

David Wilkerson, US, Evangelist

February 28. David Wilkerson. Wilkerson was the founding pastor of the non-denominational Times Square Church in New York City and the founder of the addiction-recovery program Teen Challenge. He started as a Pentecostal preacher in rural Pennsylvania. On this date in 1958, Wilkerson drove eight hours to preach God's love to members of a New York gang. Soon he moved to New York City to minister to the gangs.

In 1962, Wilkerson published *The Cross and the Switchblade*, which made him famous, especially after its movie version came out eight years later.

But when Wilkerson published his new book: *Vision*, which warned that because of America's "rebellion against God, we were headed toward major judgments and ultimate destruction," he immediately fell out of favor. Wilkerson "became a pariah overnight. His books were removed from the church bookstores, and he was personally condemned as a 'fear-monger.'"

Wilkerson had written: "The world is about to witness the beginnings of great sorrows brought about by history's most drastic weather changes, earthquakes, floods—terrible calamities ..." and "It is not really a depression I see coming—but a recession of such magnitude that it will affect the lifestyle of nearly every wage earner in America and around the world.... some of the nation's major corporations will declare bankruptcy. ... Fear generated by the economy will lead to a revolution at the polls" ... and ... "The auto industry is going to be hurt badly."

No amount of shunning could keep Wilkerson quiet. He kept telling the truth in love until he died in 2011. Today's story focuses on his early years in New York.

Nothing can stand against a man fueled by God's love.

With the newspaper spread out in front of him, small-town preacher David Wilkerson sat praying. The article in front of him was about the Mau Maus—a New York City gang who had declared war on the police department. Gang members hid on rooftops and dropped sandbags on the police. They fired at each other with shotguns, and many of the boys died that year.

Wilkerson thought about the Apostle Paul saying he was the worst of sinners, but he had found grace. Paul thought of himself as an example of what Jesus could do, he said. If God could save Paul, God could save anybody.

So Wilkerson prayed that God would send him to "one of the worst gang leaders in New York City. Save him and put your hand on him, and then let him walk the streets with me." That young man would be an example like Paul.

And before long, Wilkerson stood on a stage in New York, and the Mau Maus were in the auditorium. Wilkerson said God had the power to change the people—he meant the people there this night.

Nicky Cruz jumped up, pointed at Wilkerson, and yelled, “You shut up. Don’t open your mouth anymore. If you say anything, you’re gonna drop dead. ... This is not God power here ... this is man power and this is gang power. And there’s no way that God has the power to change anybody.”

“He was standing calmly on stage,” Nicky said about Wilkerson. “His head bowed. I knew he was praying. Here was this skinny man, unafraid, in the midst of all this danger. Where did he get his power? Why wasn’t he afraid like all the rest of us?”

Nicky was irate, told his gang the preacher was crazy, took them down to a certain basement, and promised them a good time.

Fifteen minutes later, without even knocking, Wilkerson opened the door and walked into the basement room, the Brooklyn headquarters of the Mau Maus. He said, “Where’s Nicky?” as if he had known him a long time.

Nicky stood and yelled at him, told him to stop, pointed his gun at Wilkerson, and said if he took another step Nicky would blow his head off.

“Wilkerson hesitated for a moment,” Nicky said. “But he didn’t stop ... he was a skinny man, but he kept walking straight toward me and said, ‘Come on, Nicky, shake my hand.’”

Nicky slapped Wilkerson’s face, spat on him, cursed at him, and threatened to kill the young preacher. Then he headed for the door.

Before he reached the door, Wilkerson yelled at him, “Nicky, just a moment.” He said, “You could kill me, Nicky. You could cut me in a thousand pieces and lay them out on the street. But every piece would cry out Jesus loves you.”

Trying to scare Wilkerson away, Nicky gave him a death stare.

“Nicky, I’m not scared of you,” Wilkerson said. “You’re just like the rest of us. You’re afraid. You’re lonely. But Jesus loves you. One day, Nicky, you are going to stop running and come running to Him.”

Crying, Wilkerson put his hand on Nicky’s head and prayed for him—the first time Nicky had heard anyone pray out loud.

Nicky swore he wouldn’t cry; he hadn’t cried since he was eight—but this man was talking to God about him. Nicky pushed Wilkerson away, but then he saw a vicious gang member on his knees and bawling his head off, asking Jesus to help him. Two more gang members were on their knees and crying.

Nicky thought this was crazy. He was so confused. Could it be true that God loved him? After a gut-wrenching struggle, Nicky asked God—if it was true—would God help him.

Within minutes, a burden lifted off his shoulders, and he told Wilkerson that he knew that Jesus loved him.

God began a great work in Nicky that night. And he went on to enter the ministry full time.

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love” (1 John 4:18 NASB).

Are there things you fear? What small step toward overcoming that fear can you take today? Nothing can stand against a man fueled by God’s love.

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Story read by Daniel Carpenter