

A black and white portrait of David Wilkerson, an older man with light-colored hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. His hands are visible at the bottom left, holding a pair of glasses.

THE CROSS,
THE SWITCHBLADE,
AND THE MAN
WHO BELIEVED

DAVID WILKERSON

GARY WILKERSON

WITH R. S. B. SAWYER

FOREWORD BY JIM CYMBALA

ZONDERVAN

David Wilkerson

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Introduction

THE MAN WHO BELIEVED

“WHAT DO YOU SEE?” my father asked.

He had asked me this question several times in my life. At the moment, we stood side by side, sweating, at the center of one of the world’s largest slums. The question now — about perceiving something accurately — had always been central for him, no matter where he stood.

Our dress shoes, covered in muck, toed a weedy patch of dirt in Nairobi’s steaming heat. A van had dropped us off a half mile away, after having driven us as far as it could. We had walked the rest of the way here, winding along narrow dirt pathways, past row after row of mud huts and lean-tos, our group gazed upon impassively by Kenya’s poorest, their tiny, makeshift dwellings jammed into each other for as far as we could see. Some of the huts were made of two-by-fours for corner posts, a piece of canvas or tin for walls. Some were covered by plastic tarp or cardboard. These were permanent homes to multitudes who lived and died in the slum without ever leaving it.

We had come here with a delegation of Kenyan pastors, at my father’s request. At one point, our group had to straddle a long latrine that runs between the shacks for block after block. The slum had no sewage system, so people had dug runoff trenches from their homes. The rivulets fed into a river of waste flowing between the rows of huts. We came to a spot where there was no room on either side of the latrine to walk, so we straddled the stream — left foot on one side, right foot on the other. Our waddling might have seemed undignified for a group of men in Sunday suits, particularly for my father, a slight figure in glasses, now

in his midseventies and always crisply dressed. But he wasn't fazed; he clearly had something in mind.

Occasionally we had to step over a cable wire that snaked surreptitiously into a shack. Most people in the slum didn't have electricity, so a few brave dwellers had run wires off a main electrical line somewhere on a street nearby. If caught, they faced not just fines but harsh punishments or sizable bribes they could never afford. I admired their ingenuity, not to mention their bravery, in the name of survival. That's life in any slum. My father had been familiar with this kind of desperation all his life, and he had never turned away from it. In fact, Dad was an expert at locating just these kinds of "wires" — lines of human desperation leading him directly to the world's most needy areas. He seemed magnetized by them.

Finally we arrived here at the small clearing. Dad had stepped away from the group of pastors when he motioned for me to stand next to him on the cracked earth spotted with weeds. I glanced at him again for a clue about what he had just asked me. What did I see? A vision of human hell.

The vast Mathare Valley slum is home to 600,000 people. It sits in the shadow of downtown Nairobi — ironically, near the capital's affluent areas. The deeper one ventures into the slum, the poorer it becomes, with its own gradations of poverty. At its very center, encompassing the weedy patch where we now stood, is a city within a city within a city. Each of the slum's neighborhoods has its own schools, churches, and stores, basic human institutions unrecognizable to visitors. At the heart of the Mathare Valley, a half mile back — mired in the worst of its squalor, amid the earth's most deplorable conditions — we had helped to build an elementary school for neighborhood children.

We had met the delegation of pastors at the school, a group that included a Kenyan bishop. Just inside the gated compound, on a dirt and clay patio, our group was greeted by the beaming school staff. "The children made you this plaque," said the principal, stepping forward to present it along with a bouquet of flowers. They were poised to give us a tour of the school, which we supply with daily lunches for the four hundred children who attend. My father was eager to see where the food was prepared and served, the one healthy meal of the day these kids enjoyed. We were led to the kitchen, which was essentially a pit in the ground

with a place for a fire, and a huge pot in which large quantities of meat or vegetables could be boiled.

As we rounded a corner into a small courtyard, we were greeted by a chorus of four hundred young voices, all lined up in bright school uniforms our ministry had paid for. “We love you, Jesus!” they shouted in song, one they had written for the occasion. Then came a verse somewhere in the middle: “We thank you, David Wilkerson!”

Dad smiled at this. Yet I could tell his thoughts were elsewhere. I wasn’t surprised. As the kids lined up single file to be served lunch, my father turned to consult with the bishop.

Once the kids loaded their plates, they squeezed into a small, walled-in area where they sat on hardened dirt to eat their meal. There were no chairs or tables because the space doubled as their play area. After lunch, one by one a group of them kicked a soccer ball, but soon the area was so crowded the game became a kind of frenzy. I gave in to it, kneeling on the ground among the kids, who within minutes had piled on top of me. When I looked up I saw my father with the bishop and pastors waiting. Dad was antsy, wanting to get moving. He had seen what he needed to see.

Now at the edge of the weed-filled patch of ground where we stood, I was about to learn what that was. “So, what do you see?” my father asked.

Heat rose from the earth in skinny waves. “An empty field, Dad?” I thought of joking. We were at the epicenter of the world’s desperation. There was nothing here for the naked eye to take in but bald life-or-death need. Even the bleached ground had been picked clean of any shard of glass that might be sold for scrap. The desolate sight was reinforced by its smell — a mixture of fumes from the oils people burn in their homes for fuel and the urine and feces vacated from their malnourished bodies.

Yet I knew exactly what my father was thinking. There he stood in his suit, despite the oppressive heat, his shoes filthy. He always dressed well to honor those we visited, who themselves put on their best to host us. Now he pointed across the field. “Here’s what I see,” he said, and he articulated a sharply detailed vision for new school grounds. “The dining hall — here,” he said. “The playground, right there.” Every gesture pointed to a specific patch of ground. Each signified a specific improvement in exacting detail. I could see it all.

A grin formed as he talked. His juices were flowing; this was my father at his best. The need he had discerned in the cramped quarters of the school had registered in his mind the moment he took it all in, and a vision immediately formed. These children had a classroom building; now they needed a place to play and eat, and these teachers needed help. Before we left the Mathare Valley slum that afternoon, a cell phone call was placed to start the drawing up of plans, which Dad provided off the top of his head.



IT WASN'T THE FIRST TIME my father had shown me what he dreamed. In 1973, when I was a teenager and our family lived in Dallas, Dad occasionally took me on his weekend drives eastward where Texas's piney woods begin near Tyler. Those drives were refreshing breaks for him between his preaching trips, long travels that zigzagged across the country between metropolitan arenas and small-town churches, between crowds of ten thousand and merely a few dozen; travels that took him overseas, where he addressed vast throngs in soccer stadiums and small gatherings in hand-built slum churches. At a certain point on our drive, he turned north off Interstate 20 onto a county road and followed its winding miles between groves of post oaks and magnolias. Near a certain bend he turned right onto a short gravel drive and followed a dirt trail that bisected a sprawling property. He aimed the car toward the highest hill we could see and drove along its bumpy incline in grooves made by someone's pickup truck. Finally, at its highest point he parked and stepped out of the car. As we paced forward to the hill's edge, Dad made sure he had my attention, raised an arm, and pointed, saying, "Let me tell you what I see."

On those East Texas trips, he envisioned a leadership school for graduates of Teen Challenge, the drug rehabilitation program he had founded thirteen years earlier. That kind of rehab program had been unheard of when he started it. There were only two centers in the United States that treated addicts — one was part of a psychiatric unit; the other was a wing of a federal prison, institutions that said everything about how the world viewed addicts at the time. Teen Challenge not only removed the stigma

of addiction, but it also became renowned for its eighty-six percent cure rate, the world's most successful by far. Its reach had spread to other continents, even communist nations whose drug problems had become societal epidemics. Regime leaders were desperate for the program, fully aware it was fueled by faith in Christ's power to deliver human beings body and soul.

"His preaching in Poland was a near miraculous gospel exploit," wrote McCandlish Phillips, a celebrated reporter for the *New York Times*. He refers to my father's historic 1986 trip, when civil unrest in the communist nation was at a peak. "David's plainness of speech directly from the Scriptures — in halls, auditoriums, and arenas to young people that were bused to these places — was breathtaking in its power. It surely should have been reported."

Phillips himself was renowned in the *Times* newsroom, revered by peers Pete Hamill, Gay Talese, and David Halberstam. For ten years this devout Christian sent memos to his editors before finally being permitted to write a feature on the astounding success of the faith-based drug recovery program that was "becoming a wide-reaching phenomenon." Phillips knew this phenomenon hinged on one thing: the power of God's love to address the world's most intractable problems.

My father's visions weren't just about the transformation of real estate. He envisioned transformed lives. He had embarked on that vision in a way that's hard to imagine today: as a naive, socially awkward, white Pentecostal preacher from a small town venturing alone into the gang zones of New York City in the late 1950s. Yet as my father had come to believe, if God's love could not reach into impossible places to do impossible things, how real was it?

There were thousands of churches in New York City when my father arrived. Many of those churches were afraid to venture into their own neighborhoods for their own people's safety. "We lost forty young people in one summer to gang warfare," says Dick Simmons, director of Men-4Nations today but a pastor in Brooklyn at the time. My dad's efforts on those dangerous streets had a transforming effect on the church as a social force. "His actions were extremely prophetic, cutting edge," says church historian Dr. Vinson Synan. Those actions produced what Billy

Graham called one of the most outstanding conversions of the twentieth century. He speaks of Nicky Cruz, the gang leader whose encounter with Jesus was emblazoned in the imaginations of generations through the bestseller *The Cross and the Switchblade*. Nicky had gained notoriety among New York City crime reporters. His transformation demonstrated to millions of readers the powerful lessons contained in Dad's enduring book: God can change anyone. God can use anyone. And God wants you.

His gaze now fixed on the East Texas countryside, my father described to me in detail what he saw: a graduate program for "recovered" young men and women who showed promise as leaders in ministry. He wasn't just thinking of leaders for Teen Challenge centers. He envisioned ministry outreaches of all kinds — urban missions, overseas missions, inner-city churches — with young leaders drawn from all over the United States and sent to the world's neediest areas. He pointed to a grove of trees and said, "That's where we'll build homes for the staff who come to train them. We'll put the main offices over there. We'll have a gym over there. The warehouse for the ministry's books will be by the highway, so trucks can back up to it."

Within three years, what my father described to me during those weekend drives is exactly what came to pass — and exactly as he had envisioned it. The properties as he described them stand intact today. Yet here is what's truly amazing about it: he envisioned it all before he even owned the land.

This kind of thing happened time after time. More than a decade later, he intrigued a legendary family of Broadway producers when he sought to buy their flagship theater in Times Square to house a church. Standing before them was a Pentecostal minister who for years had been living in the sticks of rural Texas. Within a year and a half, those same producers were shaking their heads in disbelief as they signed over the Mark Hellinger Theater to make it the home of Times Square Church, a congregation where the humble aromas of homeless people mixed with the heady colognes of hedge-fund managers, where Tony-winning actors held hands in prayer with crack addicts. "The Church That Love Is Building" reads the marquee.

"David did things that no one else could do, or even conceive of

doing,” said McCandlish Phillips. He was friends with my father and knew that Dad possessed the threefold gift of a visionary: He was able to see in his mind’s eye what few if anyone else could. He had the pure faith to believe that what he envisioned would come to pass. And he possessed the ability, drive, and trust in God to pull it off. As my uncle Jerry, Dad’s younger brother, says, “He could look at something and see what it would be in five years.” That included lives.



DAD AND I HAD COME to the Mathare Valley slum on the heels of a pastors’ conference that his ministry, World Challenge, was holding in Nairobi. Dad always allowed time after a conference to visit the local ministries we supported. The conferences themselves are designed to encourage pastors in their difficult work, especially in their service to the poor. The events are always free, because often the pastors are poor themselves. We provide meals for many, some of whom travel great distances to attend. Dad had begun these conferences after years as a pastor himself. He had instructed his staff at Times Square Church, “I know there are pastors crying out from slums around the world, needing encouragement. Go find them.” Now, in his last major effort to do hands-on gospel work, he traveled the globe to minister to them personally. In five years’ time he went to sixty countries.

On the final day of the conference, we saw a brilliant cultural dance by Kenya’s Maasai warriors, whose amazing jumping abilities are renowned. They had performed at the request of the nation’s vice president, who shared the platform with us that day in the hotel ballroom. As the Maasai finished their dance, I directed Dad’s attention to someone in the crowd whose story I’d just heard. “She’s a missionary who runs an orphanage,” I told him, gesturing to a woman who jostled a three-year-old. “She rescued that boy out of a garbage can.” Little Samuel, I was told, had been left to die as an infant.

Moments later, my father was at the podium. “Before we start, there are some dignitaries here you’re going to want to meet,” he said. “These are real world-changers, people you will hear about.” All eyes turned to the country’s vice president and the church bishops. Instead, Dad said,

“I want to introduce you to Samuel.” He motioned for the missionary to bring the boy to the platform. Dad took the child into his arms.

“This is Samuel,” he said, smiling. “God rescued him from a garbage heap. He’s going to be a great man of God in your country.”

One by one, the pastors stood and erupted in praise. I glanced at Kenya’s vice president. Tears traced down his cheeks. I could read his thoughts: “This is what our country needs to hear. Yes, this is a son of Kenya.”

My father had just breached protocol. The proper thing would have been to acknowledge the societal dignitaries, yet no one in the room felt that way, including the vice president. God’s reality had broken in. The lens of Christ had cast everything in a different light. It was the same lens through which my dad had first seen Nicky Cruz, with a vision for what his horribly damaged life could become.

What my father had done in that moment wasn’t out of the ordinary for him. It was in keeping with how he had always lived. For reasons of his own, he had turned down every invitation from a US president to visit the White House, but he would drive hundreds of miles out of the way during an evangelism tour so he could meet an obscure nun who had written something about Christ that had moved him. Always, he saw the world and those around him through the lens of eternity.



MY DAD NOT ONLY SAW what many of us couldn’t. He disciplined himself to see what most of us didn’t want to see.

He forced himself to go into heroin “shooting galleries,” to witness what the world turned a blind eye to: downtrodden young people knowingly killing themselves. He foresaw the same deadly drugs flooding into middle-class suburbs years before secular commentators recognized the shift in society. For the bored generation that succumbed to them, he foresaw their lives five years down the road and was moved to tears again. He founded David Wilkerson Youth Crusades to reach that generation with God’s love before despair, addiction, and suicide could, a deadly progression he had already witnessed in urban ghettos.

It’s easy to forget the culture of that period, how suspiciously young

people were viewed. It was the time of “America, love it or leave it.” Any guy with hair touching his ears was seen as rebellious. The same for any girl wearing a miniskirt. Dad pursued them all, the same way he had gone after gang members and drug addicts — not just to rescue them, but because he saw them as God’s best evangelists. His faith helped transform the way they saw themselves — as objects of eternal love rather than scorn.

Dad’s vision for people also aroused their faith. He preached that supernatural works could be accomplished through imperfect but yielded human beings. Over two decades, that message stirred untold numbers to entrust their lives to Jesus. During the classic era of evangelistic crusades, many Americans accepted Christ as their Savior. At my dad’s crusades, they were stirred to more, offering to God not just a believing heart but a life of sacrificial service.

“He was always way out ahead,” says Dallas Holm, the renowned musician and songwriter who traveled with my dad full-time for more than ten years. “I don’t think he knew how progressive he was. His crusade messages were always about something very relevant to the culture, a specific, unique topic everybody was aware of — drugs, suicide, music, issues of the day. I’ve heard pastors try to be relevant — you know how that goes — but there was an authority with him. There are people who make themselves relevant because they’ve read all the information. But Brother Dave lived in the middle of it. So much was going on in California — the biggest services, with all the hippies getting saved — that he moved all of us, his entire ministry, from New York. He said, ‘We’ve got to be out there. That’s where God has our ministry.’ That’s why he was so relevant — he didn’t just read about it; he went there.”

Over five years, my father had a profound impact on the Jesus Movement as he preached at a series of influential youth rallies held by Ralph Wilkerson (no relation) in southern California. “Melodyland Theatre held thirty-two hundred people, and the services were packed out,” notes David Patterson, my dad’s first full-time crusade director. “The conviction of God would rest so strongly in those meetings that when Brother Dave invited kids to come forward, they couldn’t get up out of their seats. They were riveted. The ushers would have to pick them up and carry

them to the altar. It was the most amazing series of meetings I've ever seen. There were hundreds and hundreds of kids getting saved. Every three months, the rally would be moved to the eight-thousand-seat Anaheim Convention Center, and those meetings would be full too. There was nothing like this happening anywhere in America. Some of the early pioneers will tell you that it was the momentum of those meetings that gave birth to a large portion of what became the Jesus Movement."

I'm touched by a relic from that era. My dad had written a book, *Purple Violet Squish*, titled after one stoned kid's conception of God. Inside, the book's owner inscribed her name, "Mrs. Powell," whom I might safely guess was someone's mother, looking for insight. Dad was not only an advocate for young people; he was a faithful translator of their experiences to their concerned parents. He saw the distress that people had over their children's struggles, and he was a compassionate friend to them. He also challenged them, just as he challenged their kids, that God could be trusted in all things. His directness earned the trust of both generations.

That's another overlooked role my dad played: he was an intrepid reporter. Whenever he went to the front lines, he faithfully reported what he had seen. And he didn't embellish; he spoke the truth straight. In 1959, he recruited his youngest brother, Don, to accompany him to a heroin shooting gallery to film teenage addicts. Dad was convinced, "The churches won't believe us unless we show them what's happening." He was right. When they screened *Teenage Drug Addiction*, which showed addicts injecting needles into their blackened arms, people fainted.



HE SAW THE CHURCH FAINTING in other ways too — falling into ruin as it descended into a compromise of basic gospel tenets. He boldly called a "fattening" church to account — not judgmentally but because he envisioned the beauty of Christ's bride enacting justice for the poor. He wrote endlessly about that bride, and he led the mission for justice by example.

Long before cable television, he foresaw little black boxes sitting on top of TV sets, piping pornography into homes. He published that prediction in 1973 in his controversial book *The Vision*. Now, when it's estimated that nearly half of all pastors view porn online through little black

boxes emitting signals from the internet, it's hard to imagine why he was ever dismissed.

In truth, I was never fully comfortable with my dad's prophetic role; he never was either. I'm very different from my father in many ways — in temperament, gifts, and personality — but the prophetic role my dad played is one I came to respect. He himself never wanted to be a prophet. “No true prophet ever does,” says church historian Dr. Stanley Burgess, who encountered my dad in his earliest days of ministry.

When my father saw evil in the world, he never questioned why it existed. Instead, he did something about it. “You can't do everything,” he always told us, “but you can do something.” He did more than his share. He went to every area of crisis he could — ghettos, prisons, poverty-stricken countries that few evangelists visited — and started works there. “Find the poor,” he advised every young minister who sought his counsel. “Help those who can do nothing for you. Then watch God bless you.”

He was also a pastor to millions through his writings. He authored more than forty books, each with an urgent message — on suffering, on suicide, on crossless Christianity. His monthly newsletter messages were a lifeline to Christians during some of the church's — and America's — most difficult times. At one time his free mailing list exceeded one million households, with an estimated actual readership well above that number.

But that wasn't the extent of his writing. He had a powerful ministry penning letters to people who wrote to him in agony of soul. He responded by dictating letters — thousands over the years — to prisoners, shut-ins, widows, the mentally ill, anguished parents, and troubled children. He wrote to them as if he knew them and as if he were right there with them in the midst of their pain. I couldn't begin to recount the number of people I've met whom Dad wrote to, personally offering a specific word that changed their lives.

Yet of everything he authored after *The Cross and the Switchblade*, my dad never wrote much about himself. In his last years, my aunt Ruth, a writer herself, did all she could to urge him to reflect on his life. She gifted him with a stack of his preferred lined pads, the kind he used for his favorite writing task — sermons — but he never touched them. My

father was comfortable in his own skin, always at ease with who he was, but in some ways he didn't seem alert to his own life.

On the flight home from Nairobi, I was surprised to see him lift a copy of *The Cross and the Switchblade* from his briefcase. He noticed my puzzlement. "I just read this recently," he joked. "Boy, I was a great guy." He hadn't recognized in those pages the young, tee-totaling preacher who founded the world's first successful drug rehabilitation program. Yet history saw my dad very clearly: as a bold, progressive, and fearless spokesman for God. "He was a visionary," says Stanley Burgess, "a man of God's heart who followed the Spirit directly and started a resurgence in social awareness." Vinson Synan adds, "He was one of the most transformational figures in Pentecostal and charismatic history."

Still, Dad had begun asking his trusted friends, "People tell me I'm famous. Do you think I'm famous?" Make no mistake, my father was acutely aware of his reputation, and yet his question was sincere. What he was really communicating was, "I'm unsure how God sees me."

At his most vulnerable times, my father wondered whether he was loved by God at all. He didn't question the Lord's goodness. He didn't struggle over why evil exists. He didn't wonder why people suffer. (And his family suffered as much as any. Through a genetic anomaly, my mother, both sisters, a niece, and now a nephew all have faced serious battles with cancer.) Very simply, my father wondered his whole life whether God loved him. It was a question he kept mostly to himself. Growing up, he had absorbed some of the traumatizing aspects of a theology that leaned toward works and legalism and sometimes fear. Although doctrinally he knew he was free in Christ, something in him still made him feel he had to work hard — that nothing he did was enough, that more was required to fill what was missing in his righteousness in Christ. My uncle Don, who for years worked alongside my dad in ministry, observes, "David had a lot of grace for other people, but he wasn't always able to appropriate it for himself."

Unlike some pastor fathers who battle in this area, my dad never placed that burden on us, his family; he reserved the struggle for himself. Yet in waging that battle alone, my dad withheld an important part of himself from us. It was a part we desperately needed, in retrospect.

That's why, more than three years after his passing, my siblings and I are each still raw in our grief over his loss, still wishing we had a part of him he chose to keep from us. (I don't presume to speak in this book for my siblings. Their contributions here are ones they've chosen to make. Like children of any public figure, we have to work to keep those parts of our father that are due to us alone. Children of civil rights leaders speak of this kind of thing. They understood what their father was doing and why it was important, and that, in effect, they had to share him with the world. But even with that understanding, some say they still feel something crucial had been taken from them, and they wouldn't surrender it again if given the choice.)

The revelation of my father's lifelong struggle was stunning to many. "I preach a lot about the love of God nowadays, and it was David who had the greatest influence on me for that," says Bob Phillips, who copastored with my father at Times Square Church. "It's based on what I learned from him in his years as a pastor, not just from his preaching but from how he believed and lived." Like so many others who worked closely with my dad, Bob never would have guessed this struggle to be my father's deepest.

From the outside, those who understood my dad's early life would say he never stood a fighting chance. Yet, characteristic of my father, a few decades ago he set himself on a journey to correct things within himself. At that time, in the eighties, he was still busy traveling the world as an evangelist. Yet his own soul was dry; he had become weary of preaching the same messages to crusade audiences. Between those events, he began reading a stack of books given to him by a discerning friend, author and preacher Leonard Ravenhill. These were classic works that had endured the centuries, most of them written by Puritans, names many of us have never heard of. As my father dug into those treasures, his heart opened to a new revelation of Christ. Grace awakened in him, coming alive in a way he had never known. The old books stirred him once again to study the Scriptures cover to cover, this time with a new understanding of the gospel. As he explored the full extent of the finished work of Christ, he experienced joy.

Toward the end of his life, my father confided to me that he still

struggled to know whether he was loved. He couldn't escape completely the emotional cobwebs, but he was seeing more and more clearly the work that Jesus had done for him. In my last conversation with him, he told me of how deeply he had probed, how he had scoured every page of every writing he could find on the glorious subject of God's covenant grace. And yet I could see in his eyes there was a yearning for more. There were things he still wanted to know about the depth and breadth of Christ's finished work. That's when he urged me to dig deeper in my own search on the subject, not to be satisfied but to go farther. It was as if he were saying, "I got a late start. I want you to have it better. I want my grandchildren to have it better. Don't ignore this truth. If you catch it now, it can save you years. Son — *do you see?*"

A few weeks after my father's funeral, my brother-in-law sent me the last book that Dad had left open on his study table. It was a classic work by Thomas Brooks. Almost every page was underlined and highlighted, with comments filling every open margin. There was my father, nearly eighty years old — after sixty-five years of serving in ministry — still yearning, still reveling in the gospel of Christ, its glories never ceasing to unfold new beauties of assurance.

In this way, my father was like Paul. With every achievement, his estimation of himself had grown smaller. Early on, Paul went from strength to strength in his accomplishments for the gospel. In AD 55 he wrote to the church in Corinth that he was no less than any of the other apostles. Two years later, he wrote something very different to the Ephesians, stating, "I am the least of all saints." Finally, in his last known letter, Paul wrote, "I am the chief of sinners."

That was my father. In the beginning of his ministry, David Wilkerson was a crusading young zealot, making a massive imprint on the world for Christ. Later, as he gazed hard into his own brokenness, he realized, "I am dependent on God for everything," and he offered genuine encouragement to others in their sufferings. By the end of his life, amid his anguished battle to know love, he claimed, "I can do nothing. He did it all. 'It is finished.'"

Here is where God's work in my father began. Let me tell you what I see.



Part One

VISION

David Wilkerson realized at some point, “It’s not about my knowledge or expertise. If we all trust God, anything can happen.” Of course, it has. What happens in *The Cross and the Switchblade* is not fantasy. It’s the story of a real guy who opened a magazine, felt God leading him to a New York courtroom on behalf of teenagers on trial for murder, and ended up ridiculed with his photo in the newspaper. No one could have scripted this except God. It’s almost comical. It’s as if the Lord wanted to give us an illustrated sermon: “Let’s take this diminutive white guy to Harlem. Let’s make this self-educated man a prophetic intellect. Let’s make this socially awkward guy who doesn’t come from means negotiate multimillion-dollar real-estate deals, not with teams of high-powered lawyers but just himself. Let’s see how far opposite I can make him of everything you would think is the way to accomplish things.” He had nothing going for him in all these things. He just had a drive to act when he felt God told him something. His fearlessness was in proportion to his confidence in God.

—Dallas Holm

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TWO SIDES OF A HILL

SOMEWHERE IN A FAMILY MEMBER'S garage, there is reel-to-reel tape that dates back to 1958. It's a recording of my grandfather preaching at his small Assemblies of God church in Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania, a tiny town in the coal-mining hills southeast of Pittsburgh. When I was a teenager, my father played that tape for me. Through the tinny crackles I heard my grandfather preparing to start his sermon. "Before we begin," he interjects, "I'd like to welcome my son Dave and his family, and their newest addition. I'm very proud to announce my grandson, Gary Randall Wilkerson."

My father took joy in playing that tape for me. It was his way of making a generational connection. I never knew my grandfather, Kenneth, because he died before I was two. And when it came to his own family, my dad wasn't a storyteller. He didn't articulate to us his relationships with his parents or siblings, partly because there were no family stories to speak of—none, that is, that didn't center around church or its obligations.

There was another reason my father didn't talk much about his childhood years. He just didn't look backward very often. In most conversations we had, he was always looking forward. Our talks centered more on his views of things and how he might bring about change. "Have you noticed this happening in the world today?" "What do you think about this movement in the church?" "Here's what we're going to do, what we're believing for."

Whenever Dad did speak of my grandfather Kenneth, it was always with reverence and respect. He described his father — a tall, dark-haired, striking man with a persuasive preaching style — as tenderhearted and soft-spoken. But I know my grandfather was also intense and serious. These traits were partly his temperament, reinforced by his training as a US marine. Yet they also extended to a certain legalism — an emphasis on outward behavior to reflect God’s holiness — that was part and parcel of the Pentecostal holiness faith that he and my grandmother adhered to. They weren’t unique in this. The 1940s — my father’s teenage years — were generally a stricter time for a lot of reasons. Those were the war years, and the mood in society wasn’t one of frivolity. That generation had also just endured ten agonizing years of the Great Depression. For a while, my grandparents had to rely on a neighbor’s kindness to provide their children with food. Yet beyond this were “spiritual” prohibitions against worldly things — not just movies or sporting events but, to people of my grandparents’ persuasion, even owning a washing machine.

“There was joy in church,” attests my uncle Don, the baby of the family. This was certainly true for his parents. When they looked into the pews, they saw all five of their children in attendance. Church was where the very reserved Kenneth and Ann Wilkerson channeled all their emotional energies, leading two Sunday services — a morning sermon to build the body of Christ and an evening message geared to evangelism. Once the day ended, there was a discernible release in the household. “Dad and Mother were relaxed and loose, and everyone in the family spoke their minds,” Uncle Don says. Those free and easy evenings must have been true Sabbaths. My uncle looks back on them fondly as “the Wilkerson jam sessions.”

“We would all gather in Dad’s study after a Sunday night service,” he remembers. “David would be there with his girlfriend. Jerry would be there with his girlfriend. I was just a kid then, but those were some of the happiest times I can remember in our family. Everyone would just talk. Then they would complain because there was a schedule of who should wash the dishes and who should dry. And they would pay each other off. ‘I’ll give you a quarter if you do mine.’ It was a good family time.”

Every son desires his father’s approval, and it was no secret that my

dad, the oldest brother, wanted his father's. He never would have done anything to disappoint his father, much less get crosswise with him. But my dad's outsized ambitions for a life in ministry would inevitably have to collide with his father's — and they did.

Only once did I get a glimpse into any deeper feelings my dad might have had about his father. I recall him once saying, "He was a denomination man." He offered this as a description, not a judgment; Dad never would have disparaged his father. But I know the exact compartment in my father's heart — a palpitating chamber of burning vision and restlessness — that let slip that comment. All of my dad's dreams had to do with serving God, and those dreams ranged as broadly as his imagination allowed.

What I've written up to here is very nearly the extent of what my father told me about his childhood. The one other thing he disclosed was that he loved basketball and that he thought he was pretty good at it. That was it. The past just wasn't his concern. There were reasons for this, which he kept to himself, and others I don't think he was fully aware of. He just knew that everything ahead of him would be a matter of pleasing God. And he trusted that God would make possible things that the church world could not.



ALBERT STREET, WHERE MY FATHER, David Ray Wilkerson, spent his adolescent years, isn't very long. But it does stretch the length of the plateau that sits atop a steep hill overlooking downtown Turtle Creek. Up on that hill, anchoring the center of Albert Street, was the neighborhood grocery store, a small, narrow building occupying a single corner lot. People weren't allowed to buy a newspaper there on Sundays. But outside was a telephone booth where men made discreet phone calls throughout the day. My uncle Don was just a schoolboy then, but if he happened to be walking by when the phone rang, the store owner would tell him to answer it and to shout out the series of numbers that the caller whispered to him. My uncle had no idea he was relaying illegal bets.

Not far from the grocery store was the Packard garage, where my father and his younger brothers would eye the classy cars as they walked

by on their way to the schoolyard basketball court. Their own dad appreciated a good car, but on a pastor's salary Reverend Kenneth Wilkerson could afford only a Hudson. Packards were the Cadillacs of their day.

Down the block from the garage was the neighborhood bar, which my dad and his brothers also would have passed. As preacher's kids, they rarely recognized anyone who came or went through those doors. But they were surprised one afternoon by the sight of their uncle Frank, their mother's brother from Cleveland, emerging from the bar in his navy uniform on his way to visit them.

Up and down the neighborhood streets of Turtle Creek, soot of all kinds gathered on window shades, floating in from the various industries: the Westinghouse factory that employed so many townspeople; the electric plant down at the creek bottom next to the railroad tracks; the coal mines in nearby Forest Hills, a town just down the road.

Like a lot of working-class homes on Albert Street, my grandparents' three-story wood house, humble but spacious, sat on a narrow lot. Its enclosed front porch jutted almost to the street. The driveway led to a backyard garage where my dad and his brothers had set up a hoop so they could spend hours shooting baskets. When the weather was bad, they unleashed their energies playing ping-pong in the basement. And in summers they enjoyed the shade of the back alley, where neighborhood kids gathered to play baseball. One inventive mother improved their games by producing a baseball-sized sphere from yarn, woven tightly so it wouldn't unravel when battered, yet staying soft enough not to break a windowpane. She should have patented it.

In that hilltop neighborhood in Turtle Creek were two spots that occupied my father's imagination for most of his teenage years. They were located on opposite sides of the hill — and opposite ends of my dad's dream life.



AT ONE END OF THE hill, perched on a slope overlooking downtown Turtle Creek, is the Assembly of God church my grandfather pastored. It's a modest, simple brick church he had led his small congregation to build, and they all were proud of it. It replaced the cinderblock structure

where they used to meet, directly below at the bottom of the hill, beneath a clattery raised railroad track that ran parallel to a flowing Turtle Creek. In those two church buildings, a central part of my dad's imagination was fed and formed. Despite the restrictions of his family's brand of faith — or maybe because of those restrictions — church was the one safe place he could let his imagination run free.

Dad's preacher father may have been soft-spoken in person, but in the pulpit Brother Kenneth Wilkerson didn't flinch from preaching on God's judgment. In my dad's young mind, the flames his father described morphed into fireballs — exploding World War II fighter planes, Japanese Zeroes and German Messerschmitts he imagined crashing into Turtle Creek's hillsides. Yet it was the sermons on Christ's second coming — when a trumpet would sound, lifting the faithful into the air and leaving the world to face destruction — that left the deepest impression on him. The end of all things wasn't hard for my dad to imagine: two of Japan's major cities had been decimated in the twinkling of an eye by atomic bombs. With a single newspaper photo, everything that Christians had believed for two millennia about the earth's sudden destruction became plausible. And though his thoughts of end times would be tempered by his maturing years in ministry, my dad could never dismiss those images of mushroom clouds as imminent possibilities.

At the opposite end of the hill — just three blocks from the Wilkerson house — Albert Street dead-ended at a beautifully impressive overlook. Outstretched below was Turtle Creek High's football stadium, cradled in a natural amphitheater of leafy hills. Football was big in Turtle Creek, so big that if the high school team beat their archrival, Scott Township, all the schools in town got a half day off.

Every other Friday afternoon, my father and his brothers walked the three blocks to sit on the hillside and gaze below at the stadium, a mesmerizing world of daring and stardom. There on that field played Leon Hart, the great end who became a hero at Notre Dame, winning the Heisman Trophy and later starring for the Detroit Lions. But the stadium below was more than that; it was also a world of exhilaration and freedom. My father and his brothers watched as their classmates filed into the massive concrete grandstands on the facing side. Some clasped hands

with their dates, others shouted rowdily with friends, all encouraged to go wild with school spirit. These were the kids who ran free in gym class, a class forbidden to the Wilkerson boys, who were pulled from it at their parents' request.

“David-Jerry-Donald. Time for prayer!”

Mom Wilkerson's shout reached them easily on their hillside perch. Her voice could be heard to either end of Albert Street, and it tolled with authority. I wouldn't be surprised if startled fathers along the block dropped their newspapers and momentarily considered their souls. Mom Wilkerson had the physique of a bird and was quiet and reserved, but when she spoke, it counted. It didn't matter how involved in a game her boys might be when she called them. My dad or uncle Jerry could be up to bat in the ninth inning of the Albert Alley World Series, but they knew not to balk at her summons. If they mumbled something on arrival, they could expect their mother's singular response: “You know where you belong.”

To youngest brother Donald, those words contained a mild reassurance. To middle brother Jerry, they added one more brick to a wall slowly being erected between his parents and himself.

“Family altar” in Brother and Sister Wilkerson's household was not meant for spiritual discussion. It was a solemn time for all five Wilkerson kids to gather in their father's study on the second floor of the house and hear their parents' prayers. Other than meals and church, it was the only activity that gathered everyone as a family. And each of the five children came to it with his or her own level of interest or toleration.

Juanita — or Nan, as her younger siblings called her — had chafed at her parents' restrictions. The oldest, she resented being sheltered and overprotected. At seventeen she was still threatened with spankings. She wasn't allowed to style her hair. She had been made to wear unstylish long stockings while her classmates wore ankle socks. She was forbidden to date until she graduated high school. Now she had begun lashing back at her parents without remorse. Her heroes were Hollywood icons, not Bible figures or missionaries, and she resisted every restriction placed on her.

In truth, my grandmother was desperate to bridle Juanita because

she reminded her of her own younger self. Mom Wilkerson looked back on her youthful years as wild ones, which may have been somewhat of revisionist history. She was probably as close to normal as any first-generation child in an immigrant family could be, which of course carried its own burdens. In the 1920s my grandmother had been an independent young working woman — a “modern girl,” with a job as a secretary, dressing in current styles and spending her evenings in dance halls perfecting the Charleston. If that kind of nightly release carried any guilt, it wasn’t because she had a serious faith commitment — she didn’t at the time — but more likely because she had hardworking immigrant parents who didn’t indulge themselves. For a working girl from an austere home in which English wasn’t spoken, the dance floor was a place to cut loose and be free, which happened to be where she met my grandfather. Kenneth Wilkerson was a marine recruiter who at the time was sidestepping his own Pentecostal restrictions and was still a few years away from returning to his roots to become a minister. It took him some time to give up his drinking habit, however, his chosen means of drowning the pain of his own growing-up years.

My grandparents didn’t want their oldest child repeating their “mistakes.” Aunt Juanita wasn’t aware that in a few weeks she would be sent away to Cleveland, to stay with an uncle and his family. After a few months there, Juanita would seem to have changed; she would write her parents that she was interested in going to Bible school to become a missionary. That was the ultimate vocation for any Pentecostal girl, in a hierarchy that held missionaries at the top, followed by evangelists and then pastors. Ultimately, though, Juanita wouldn’t recover from the binding legalism she tied inextricably to her parents’ faith. After graduating she would marry a Catholic man, which would be a slap in the face to her father. In turn, her father would never talk to her again. In both my grandparents’ eyes, their daughter had backslidden, a conclusion that may have been their way of steeling themselves against heartbreak.

In years to follow, Juanita effectively disappeared from her family — calling herself Joan, moving to Arizona, raising two sons, and divorcing. She pursued eastern religions, even traveling to the Far East to study, as many searching souls did in the sixties. She became a cautionary tale to

us through our grandmother. “You don’t want to end up like Juanita,” Grandma would tell us. “She had a call to Africa, but she ran from the Lord.” That caution registered with us grandkids the few times we were around our aunt. Juanita’s humor was brazenly sarcastic and at times caustic, and she seemed to try to shock her adult siblings with tales of her lifestyle. In retrospect, perhaps she was instead trying to impress them — and maybe, deep down, wanting to endear herself to them again.

When we were growing up, Aunt Juanita was a source of confusion to some of the Wilkerson granddaughters. Some saw her as a glamorous figure — beautiful and smart, worldly and well-traveled, interesting and free. And she was striking, with large, dark-brown eyes, high, pronounced cheekbones, a pointy chin, and olive skin. She had entered the education field and ended up doing stellar work among children with learning disabilities. But ultimately my grandmother’s view of Juanita held sway with us. Between the two of them, Grandma was the one who had authority to speak for God. We saw her pray for her daughter with every good intention.

Yet the traits we saw in our aunt Juanita — intelligence, spirit, vision — were the very ones Grandma esteemed, but for God’s use, not worldly pursuits. The only Christian doctrine our grandmother knew very narrowly defined what it meant to serve God.



AT FIFTEEN, MY FATHER MIGHT have fallen in line with his parents’ view of Aunt Juanita. I picture him sitting across from her in the study as their parents prayed. If during those times he thought of his sister as lost, he couldn’t be blamed. Certain Pentecostal churches didn’t preach grace for sins back then; if you sinned, you had to get saved all over again. In that environment, I wonder what my father’s thinking was regarding his sister. Later in life he came to believe she had borne an unfair share of their parents’ legalism. But at the time, his sister’s example might have been something he learned from, as any second child would.

My dad wouldn’t have identified with Juanita’s disrespectfulness. But to find his own way, he would have to do some rebelling of his own. The rules he broke didn’t have to do with God’s law; he rebelled instead by cir-

cumventing his parents' legalism. He didn't tell them, for instance, about sneaking a TV set into the attic bedroom he shared with his brother Jerry and watching *The Milton Berle Show*. Or taking his two brothers on the trolley to Pittsburgh (which was allowed) to enjoy the amusement park (which was not) or to Forbes Field to watch the great Pirates slugger Ralph Kiner (also forbidden). He brought home board games of their favorite sports, but he had to keep an extra pair of dice handy because when their mother found them she threw them away.

A brasher act of my dad's was auditioning for the lead role in the high school play, *The Scarecrow*, and landing it. Juanita was wounded when she found out about it; she'd been strictly forbidden to take part in any school activity. But her siblings swore her to secrecy for their brother's sake. Their undersized, socially awkward sibling had conquered something in an outside world they had not been allowed to enter, and they were proud of him. Somehow the siblings were even able to slip away to see the production without their parents knowing, and they were thrilled at the boisterous applause my dad received at the curtain call.

I'm trying to imagine what inner part of my father would have come into the open during that performance. According to descriptions of the play, the role demanded some emotional range. My father was no extrovert — quite the opposite, in fact — which would have made his performance all the more mesmerizing to his siblings. For a moment, they wondered whether he might go into acting; his onstage presence had seemed that natural.

It shouldn't be surprising that any preacher's kid might project a sort of "theater" onto a church service — the spotlight of the raised platform, the dramatic telling of a biblical story, the endpoint of redemption. But I don't think it was unconscious training that summoned my father's powers for the role he played. I think there was something else going on when he took his bow — an inner drive for affirmation.



IT WAS THIS SIDE OF my father's personality — what the family called "theatrical" — that upset his parents. It was assumed from early on my dad would be a preacher, something he desired and was gifted for. Yet I

think he knew deep down that conventional church life couldn't contain all that he envisioned doing for God. It certainly couldn't contain the great emotions churning inside him. Years later he would write of his boyhood dreams, "I composed sermons in my mind, sermons that made people laugh or cry. When my dad found out about these imaginings, he chided me: 'David, why do you get so carried away?'"

His parents were simply distrustful of emotions. (It was a running joke in our family that if you wanted a hug from Grandma, you had to make the first move.) Yet it's clear to me that getting "carried away" was my father's only way to handle fears produced by certain Pentecostal-holiness beliefs. My father was prone to all of them. He told me that while growing up, he feared missing the rapture, the sudden event signaling the end of all things. In his mind, the sound of the "last trump" was both fascinating and terrifying. What if he wasn't ready? What if he was at Forbes Field when it happened? Would he be left behind for eternity?

He had a powerful imagination already, but the church's emphasis on the rapture did some damage to a lot of earnest believers. It placed great pressure on them to witness for Christ, getting as many souls as possible into heaven because the clock was always ticking down on Jesus' return. Any idea of a "social gospel" — helping others through charitable works — was barely visible down the list of priorities. The other mental burden was having to avoid committing any sin at all. If you were "fallen" — or even distracted — at the moment Christ returned, you were lost forever. It was a doctrine that forced a believer to organize his or her every thought around spiritual matters. My father eased his mind from that pressure through the years, but he never escaped it entirely. As much as he grew in his knowledge of God's grace, he never stopped wondering whether his life was pleasing to God and, more especially, whether he was deserving of God's love.



MY QUIET UNCLE JERRY WOULD have come to the family altar with pain as deep as his older sister's. What his parents saw as their athletic, blond-haired son's "rebellion" was never about belief in God. Jerry just didn't compute their legalism, and it wasn't in him to fake it. He couldn't

adopt behaviors to accommodate religious rules that he didn't grasp. At thirteen, he had become a watchful, observant boy of few words. It was his only strategy to withstand what he couldn't comprehend.

In adolescence, Uncle Jerry's resistance to legalistic rules was interpreted by his parents as stubbornness. When he was punished for something, he didn't cry, the way my father did. He dug in. "Son," my grandfather would say, brandishing a leather belt, "I'm going to knock that stubbornness out of you." My grandmother intervened to protect her middle son, seeming to understand something of what went on in him. By that age, Jerry had learned how to ride the trolley on his own. Some Sundays after church, he would hop on it by himself and ride all the way to his Czech grandparents' house in Canonsburg, more than twenty miles away. Despite the language barrier, my uncle was content just to be with them. When he returned home later in the afternoon, after a nearly fifty-mile round trip, sometimes his parents weren't even aware he had been gone.

Soon after high school graduation, Uncle Jerry left home and took up drinking. He also entered military service. Perhaps not coincidentally, those were two things his father, Kenneth Wilkerson, had done at the same age — in reaction to his own preacher father.

Thankfully, these wouldn't be the defining actions of my uncle's life. Despite several rocky years early in his adulthood, he forged his own idea of family, and years later he reconnected with his family of origin in a meaningful way.



EVEN AT AGE TEN, my aunt Ruth brought to the family altar a spiritual inclination as clear as my father's. Modest and reserved, she was bright and studious and she loved the Bible. Ruth looked up to her older sister, as any little girl would, longing for Juanita's attention, despite the difference in years and temperament. But at her tender age, Ruth couldn't comprehend Juanita's arguments with their parents. She recoiled when her sister talked back to their mother. Ruth loved church life, her parents, and her siblings. And gradually, she wanted less to do with the sister who seemed antagonistic toward it all.

As years passed in the household, my grandparents' legalism waned a bit. Ruth and her younger brother, Donald, were allowed to do some of the things their older siblings couldn't. Ruth even dated a young man who lived next door. But the priority at home was still — as my uncle Don recounts — “God first, church second, and family third.” When Ruth received a four-year scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, her parents asked her to turn it down. They weren't biased against education. They were simply poised to take the reins of a larger church in Scranton, double the size of the congregation in Turtle Creek. Church was like a family business to my grandparents, and they needed their daughter's help.

Torn but loyal, Aunt Ruth obliged. In time she found her own wings in a life she loved, serving in ministry. She married a pastor and blossomed as a writer. The view she formed of her family's spiritual heritage honored her parents, but by then it was completely her own.

In homes like theirs — where every child is conscious that God, rather than family, is the focus — each young mind is convinced that he or she suffers alone. Years later, after their parents had died, my two aunts grew closer. Whenever they got together, they reminisced mostly on safe topics, recalling the jokes they played on each other. But eventually Ruth revealed to Juanita how lonely she had been all those years — and that she could have used a big sister's help. Juanita seemed shocked. Being labeled the black sheep of the family had made her feel alienated from them all. Both sisters realized it hadn't needed to be that way.



LIKE HIS OLDER SISTER, RUTH, curly-haired Donald had no reason to resist the family altar, other than the boredom that would torment any seven-year-old. With his father's dark hair and rangy build and his sister Ruth's shy reserve, Donald got the affection — minimal though it was — that comes with being the last child. In years to come he enjoyed a few concessions that had been withheld from his siblings. One was getting to play Little League baseball.

Uncle Don pitched for a team sponsored by the Lions Club. By that time, his father's church had grown to include civic leaders — mer-

chants, doctors, and businessmen — which may explain the easing up on prohibitions. My grandfather had also become part of the town's ministerium, a group of pastors that included mainline denominations. He even had a radio broadcast. All these respectable activities may have spelled compromise to stricter Pentecostals, but my grandfather had his own, deeply personal reasons for pursuing them, reasons that superseded doctrine.

Still, the emotional tenor of the Wilkerson household remained subdued. One day, my uncle Don pitched a three-hitter for the Lions, and his coach rewarded him with a quart of ice cream. Bouncing up the hill with a skip in his step, he couldn't wait to share the news about his achievement, but as he rounded the corner to Albert Street, he found his pace slowing. As he approached home, a cloud came over him. Pacing up the driveway, he peeked around the corner of the house to see his father sitting in the back yard. "Dad," he began — and stammered out his accomplishment. Then, Uncle Don recalls, he was met with nothing. "Not discouragement," he says, "but no encouragement either. It just wasn't going to happen." In any other house along Albert Street, he thought, maybe there would have been a celebration.

Young Donald, however, was allowed to go to Forbes Field for Pirates games. He remembers being with Jerry amid a sea of African Americans — the first he had ever seen en masse — who had come to witness Jackie Robinson perform with the visiting Dodgers. He and Jerry would have ridden the trolley to get there, but never with their father.

It wasn't just rare Little League feats that my grandparents gazed past. They didn't give hugs. They didn't celebrate birthdays, their own or their children's. And they never told their children, "I love you." Strange as it sounds, they weren't all that different from other parents of the era, particularly those from stricter holiness churches. To stand out in any way was prideful.

In my grandparents' case, I'm convinced it was a matter of emotional frozenness. Because of their own difficult backgrounds, they had never learned something essential about the human experience. They simply didn't know to give that essential thing — affectionate love — much less how to give it.



“BOY, WHAT THEY WENT THROUGH,” Uncle Don says of his parents’ lives. “We heard them talk about the hard times. It always broke my heart to know how it affected them.” Try as they might to conceal their burdens, my grandparents bore them nonetheless to the family altar.

My grandmother Ann had her share. Like all people with foreign accents, her family had been suspect in a culture that resented the great flood of immigrants in the early twentieth century. The Marton children kept their heads low. This wasn’t hard for Ann, who was naturally reserved and quietly discerning. Keeping her guard up was a good trait for protecting herself, but not great for making friends. “She wanted to live and think the American way,” my aunt Ruth wrote. But even my grandmother’s faith experience, which came later, “did not change her longstanding habit of keeping her thoughts and problems to herself.”

My dad admired his mother deeply, and I think he saw her guardedness as a spiritual strength. He was made of the same basic stuff — no nonsense, forthright and direct, a loner by nature — and that was the way he led his ministries for years. In the early days of Teen Challenge, he never revealed the pressures he felt, and there were plenty to be borne in a pioneering work like that one. When my uncle Don joined the ministry, he sometimes opened up to a staff member about a distressing concern. My dad dressed him down for it. “Don’t lay your burdens on them,” he warned. He worried about the effect on the staff if they saw their spiritual leaders struggling.

That advice was easier for my father to live by than for others. He went to God alone — with everything. “Part of it was his theology,” says Uncle Don, “and part of it was just his personality. His approach to life was, ‘It’s me and God.’ I really think that was enough for him, in some ways.”

It was an unusual makeup to have, yet I think my father made up his mind early on that it would always be that way for him. Thankfully, throughout their marriage he and my mother always had another couple or two with whom they could relax and be themselves. My dad loved to laugh and have lighter moments, and he shared some of his worries with

those cherished friends. But he rarely opened up to anyone about the deepest concerns of his heart. Try as he might — and he tried hard — he could not unlearn the guarded ways he absorbed from the mother he admired.

Sadly, for my grandmother, the guardedness translated into panic attacks. She was never confident in her abilities as a minister's wife or to run a household. She did all of it well — when she preached in her husband's absence, it was with an acknowledged authority — but deep down she was an independent soul, never quite suited to any of the roles she had taken on. And she couldn't help questioning her performance at them.



NOT SURPRISINGLY, MY GRANDMOTHER MARRIED a man with emotional walls nearly as high as her own. The son of traveling evangelists, my granddad Kenneth had twice been sent to boarding school by his parents as a boy. That wasn't unusual around the turn of the century, but all indications are that my grandfather never got over the rejection he felt from it. He was a teenager when his mother died. When his father remarried a much younger woman — a girl just a few years older than sixteen-year-old Kenneth — it was more than his neglected young soul could take.

He signed on with the marines, and military life brought order and guidance to the inner chaos that ruled my grandfather's emotional life. "Adhering to rigid rules gave him a sense of accomplishment and security," Aunt Ruth writes. "Years later, Dad would tell us that he could read a man's character by the way he respected the laws of God and government and by the neatness of his clothes and the shine of his shoes."

That's why punctuality — US marine style — was the first order of business at the Wilkerson family altar. Nobody made my grandfather wait. That kind of consistency and reliability can provide children with a sense of security. But any security the five Wilkerson kids felt was offset by their father's bleeding ulcers. For ten years they threatened my granddad's life. The family could never anticipate when he would suddenly double over from a potentially deadly attack, and the specter of death

loomed continually over the household. “I bawled my eyes out as a boy, wondering if my dad was going to the hospital again and not coming back,” Uncle Don says. I know my dad absorbed those traumas in his own way.

My grandparents were leading the family as best they knew how. But as I picture them gathered in the second-floor study for family altar, I wish with all my heart they could have just told stories to each other — stories about their day, their thoughts, their history, stories that could have helped them through it all.

They could have started with the amusing way my grandparents had become a couple. Ann Marton’s walls came down momentarily in 1928 the night she and Kenneth Wilkerson first danced the Charleston together. The next day, when Ann clocked out of her job, she found Kenneth waiting on the sidewalk outside her office building, dressed in his US marine best. “I want to marry you,” he declared. “But I’m engaged,” she said. “Break it off,” he told her. It took him three months to convince her, but she did it.

They also might have told their kids about the odd thing that happened when Kenneth was a marine and still drinking. He had hidden his church background from his fellow troops, but after too many drinks, he started preaching — right in the middle of a bar. A couple of rounds turned the soft-spoken sergeant into a tent-revival evangelist, his fiery sermons turning heads throughout the bar. For most marines, cutting loose meant brawling. For my granddad, release meant speaking his deepest heart and mind, and what came pouring out was gospel fire.

Those aren’t the stories that got told at the Wilkerson family altar. Instead, the kids listened as their father and mother cried out to God for their own souls, for their children’s souls, and for the church congregation that God had entrusted to them. “We lacked a close bond with our siblings because of the nature of our household,” Aunt Ruth writes in her book *The Wilkerson Legacy*. She writes respectfully yet perceptively of her family, observing that “too many ordinary pleasures were taboo; there were few family fun times. I don’t recall either Mother or Dad sitting down with us for a game of checkers. And card games were definitely forbidden. We ate together, listened while our parents prayed at family

altar time, sat separately in the church services, and attended church camp without ever meeting up with each other. This emotional disconnect, although unintended, left a void in us, and eventually affected each one of us deeply.”

That effect would show up in each of their lives and marriages. Aunt Ruth says, “I did not know how to converse with people who could not talk about ‘the things of the Lord’ . . . Don speaks of having had difficulty socializing with people outside our church community. It became a hurdle we all had to overcome.”

After my grandfather’s death in 1960, his adult children didn’t stay in touch with each other very much. Nearly fifteen years passed before all five got together again.



YET AS MY AUNT RUTH makes clear in her book, family is also where my father and his siblings found faith — true, spiritual, grounded faith, the kind a person can live by.

My grandmother didn’t compromise when it came to the gospel, to speaking truth, and to relying on God through trusting prayer. She had a great burden for the lost, and she evangelized with passion. These unshakable traits made her a fixture in my father’s early days of ministry in New York City. When my grandfather Kenneth died prematurely, at age fifty-three, Dad made a place for my grandmother at Teen Challenge. She preached there as she always had, in her direct, authoritative style. And she gained the same respect from tough New Yorkers that she’d earned from small-town Pennsylvanians.

From my grandfather, my dad heard the exhortation again and again, “God always makes a way for a praying man.” My grandfather lived by that truth, convincingly enough that my Dad adopted it as his own way of life.

Somehow, at the intersection of my grandparents’ towering faith and their sad void of affection, my dad’s faith formed. For better or for worse, he had learned to see the world without illusion. And he had learned not to expect its affection. He had these two things in common with the downtrodden people he ministered to throughout his life. It helped him

preach convincingly to them of their one hope — God’s unconditional love — because it was something he had to know for himself.



IT’S SAID THAT ONE QUALITY of leaders is their ability to compartmentalize. This doesn’t mean they deny one thing to be able to accept another. It means they’re momentarily able to set aside one troubling set of issues to tackle another. My father had that ability.

It’s what helped him know that he could love his sister Juanita, sitting bitterly across from him during family altar, without seeing her solely as an object of prayer. It’s what helped him later, when his marriage was in serious turmoil, to preach of God’s trustworthiness to crowds of ten thousands. When he delivered those messages, he knew he was preaching to himself first and foremost. That ability also gave him peace when one of us kids was deep in trouble. My dad never denied the problems life sent his way. He might have mishandled them at times, but he didn’t turn away from them. As broken as he was by life’s struggles, he kept moving forward through them. He had learned that at home.

God first, church second, family third. “David reordered those priorities in his own family,” Uncle Don says. “We all did — but David probably more so than the rest of us.” My father had learned the one essential thing about the human experience — and the spiritual experience — that my grandparents had missed: that love is at the center. It became the focus of every street rally, every outreach, every David Wilkerson Youth Crusade event: the piercing, enveloping, powerful love of God.

Yet that focus didn’t make it any easier for my dad to show affection that he himself had never received. He tried to be affectionate with us, but those times could be awkward. So he usually demonstrated it with gifts rather than hugs. Growing up, we were never aware of the inner barriers he struggled through to reach out to us. And we had no trouble laughing when he fumbled his way through an emotional moment. Even those attempts must have been major victories for him.

My uncle Don once told someone, “In all the years I’ve known Gary, I’ve never seen him struggle with his security in Christ.” He’s right about that. I never have, in any serious sense. What made the difference for me?

Deep down I knew that, despite his many absences in my growing-up years, my father loved me.

It's ironic — and saddening — that although my father knew God's steadfast promises better than I ever will, he could never be sure he was measuring up. My father and I occasionally had conflicts, for a variety of reasons, but I never doubted his love. To me, that's a tribute to how hard he battled to show to me the very thing he lacked. It was the conflict of his life.

Dad admitted to me that he always wanted to please his father. Any child does, and that desire is stoked when affection is withheld and love is in doubt. I'm sure that's what was behind my dad's Sunday night telephone calls to his father. After my dad struck out on his own in fledgling ministry, he took time each week to report back home on what God was doing. I see now that he did it for his own sake as much as his parents'.



WHAT I CAN PROUDLY AND confidently say about my family — my grandparents, my father, and the heritage they left us — is that they loved God. No one who knew them doubted this. Their hearts were set on Jesus and their gazes were aimed forward, all based on one thing: the faithfulness of the one in whom they believed.

So why would I frame my father's early life in the interpersonal terms that I have here? You don't have to subscribe to psychology to understand why. You don't even have to subscribe to biblical counseling. Stories like ours play out throughout the Bible — of favored sons, of prodigals, of overlooked and alienated children. Thankfully, Jesus changes our understanding of who prodigals are and what it really means to stray from God. Prodigals are not always the runaways but sometimes are those who stay on the family path. My father and my aunts and uncles all had a little of both in them. So did their parents — and so do the rest of us. The only people who get disparaged in Scripture are those who don't face the truth about themselves and who end up inflicting damage on others because of it. As one perceptive theologian has said, "If we don't deal with the sin that has been done to us, we're destined to sin against others in the same way." That's not a psychological statement; it's a statement of how grace works — and of its absence.

My grandparents didn't have a vocabulary for the traumas they suffered, much less what they unknowingly passed on. But even my father, who resisted psychology and counselors for much of his life — until, notably, he became a pastor — was aware that these dynamics played out in his life. God's Spirit was faithful throughout the years to compel my dad to face down his inner conflicts, and Dad was faithful to respond, eventually, as that light came to him. Like his own praying parents, my father listened faithfully whenever he thought God was speaking. He was like a lot of men of his era: he neglected some important things — both with our mother and with us — out of emotional convenience. But he kept listening to God, and he didn't turn away from what he heard. And he came to us in tenderness whenever he thought he had failed.

My dad never would have written of psychological matters to his newsletter audience; that wasn't their interest. But he often revealed deeply felt convictions in the personal notes he wrote to individuals. As those recipients attest, his words were usually pungent and on the money. He once wrote something very telling in a note of condolence to a staff member whose dad had just died. The note consisted of just two sentences. The first read, "I'm sorry to hear of your father." The second was equally simple and true to his experience: "You'll never get over it."

DAVID WILKERSON

THE CROSS, THE SWITCHBLADE, AND THE MAN WHO BELIEVED

By Gary Wilkerson with R. S. B. Sawyer

This is the story of David Wilkerson, the man who believed against the odds that God could do great things in the rejected and ignored of New York City, who refused to give up on those on the streets even when they had given up on themselves, and who saw in the eyes of the drug addicts and gang members what others failed to see—the love of Jesus Christ.

But who was David Wilkerson? Many Christians don't really know. More often than not, we saw the fruit of his faith in God rather than the man himself.

When Wilkerson moved to New York from rural Pennsylvania in 1958 to confront the gangs who ran the streets, he was a skinny, 120-pound man. After the initial publicity that brought him face to face with some of the most dangerous young men of the city, he largely flew under the radar of the media, using the Word of God and a bit of tough love to help men and women of the street escape the destructive spiral of drugs and violence. Wilkerson was always the real deal, full of passion and conviction, not interested in what others said was the "right" or political thing to do.

Wilkerson later founded the Times Square Church, now a non-denominational mega-church of 8,000 members, to this day a crossroads for those battling sin, drugs, and pornography, and a place where the message of Christ is discussed. He created the faith-based program Teen Challenge to wean addicts off drugs, and then World Challenge, dedicated since its beginning to promoting and spreading the Gospel throughout the world. Both now have branches worldwide, continuing the work that God began in the life of one man who believed

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