

THE CROSS AND THE SWITCH- BLADE

THE TRUE STORY OF ONE MAN'S FEARLESS FAITH

DAVID WILKERSON

WITH JOHN AND ELIZABETH SHERRILL



Chosen

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David Wilkerson with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Cross and the Switchblade*
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To my wife, Gwen

FOREWORD

Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3, NASB). Ten words, written two thousand years ago.

But these same words could have been written today to anyone holding this book. It is the call that drew both David Wilkerson and me to a commitment neither of us could have imagined, a commitment to people who once seemed very different from ourselves. I first encountered “those in prison” quite against my own wishes, when I found myself in prison alongside them. David, too, contrary to everything he had planned and envisioned for his life, found himself captured by the plight of seven teenagers in prison, accused of the thrill-killing of a crippled youngster.

The Cross and the Switchblade tells the mesmerizing story of this skinny country preacher, popular and contented in his ministry in western Pennsylvania but drawn to New York City, where he had never been and never wanted to go, to try to help those seven members of a gang that stood for everything he detested.

David never did gain admittance to the prison where the seven were held. All were found guilty and given long prison

terms. Many years later, David did meet one of the gang leaders in an upstate New York prison.

But in David had been planted a lifetime passion for reaching just such troubled teenagers before they destroyed their own lives and those of others. Today David is working—as I am—to set men and women free of hatred, anger and addiction, I among those in prison, David trying to address these troubled teens in their street environment.

Where does freedom come from? The power of God alone. How do ordinary people like you and me and David call on this power? Through prayer. Prayer is at the heart of my organization, Prison Fellowship, and of the organization David founded, Teen Challenge.

I heard an interesting story about prayer from John and Elizabeth Sherrill, who co-authored *The Cross and the Switchblade* with David. While working on the book, the Sherrills learned that David sought to start each day, no matter how pressured his schedule, with two hours of prayer. Over the years after the book was published, the Sherrills told me, they kept in touch with David and asked each time if he was still praying for two hours before beginning the day. “Oh yes,” David always reported.

Then, after years of headquartering his ministry in other parts of the country, David felt called back to New York City, where his ministry to drug addicts and gang members had begun. Two years after his return to Manhattan, over lunch in the city, the Sherrills asked their habitual question: “And are you still praying for two hours each day, David?”

“No,” came back the answer.

“Our hearts sank,” Elizabeth told me. “We’d watched so many ministries founder when the leaders got ‘too busy,’ or what they were doing for others was ‘too important,’ to give their own prayer life priority.”

But at the lunch table David hadn’t finished answering.

“No,” he continued, “no, I couldn’t possibly get along in New York City on just two hours of prayer.”

And it is from that time on his knees, literally and figuratively, that the amazing stories in this book have sprung.

Why is *The Cross and the Switchblade* a classic? Not just because it has sold more than fifteen million copies, not just because it was made into a popular motion picture and countless stage plays, but because it shows what happens when an ordinary man opens himself to the wonder-working, life-transforming power of God.

Whether you are called to compassion for those in prison, or to other work, whether it is prison in your own life or the lives of loved ones, or the prison of illness or habit or damaged relationships that all of us contend with, David’s story will touch your life in a way few books can.

—Charles W. Colson
Founder, Prison Fellowship
Author, *Born Again*

This whole strange adventure got its start late one night when I was sitting in my study reading *Life* magazine, and turned a page.

At first glance, it seemed that there was nothing on the page to interest me. It carried a pen drawing of a trial taking place in New York City, 350 miles away. I'd never been to New York, and I never wanted to go, except perhaps to see the Statue of Liberty.

I started to flip the page over. But as I did, my attention was caught by the eyes of one of the figures in the drawing. A boy. One of seven boys on trial for murder. The artist had caught such a look of bewilderment and hatred and despair in his features that I opened the magazine wide again to get a closer look. And as I did, I began to cry.

"What's the matter with me!" I said aloud, impatiently brushing away a tear. I looked at the picture more carefully. The boys were all teenagers. They were members of a gang called the Dragons. Beneath their picture was the story of how they had gone into Highbridge Park in New York and brutally attacked and killed a fifteen-year-old polio victim named Michael Farmer. The seven boys stabbed Michael in

the back seven times with their knives, then beat him over the head with garrison belts. They went away wiping blood through their hair, saying, “We messed him good.”

The story revolted me. It turned my stomach. In our little mountain town such things seemed mercifully unbelievable.

That’s why I was dumbfounded by a thought that sprang suddenly into my head—full-blown, as though it had come into me from somewhere else.

Go to New York City and help those boys.

I laughed out loud. “Me? Go to New York? A country preacher barge into a situation he knows less than nothing about?”

Go to New York City and help those boys. The thought was still there, vivid as ever, apparently completely independent of my own feelings and ideas.

“I’d be a fool. I know nothing about kids like that. I don’t want to know anything.”

It was no use. The idea would not go away: I was to go to New York, and furthermore I was to go at once, while the trial was still in progress.



In order to understand what a complete departure such an idea was for me, it is necessary first to know that until I turned that page, mine had been a very predictable life. Predictable, but satisfying. The little mountain church that I served in Philipsburg, Pennsylvania, had grown slowly but steadily. We had a new church building, a new parsonage, a swelling missionary budget. There was satisfaction for me in our growth, because four years earlier when Gwen and I first drove into Philipsburg as candidates for the empty pulpit, the church didn’t even have a building of its own. The congregation of fifty members was meeting in a private house, using the upstairs as the parsonage and the downstairs for the sanctuary.

When the pulpit committee was showing us around, I remember, Gwen's heel went right through the "parsonage" floor.

"Things do need fixing up a bit," admitted one of the church women, a large lady in a cotton print dress. I remember noticing that her hands had little cracks around the knuckles and that the cracks were filled with dirt from farm work. "We'll just leave you to look around."

And so Gwen continued her tour of the second floor alone. I could tell by the way she was closing doors that she was unhappy. But the real blow came when she opened a kitchen drawer. I heard her scream and rushed upstairs. They were still there, seven or eight big, fat, black cockroaches.

Gwen slammed the drawer shut.

"Oh, Dave, I just couldn't!" she cried.

And without waiting for me to answer, she raced to the hall and ran down the stairs, her high heels clacking loudly. I made hurried apologies to the committee and followed Gwen over to the hotel—the only hotel in Philipsburg—where I found her waiting for me with the baby.

"I'm sorry, honey," Gwen said. "They're such nice people, but I'm scared to death of cockroaches."

She was already packed. It was obvious that as far as Gwen was concerned, Philipsburg, Pennsylvania, would have to find another candidate.

But things didn't work out that way. We couldn't go before evening because I was scheduled to preach the Sunday night service. I don't remember that it was a good sermon. Yet something about it seemed to strike the fifty people in this little house-church. Several of the rough-handed farmers, sitting there before me, were blowing into their handkerchiefs. I wound up the sermon and was mentally getting into my car and driving out through the hills away from Philipsburg when suddenly one old gentleman stood right up in the service and said, "Reverend Wilkerson, will you come and be our pastor?"

It was a rather unorthodox thing to do, and it caught everyone by surprise, including my wife and me. The people in this small Assembly of God church had been trying to choose between several candidates. They had been deadlocked for weeks, and now old Mr. Meyer was taking matters into his own hands and inviting me from the floor. But instead of drawing fire, he found himself surrounded by nodding heads and voices of approval.

"You go outside for a minute and talk it over with your wife," Mr. Meyer said. "We'll join you."

Outside in the dark car, Gwen was silent. Debbie was asleep in her wicker basket in the backseat; our suitcase was propped up next to her, packed and ready to go. And in Gwen's silence was a quiet protest against cockroaches.

"We need help, Gwen," I said hurriedly. "I think we should pray."

"Ask Him about those roaches," Gwen said darkly.

"All right, I'll do just that."

I bowed my head. There in the dark outside that little church I made an experiment in a special kind of prayer that seeks to find God's will through a sign. "Putting a fleece before the Lord," it is called, because Gideon, when he was trying to find God's will for his life, asked that a sign be made with a fleece. He placed a lamb's fleece on the ground and asked Him to send down dew everywhere but there. In the morning, the ground was soaked with dew, but Gideon's fleece was dry: God had granted him a sign.

"Lord," I said aloud, "I would like to put a fleece before You now. Here we are ready to do Your will if we can just find out what it is. Lord, if You want us to stay here in Philipsburg, we ask that You let us know by having the committee vote for us unanimously. And let them decide of their own accord to fix up the parsonage with a decent refrigerator and stove—"

"And, Lord," said Gwen, interrupting because just then the front door of the church opened and the committee

started toward us, “let them volunteer to get rid of those cockroaches.”

The whole congregation followed the committee outside and gathered around the car where Gwen and I now stood. Mr. Meyer cleared his throat. As he spoke, Gwen squeezed my hand in the dark.

“Reverend and Mrs. Wilkerson,” he said. He paused and commenced again. “Brother David. Sister Gwen. We’ve taken a vote and everyone agrees that we want you to be our new pastor. Hundred percent. If you decide to come, we’ll fix up the parsonage with a new stove and things, and Sister Williams says we’ll have to fumigate the place.”

“To get rid of those cockroaches,” added Mrs. Williams, addressing herself to Gwen.

In the light that streamed over the lawn from the open front door of the church, I could see that Gwen was crying. Later, back in the hotel, after we’d finished with handshaking all around, Gwen said that she was very happy.



And we *were* happy in Philipsburg. The life of a country preacher suited me perfectly. Most of our parishioners were either farmers or coal workers, honest, God-fearing and generous. They brought in tithes of canned goods, butter, eggs, milk and meat. They were creative, happy people, people you could admire and learn from.

After I’d been there a little more than a year, we purchased an old baseball lot on the edge of town, where Lou Gehrig had once played ball. I remember the day I stood on home plate, looked out toward the infield and asked the Lord to build us a church right there with the cornerstone on home plate and the pulpit at shortstop. And that’s what happened, too.

We built a parsonage next door to the church, and as long as Gwen was mistress of that house, no vermin had a

chance. It was a pretty little five-room pink bungalow with a view of the hills out one side and the white cross of the church out the other.

Gwen and I worked hard in Philipsburg, and we had a certain kind of success. By New Year's Day, 1958, there were 250 people in the parish—including Bonnie, a new little daughter of our own.

And I was restless. I was beginning to feel a kind of spiritual discontent that wasn't satisfied by looking at the new church building on its five acres of hilltop land, or the swelling missionary budget, or the crowding in the pews. I remember the precise night on which I recognized it, as people remember important dates in their lives. It was February 9, 1958. On that night I decided to sell my television set.

It was late, Gwen and the children were asleep, and I was sitting in front of the set watching the *Late Show*. The story somehow involved a dance routine in which a lot of chorus girls marched across the set in just-visible costumes. I remember thinking suddenly how dull it all was.

"You're getting old, David," I warned myself.

But try as I would, I could not get my mind back on the threadbare little story and the girl—which one was it?—whose destiny on the stage was supposed to be a matter of palpitating interest to every viewer.

I got up and turned the knob and watched the young girls disappear into a little dot in the center of the screen. I left the living room and went into my office and sat down in the brown leather swivel chair.

How much time do I spend in front of that screen each night? I wondered. *A couple of hours, at least. What would happen, Lord, if I sold that TV set and spent that time—praying?* I was the only one in the family who ever watched TV anyway.

What would happen if I spent two hours every single night in prayer? It was an exhilarating idea. Substitute prayer for television, and see what happened.

Right away I thought of objections to the idea. I was tired at night. I needed the relaxation and change of pace. Television was part of our culture; it wasn't good for a minister to be out of touch with what people were seeing and talking about.

I got up from my chair and turned out the lights and stood at my window looking out over the moonlit hills. Then I put another fleece before the Lord, one that was destined to change my life. I made it pretty hard on God, it seemed to me, because I really didn't want to give up television.

"Jesus," I said, "I need some help deciding this thing, so here's what I'm asking of You. I'm going to put an ad for that set in the paper. If You're behind this idea, let a buyer appear right away. Let him appear within an hour . . . within half an hour . . . after the paper gets on the streets."

When I told Gwen about my decision next morning, she was unimpressed. "Half an hour!" she said. "Sounds to me, Dave Wilkerson, like you don't want to do all that praying."

Gwen had a point, but I put the ad in the paper anyhow. It was a comical scene in our living room after the paper appeared. I sat on the sofa with the television set looking at me from one side, the children and Gwen looking at me from another, and my eyes on a great big alarm clock beside the telephone.

Twenty-nine minutes passed, by the clock.

"Well, Gwen," I said, "it looks like you're right. I guess I won't have to—"

The telephone rang.

I picked it up slowly, looking at Gwen.


"You have a TV set for sale?" a man's voice asked.

"That's right. An RCA in good condition. Nineteen-inch screen, two years old."

"How much do you want for it?"

"One hundred dollars," I said quickly. I hadn't thought about what to ask for it until that moment.

“I’ll take it,” the man said, just like that.
“You don’t even want to look at it?”
“No. Have it ready in fifteen minutes. I’ll bring the money.”



My life has not been the same since. Every night at midnight, instead of flipping some dials, I stepped into my office, closed the door and began to pray. At first the time seemed to drag and I grew restless. Then I learned how to make systematic Bible reading a part of my prayer life: I’d never before read the Bible through, including all the begats. And I learned how important it is to strike a balance between prayer of petition and prayer of praise. What a wonderful thing it is to spend a solid hour just being thankful. It throws all of life into a new perspective.

It was during one of these late evenings of prayer that I picked up *Life* magazine.

I’d been strangely fidgety all night. I was alone in the house; Gwen and the children were in Pittsburgh visiting grandparents. I had been at prayer for a long time. I felt particularly close to God, and yet for reasons I could not understand I also felt a great, heavy sadness. It came over me all at once and I wondered what it could possibly mean. I got up and turned on the lights in the study. I felt uneasy, as though I had received orders but could not make out what they were.

“What are You saying to me, Lord?”

I walked around the study, seeking to understand what was happening to me. On my desk lay a copy of *Life*. I reached over and started to pick it up, then caught myself. No, I wasn’t going to fall into that trap: reading a magazine when I was supposed to be praying.

I started prowling around the office again, and each time I came to the desk my attention was drawn to that magazine.

“Lord, is there something in there You want me to see?” I said aloud, my voice suddenly booming out in the silent house.

I sat down in my brown leather swivel chair and with a pounding heart, as if I were on the verge of something bigger than I could understand, I opened the magazine. A moment later I was looking at a pen drawing of seven boys, and tears were streaming down my face.

The next night was Wednesday prayer meeting at church. I decided to tell the congregation about my new twelve-to-two prayer experiment, and about the strange suggestion that had come out of it.

Wednesday night turned out to be a cold, snowy mid-winter evening. Not many people showed up; the farmers, I think, were afraid of being caught in town by a blizzard. Even the couple dozen townspeople who did get out straggled in late and tended to take seats in the rear, which is always a bad sign to a preacher; it means he has a “cold” congregation to speak to.

I didn’t even try to preach a sermon that night. When I stood I asked everyone to come down close “because I have something I want to show you,” I said. I opened *Life* and held it down for them to see.

“Take a good look at the faces of these boys,” I said. And then I told them how I had burst into tears and how I had gotten the clear instruction to go to New York, myself, and try to help those boys. My parishioners looked at me stonily. I was not getting through to them at all, and I could understand why. Anyone’s natural instinct would be aversion to those boys, not sympathy. I could not understand my own reaction.

Then an amazing thing happened. I told the congregation that I wanted to go to New York, but that I had no money. In spite of the fact that there were so few people present, and in spite of the fact that they did not understand what I was trying to do, my parishioners silently

came forward that evening and one by one placed an offering on the Communion table. The offering amounted to 75 dollars, just about enough to get to New York City and back by car.

Thursday I was ready to go. I had telephoned Gwen and explained to her—rather unsuccessfully, I’m afraid—what I was trying to do.

“You really feel this is the Holy Spirit leading you?” Gwen asked.

“Yes, I do, honey.”

“Well, be sure to take some good warm socks.”



Early Thursday morning I climbed into my old car with Miles Hoover, the youth director from the church, and backed out of the driveway. No one saw us off, another indication of the total lack of enthusiasm that accompanied the trip. And this lack wasn’t just on the part of others. I felt it myself. I kept asking myself why in the world I was going to New York, carrying a page torn out of *Life*. I kept asking myself why the faces of those boys made me choke up, even now, whenever I looked at them.

“I’m afraid, Miles,” I finally confessed, as we sped along the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

“Afraid?”

“That I may be doing something foolhardy. I just wish there were some way to be sure that this is really God’s leading and not some crazy notion of my own.”

We drove along in silence for a while.

“Miles?”

“Uh-huh.”

I kept my eyes straight ahead, embarrassed to look at him. “I want you to try something. Get out your Bible and open it just at random and read me the first passage you put your finger on.”

Miles looked at me as if to accuse me of practicing some kind of superstitious rite, but he did what I asked. He reached into the backseat and got his Bible. Out of the corner of my eye I watched him close his eyes, tilt his head backward, open the book and plunge his finger decisively onto a spot on the page.

Then he read to himself, and I saw him turn and look at me, but not speak.

"Well?" I said.

The passage was in the 126th Psalm, verses five and six.

"They that sow in tears," Miles read, "shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

We were greatly encouraged as we drove on toward New York. And it was a good thing, because it was the last encouragement we were to receive for a long, long time.