she had never acted before—and she felt it would be a distraction from the work God called her to. She politely told them no. The brothers responded with one final pitch: “This won’t just be entertainment. This is ministry.”

That got Shirer’s attention. She read the script and discovered they were telling the truth. God had anointed *War Room* with a powerful message to teach believers worldwide about the power of prayer. Acting could be ministry.

“You know, some people may never read a book I might write,” Shirer says. “They may never come into the church to hear a message I might give. They may never go through one of those Bible studies. But they will go to a movie.”

In the movie, Shirer plays Elizabeth Jordan, a realtor and mother whose marriage is falling apart. Encouraged by a client to pray through her problems, Elizabeth witnesses the power of prayer firsthand as God restores her marriage. Despite no previous experience, Shirer received plenty of praise for her performance in *War Room*, and the film went on to become the Kendrick brothers’ most successful film to date. And while Shirer’s career remains focused on Bible teaching, she didn’t quit acting after *War Room*. She had a small role in last year’s hit *I Can Only Imagine*, and this year, she reunites with the Kendrick brothers for their upcoming film, *Overcomer*.

It’s an unexpected but natural extension of Shirer’s ministry, which likewise came unexpectedly but naturally. Though her father is megachurch pastor Tony Evans, Shirer at first had no interest in preaching. She studied communications in college with plans to become a news anchor. But during school, she

interned at a Christian radio station. Listeners would call out of the blue and ask her to emcee church events or lead Bible studies—and Shirer obliged. As a 19-year old, she'd show up wherever she was invited, sometimes preaching to 10 people and sometimes to 500.

"That's when the fire was lit in my heart for the possibility that sharing God's Word could be something I could do," Shirer says. "It never occurred to me that it would be my whole life. I just thought that would be something on the side—I would do Bible studies [for any] people the Lord would bring in my path. To make a long story short, the invitations to share God's Word just never stopped coming. So for the past 20—going on 25—years, that is what has happened. People have invited me to share God's Word in writing and publishing and Bible studies and now in film. And I just have had the privilege to just share God's Word wherever He lets me."

Hundreds of thousands—if not millions—have listened to Shirer preach over the years. But she believes what people are responding to is not her but the truth she carries.

"It's not that I'm particularly talented or anything," she says. "It's just truth. They're hearing something that gives them peace in their soul. That's what people need. ... I just keep asking Him, 'Lord, how can I package Your truth in a way that will speak to this group of people, and make sure that they do not miss the truth that's enveloped in this message?' You know, the packaging may change, but principles never do. That's what I think draws people in: something that is true yesterday, today and forevermore."

Overcoming Identity

Overcomer, which releases in theaters nationwide August 23, is the first film by the Kendrick brothers in four years. While *War Room* focused on the power of prayer, *Overcomer* tackles the concept of identity and knowing who your heavenly Father is.

“Are your value and significance rooted firmly in who you are in Christ—or are they subject to external factors?” Shirer says. “Is your significance found in your career, your ambitions or any number of other things where we tend to place our value? Sometimes we don’t realize it until those things are stripped away. All temporal things can be stripped away from us. And when they are, we can tell if we’ve placed our identity in them based on whether or not we’re just disappointed by the loss or devastated by the loss.”

Shirer admits that even she struggles sometimes with basing her identity on the opinions and acceptance of others.

“As I was looking at the script, even before we started filming, it made me look at myself: *Have I misplaced my identity in Christ as the primary governing factor of my life, the place where I’m rooted and find my value?*” Shirer says. “The Lord has a way of revealing you to yourself. Just when you feel like you need to pray about everybody else in your life, He says, ‘No, actually, it’s you. And let’s work together.’ That’s the grace of God: ‘Let’s work together. I will allow you to bring to Me all your stuff, and I turn messes into miracles.’”

Shirer’s sons even assisted on-set throughout the production, working as “gofers” who helped with any little task that needed doing. In doing so, Shirer says they got to see true men and women of integrity honoring God at work.

“Alex and Stephen and [older brother] Shannon Kendrick call the entire cast and crew together every morning of filming ... and we have devotions together,” Shirer says. “We pray together. Several times throughout filming during the day, they might stop and ask everyone to pray over a particular scene that we’re about to film, that God would be glorified in it. ... What a privilege to be able to have my sons on set, watching directors who honor Christ very boldly in the work environment.”

After all, Shirer says, our rapidly secularizing society will not provide such strong Christian role models. She prays for her sons and the next generation regularly.

“My sons [and] young people like them are going to have to—in this post-Christian era—really know what it means to be bold for their faith,” she says. “They’re going to have to know how to be apologists, how to have concrete theology behind them, so they can speak the truth in love [without fear] and have the know-how to be able to do that intelligently. ...

“I can teach them God’s Word. I can pray with them. I can take them to church with me. But at some point, that is where the Holy Spirit kicks in and gives them a fire that their mama can’t give them, their daddy can’t give them, and the pastor can’t give them. It’s got to be God’s own Spirit, ringing in their ears, convicting, challenging and ... encouraging them to be Daniels in a Babylon time.”

Overcoming Physicality

Nearly 10 years ago, Shirer was spending quiet time with God and writing in her prayer journal when she heard Him speak to her. She felt He wanted her to act as a bridge between divided groups: between black and white audiences, and conservative and charismatic believers.

“I still believe that’s part of my mission, that the Lord has opened wide the doors of the church in different streams to me for a reason,” Shirer says. “And I intend to use that as best I can to be a full demonstration of the creative genius of God in making me who I am.”

As a black woman, Shirer stands out in a preaching circuit that is often predominantly male and Caucasian. She says God has made her successful not in spite of her external “packaging,” but because of it.

“The reality is, He has packaged me in this body,” Shirer

says. "I'm made in the image of God. So I get to be proud of the fact that I am a woman. He didn't make a mistake there. I get to be proud of the fact that I am a woman of color. I'm a black woman. He didn't make a mistake there. So all those parts of my demographics are something I value and that I'm supposed to bring to the table of the ministry the Lord has given me. There's a reason why he would have me on a platform where there might be mostly white women. There's a reason as well why he would sometimes have me on a platform where there are mostly black women. And every single time, I am bringing not only the message that's coming out of my mouth, but I'm bringing it in the package of who he created me to be."

She says her physicality and life experiences enable her to bridge audiences, explaining black concerns to white audiences and vice versa. She's able to more quickly connect to people of different ethnicities. And by just being herself—as a black woman anointed with the Spirit of God to preach—she's able to show other women of color that they too have a place in the kingdom.

"Representation does matter," Shirer says. "I cannot tell you how many women ... come up to me and tell me that they appreciate something that I've said—but the next sentence, or sometimes the first sentence, is that they just appreciate seeing me. It says to them that they matter. It says to them that there is a space for them, that there's a place for them, that they do not have to become something more palatable to the church or palatable to our culture in order to be received."

That representation even extends to the movie screen. In *War Room* and *I Can Only Imagine*, Shirer says, "I didn't have to quiet my blackness. I didn't have to make my hair less black or make my expressions less than I am. I get to bring the full expression of who I am and trust that God fully intended to make me this way, and so He will use this to minister across the spectrum of the body of Christ. When someone sees me on a

screen in a faith-based film, it allows them to enter into the story in a way they might otherwise just be watching as a spectator instead of realizing 'That's me! That's what God can do in and through me.' It just draws people in when they see themselves."

Shirer also points out that though we are created in the image of Christ in every aspect, our identity is ultimately found in Him rather than any individual identity markers. That's one way she lives out the message of *Overcomer* in her daily life.

"Our identity obviously includes our physicality and our personality," Shirer says. "All of that is created in the image of Christ. But it means that, as a daughter of Christ Jesus, my identity is in Him. I'm being consistently conformed into the image of Christ. So I've got the image of God stamped on me and my creation, and I'm being conformed to the image of Christ as a daughter of God. Both of those things are simultaneously being used by God to change me and use me for His glory. So I submit all of my physicality and all of my personality to His work. He uses all of that for His glory."

Overcoming Division

But the racial divide isn't the only place where Shirer feels called to unite. In 2010, Shirer told *Charisma* she felt called to serve as a bridge between the conservative and charismatic movements within the church. Today, she feels more confident of that calling than ever. Better yet, she says she's starting to see the fruit of that union, as convergence between the Word and Spirit movements increases.

"I heard one preacher say—many years ago—that the great sin of the Old Testament was that they didn't believe in God the Father," Shirer says. "The great sin of the New Testament is that they didn't believe in Jesus the Son. The great sin of our generation is that we don't really believe in the Holy Spirit. So if you have the Word without the Spirit, you have

an imbalanced relationship with God. If you have the Spirit without the Word, you are still imbalanced in your relationship with God. We need both to come together.”

Shirer says she is encouraged by the growing unity in the body of Christ. She believes both the charismatic movement and the conservative movement can grow stronger by sharing their experiences and testimonies with one another. For example, Shirer believes that conservative circles would benefit from the charismatic practice of leaving margin for God. She says overly scheduled services leave little time for the Holy Spirit to speak.

“Our altars may not be flooded, and the reason is because we haven’t even left margin for that,” Shirer says. “We haven’t left room for God to do the work only He can do.”

She joyfully recalls attending a charismatic church service years ago in which, after each worship song, the band was completely silent for four to six minutes.

“The silence was so pregnant with the presence of God,” Shirer says. “You’d just sit there, and you would see around you tears begin to fall, people getting on their knees as the Holy Spirit began to speak to them. And I think that’s something that we can learn. There’s beauty in the stillness and the silence.”

But Shirer also believes that charismatics could learn a few lessons from conservative believers. For instance, she says, a renewed emphasis on exegetical preaching could revive a love for the Word of God in many Spirit-filled congregations. Too often people are solely chasing “mountaintop experiences that [are] fun and enjoyable,” seeking physical manifestations like goosebumps, getting slain in the Spirit and weeping before God. But Scripture provides concrete truth that will guide believers in everyday life long after the supernatural thrills have worn off.

“There is concrete truth from the Word of God that people can take home with them,” Shirer says. “People need to know, ‘What do I do as a result of this truth that I learned?’ Yes, I got prayed for freedom today. I’m delivered from my addictions. But I need to know how to walk in accountability. I need to know how to actually go home and live in this victory ... that was just prayed over me.”

If the Word and Spirit movements can unite, Shirer believes the church will be uniquely positioned to change the world.

“The reality is that we have one spectrum of the church that swung too far in one direction, and another spectrum of the church has swung so far in the other direction, and there’s a balance,” she says. “We can learn that balance from each other, if only we would stop the infighting amongst ourselves over these issues, swing our doors wide open, and say, ‘Come and share with us. Let us share with you. Let’s learn from each other and bring to the table what God has accomplished in each of our circles, and see how we can help to bring balance to the other.’ And in that way, we’ll see the body of Christ rise to her full maturity and be who she was created to be.”
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Taylor Berglund is the associate editor of *Charisma magazine*.

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