

(Biographies) William Wilberforce

by John Piper

William Wilberforce's life and labor demonstrate the transformative power of Christianity and the importance of perseverance in the face of adversity.

Duration: 1:26:44

Scripture: Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Perseverance", "Social Justice"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the perseverance and determination of William Wilberforce in his fight for the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce faced numerous defeats, criticism, and long hours of work, but he remained steadfast in his mission. He acknowledged his own guilt and took responsibility for allowing the slave trade to continue. Despite the challenges, Wilberforce's indomitable joy and love for his family remained, and he found solace in playing with his children even after parliamentary defeats.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at www.DesiringGod.org If you want to understand the life and labor of William Wilberforce, I recommend to you that you read his one big book that he wrote, *A Practical View of Christianity*, first, and then go to biographies. And the reason is that that's the way I did it, and I am so glad I did, because I do not think I would have known Wilberforce from his biography.

I think I knew him when I finished his book, and then could fill in the details with the biography, because there are a lot of biographers, even Christian ones, who just don't understand some of the things that make 18th century evangelicals tick. They don't get it. And so to read that book, you will get it.

You cannot not get it, I don't think, if you read it and have eyes to see and ears to hear. So read *A Practical View*. I'm sorry it's out of print.

Mine was only published in '96, and it's out of print. Evidently, it doesn't sell all that well. So go find it in a library and read *The Practical View*.

And then if you want to read a biography, read Pollock or McLean or Furneaux, and none of those are in print, I think, except maybe one. I think we might have one paperback out there in the bookstore. Get whatever you can and read about this life.

What made Wilberforce tick was a profound allegiance to what he calls the peculiar doctrines of Christianity. Don't think he means Calvinism. In fact, he said, I'm not a Calvinist.

And I'll tell you a word or two more about why I think he said that later. But peculiar doctrines simply meant the things that make Christianity Christianity, as peculiar and distinct from other religions. And he said those are the ones that he loved and lived by.

They were the things that gave rise to true religious affections. That's a term that was common in the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards dissertation concerning the religious affections. And he was born the year after Edwards died.

So Edwards works were influencing a lot of evangelicals in Britain. So the religious affections grow out of these doctrines. These religious affections, he believed, transformed the manners or the morals of persons, and they transformed the political welfare of a nation.

This is what he wrote. If a principle of true religion or true Christianity should gain ground, there is no estimating the effects on public morals and the consequent influence on political welfare. Now, he was no ordinary pragmatist, however, in simply using Christianity to bring about political ends.

He was practical. The name of his book, Practical View of Christianity. He was eminently practical.

One biographer said he lacked time for half the good deeds in his mind. Another wrote, factories did not spring up more rapidly in Leeds and Manchester than schemes of benevolence beneath his roof. He himself wrote, no man has a right to be idle.

There is so much misery to alleviate. If you're an idle person, you have your head in the sand, or you're an unloving person. There is so much misery in the world to alleviate.

So he was practical. Through and through, he was an activist and a doer, not a theologian, proper or improper. But he was practical with a difference, pragmatic with a difference.

He believed that new affections transformed morals, which transformed nations. So when you read that book, to realize that you're reading the book of a man who was elected to parliament at age 21, had been a politician for 16 years, would be a politician all his life, and never had a day of theological education in his life, except what he studied on his own, absolutely takes your breath away, what that book reads like. It makes you want to go back and live in the 18th century again.

Because here was a politician who knew his doctrine and his theology better than virtually all pastors do today, it seems to me. And he did it all by himself, with no seminary to teach him at all. So take heart, by the way, those of you who feel lamed, perhaps, because of a lack of institutional training.

I'll tell you a little bit about his own self-training later, but don't feel like you can't make a significant mark without that formalized training. Peculiar doctrines like the depravity of the human heart, the judgment of God on sin, the substitutionary work of Christ, justification by faith alone, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and the necessity of practical fruit in your life, worked by the Spirit. Those are the things that he meant by the peculiar doctrines of true religion.

He wrote this book to show that the bulk of nominal Christians in England in his day had abandoned those doctrines for a system of ethics that had lost its power to change people and to transform the nation. Here

was a key sentence. The fatal habit of considering Christian morals as distinct from Christian doctrines, that's a fatal habit.

It's a fatal habit to think of Christian morals distinct from Christian doctrine. Anybody that tries to pull apart ethics or politics from doctrine, he says, is doing a fatal thing. Let me keep reading that sentence.

Thus, the peculiar doctrines of Christianity went more and more out of sight, and as might naturally have been expected, the moral system itself also began to wither and decay, being robbed of that which should have supplied it with life and nutriment. He didn't think the tree of fruit of righteousness could survive the severing of the root of doctrine. He didn't believe it, and he wrote a whole book in order to show that.

That's the point of that book. Now, knowing that he is such a pragmatist or practical theologian and a politician who won his first election when he was 21 and never was defeated and was in politics for 50 years until he died at age 74, knowing that might make you think that he's a pragmatist in the sense that, well, sure, he's into Christianity because he thinks Christianity works. So if it works, if it makes people good and treat each other nice, don't steal from each other and be good patriots, then use Christianity.

And that's exactly what he's not. He's not that kind of a pragmatist. He said of sin, for example, this is just an illustration of what I mean by his kind of pragmatism, that the bulk of nominal Christians in England thought of sin as harming society.

He said they estimated the guilt of an action not by the proportion in which, according to Scripture, they are offensive to God, but by which they are injurious to society. Now, you might think that's an excellent definition of sin, especially for a pragmatist because that's what you want, is to get people to use an understanding of sin to change their lives, to make a better nation where everybody can rise and it can be a better place to live. And he profoundly disagreed with that.

Here's what he says. Their slight notions of the guilt and evil of sin reveal an utter lack of all suitable reverence for the divine majesty. This principle of divine majesty is justly termed in Scripture the beginning of wisdom.

Fear of God, reverence for the divine majesty is the beginning of wisdom. And then he drew out, you can't build a nation on folly. You must have wisdom.

And to disregard God as what makes sin, sin is the opposite of wisdom and therefore the opposite of the good of the nation. That's the kind of pragmatist he was. He was a radically God-centered activist.

I could give you many illustrations here. I'll skip over because I have 30 pages and can only do 15. So I'll leave out my dueling illustration.

Let's talk about his early life for a minute. But all these will be in the manuscript. August 24, 1759, he was born in Hull, England.

His father died when he was nine. He was sent by his mother to live with an uncle and aunt. They happened to be evangelical.

She didn't realize how evangelical. They sent him to an evangelical boarding school. She saw him becoming a Methodist, horrors.

She pulled him out of that boarding school. She was high church Anglican, afraid that he was going to get infected by this enthusiasm in England and sent him off to a different school where he proceeded to become a pagan, which he was for the next 20 years. He said in school that he did nothing at all.

He was very bright and therefore he didn't have to do anything at all, like some of the schools my children have gone to. Didn't have to do anything, which is why we're killing our kids in the cities. They said to my son Benjamin, just show up and you'll pass.

That's where he had fallen to, at Roosevelt High. He went to St. John's College, Cambridge, and there he proceeded to do nothing but party. He was very wealthy.

His father had left a lot of money behind. He got an allowance from his mom, and therefore he didn't have to do anything, and he didn't do anything significant, except make friends with William Pitt, who was his exact same age, and at age 21, on a lark, they said, let's run for Parliament. They had infinite resources.

He spent 8,000 pounds and won the election at age 21. William Pitt did too, and in four years, William Pitt was the Prime Minister of England at age 25. This is incredible what Providence was up to here, because these guys did not deserve anything they got.

They were just a bunch of lechers, partying around, thinking, cool, let's run for Parliament. That was 1780, and he stayed in Parliament until he died. 50-year investment in the politics of England, and he began as a Parliament person, his late-night, party-loving, upper-class, unbeliever lifestyle.

He was single. He liked it that way, and he stayed that way until he was 37 years old, and then he met Barbara, April 15, 1797, and he fell in love and married her two weeks later. She was a believer, and by that time, he was, which means I've skipped over the most important event of his life, so let's go back and figure out how God did this.

How did William Wilberforce become a Christian? What did God do to take this fella and turn him into the force for justice that he was in England for Christ for so many decades? Well, the way Parliament worked is that they took two long recesses, two or three months each, and all these wealthy officeholders just went to the French Riviera or went back home and hobnobbed around, and so he usually went with his sister and his mother over to France during the winter holiday, and he decided on a lark to invite Isaac Milner along. Isaac Milner, he had known in grammar school, fun guy, had gone on, was teaching at Queen's College, Cambridge, thought, I'll renew my old friendship with Isaac Milner. Says, go with my mom and my sister and me to the French Riviera in October.

We'll come back in February. And on the boat across the channel, he finds out the guy's an evangelical Christian. He'd become a Christian.

Blew all of his stereotypes. He didn't act like what he thought a typical Methodist or Whitfieldian or Newtonian was supposed to be like, and they got into endless conversations about biblical doctrine. Then, as though by mistake, and nothing is by mistake, they're in his house ready to head home.

Several months later, on the coffee table in his house is a book. Wilberforce picks it up, and it is *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Philip Doddridge. Never heard of it.

So he shows it to Milner. He says, ever heard of this book? Milner says, one of the best books ever written. Bring it along.

Let's read it to each other in the carriage on the way home. Across France, across the channel, and home, which is what they did. They read the book to each other.

Wilberforce said, February 1785 now, that when he reached Parliament, he had become an intellectually believing Christian. Not a Christian yet. He did not believe, but he affirmed the doctrine.

That's where he'd come. Milner had answered all of his questions. He had seen enough coherence, enough reasonableness, as far as he judged reasonableness, that he was going to sign on intellectually, which of course won't change anybody's life, right? And so he went right back into his lifestyle, except that God had not finished with him.

So long came the summer recess, and he invited Milner again to be with him. And they talked endlessly until the great change, that's what he called it, the great change happened. And he repented and put his faith in Jesus.

And one of the first effects, they're in France, they were in France again. One of the first effects was to make him loathe his wealth. And what he had done with it all these years.

He says he felt a contempt for his wealth and the luxury in which he had lived on all these trips between parliamentary sessions. And in its place came a passion for the poor, and the downtrodden, and whoever lacked and seemed to have no access. He was bemoaning in addition his idleness.

He had been idle. He had just played between parliamentary sessions for those few years, four of them. He's 25 now.

So for four years he just watched himself fritter his life away. And now he was so ashamed and wanted to make it right. And he was terrified.

He uses the word tormented by whether or not he could stay a politician. So where did he go for counsel? To find out, he's a brand new Christian. He doesn't know what the implications of this are.

He went to John Newton. Now he was afraid to go to Newton. Newton was living in London at the time.

And Newton had a reputation. And his reputation was he's a flaming evangelical. He's one of those.

And he's a holy roller type. His sense of decorum in the parliament now is that I'm a young parliamentarian. If people see me go to his house or gets around that I visited this well-known evangelical, I don't know what it will mean.

So he circled the block twice before he got up the courage to knock on his door. Newton is 60 years old. And he knocks on the door and goes in.

And God be praised, Newton told him to stay in politics. And then he wrote him a couple of years later, It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of his church and for the good of the nation. So you document the little turns of providence in this man's life.

Isaac Milner and Doddridge's book and visiting Newton. Any of which could have been so easily missed, you would think. And the life would have turned in another direction.

And the slave trade would not have been abolished, perhaps, for another century. Instead of when it was under this man's dynamic leadership. So he's now a Christian.

He's 25 or 6 years old when he settles it. And he begins to use those recesses for the next 11 years until he marries. To make up for time lost by study.

Here's brothers where I said I would say a word. Here's the way he described it himself. He got these months off.

And instead of playing and playing on the French Riviera. He would go find somebody's house that would let him live there. And since he didn't own one.

And he described it like this. I would spend the days studying about 9 or 10 hours a day. Typically breakfasting alone.

Taking walks alone. Dining with the host family and other guests. But not joining them in the evening.

Until I came down about 3 quarters of an hour before bedtime. For what supper I wanted. End quote.

So for 11 years. I'm sure he didn't do it exactly like that every day. But that was his described regimen during his time away.

Now you don't all have that luxury. To have those kinds of days away. But if you missed seminary.

You didn't get converted until you were 40. Or didn't have the money. It was a white school and they didn't want you to come.

Or your white tradition. Didn't believe in formal education. Or whatever.

Don't throw in the towel. On the immense growth. In grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

That you can experience in the years you have left. You know if you were 50 and you came up to me today. And you said.

I don't know Greek and I don't know Hebrew. And I never had any formal education. What would you think I should do now with the rest of my life? I just might say.

Learn Greek. I might. I might not.

Too. But why not? Why not take 2, 3, 4 years. And then have the last 10 or 15.

To do some digging you've never done before. Maybe. The cause of abolition.

Was the main cause of his life. Let's talk about that for just a minute. Here's a Christian now.

Positioned in the House of Commons. Age 25, 26. In 1787.

Wilberforce wrote a letter. In which he estimated. That the annual export of slaves.

From the west coast of Africa. For all nations exceeded. 100,000 a year.

In 1804. This is 3 years before the victory. He estimated that from.

Guyana alone. Where the British were specializing. Not the Portuguese and the French and the others who are also involved.

12 to 15,000 a year. Human beings. Being captured.

Put below deck. Shipped to the West Indies. Those who made it.

One year after his conversion. God's apparent calling fell on him. October 28, 1787.

He wrote this in his diary. God Almighty. Has set before me 2 great objects.

The suppression. Of the slave trade. And the reformation.

Of morals. What you hear in the connection of those 2 is root and branch. Root and branch.

Beneath that root of the reformation of morals. Leading to national transformation or cultural revolution in the abolition of this cultural sin. Is those distinctive peculiar doctrines.

Down here. Christmas. 1787.

A few years before a few days. Before the recess began. Will before stood up and serve notice to the whole parliament.

That he would be bringing. To them. A motion in the spring.

For the abolition. Of the slave trade. That was the beginning of a 20 year battle.

He just served notice. He laid down the gauntlet. I'm in this.

And I'm not going away. This is the main lesson of his life for us. He didn't go away.

Because the battle was long. The defeats were many. The criticism was.

Unstoppable. But he was not unstoppable. May 1789.

He made a speech. Often his speech were four hours. The hours these men kept in the commons.

Is unbelievable. Their meetings would end. Three o'clock.

Four o'clock in the morning. He wrote this. He spoke this.

I confess to you. So enormous. So dreadful.

So irremedial. Did its wickedness appear. That my own mind was completely made up for abolition.

Let the consequences be what they would. I from this time determined. That I would never rest.

Until I had effected. Its abolition. He spoke of it with great.

Sensibility about his own guilt. Just like we. Often need to do.

He said. Speaking at another time to the parliament. I mean not to accuse anyone.

But to take the shame upon myself. In common indeed with the whole parliament. Of great Britain for having suffered this horrid trade.

To be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty. We ought to all plead guilty.

And not to exculpate ourselves. By throwing the blame. On others.

Ten years go by. Ten years. Defeat.

After defeat on the floor of the commons. He wrote. The grand object of my parliamentary existence.

Is the abolition of the trade. Before this great cause. All others dwindle in my eyes.

And I must say. That the certainty. That I am right here.

Adds greatly to the complacency. That's an 18th century word for. Settle peacefulness.

Not indifference. We cannot use the word. Complacency.

Today the way they did. Because it doesn't mean the same thing at all anymore. In the 20th century.

I add greatly to the settled peaceful confidence. With which I exert myself in asserting it. If it please God to honor me.

So far. May I be the instrument of stopping. Such a course of wickedness and cruelty.

As never before disgraced a Christian country. Then. 1807.

Finally arrived. February. 24.

4 AM. After 20 years. At one point.

The house. It says. Rose.

Almost to a man. And turned toward Wilberforce. In a burst.

Of parliamentary cheers. Suddenly. Above the roar of here.

Here. And quite out of order. Three hurrahs.

Echoed. And echoed. And echoed.

As he sat. Head bowed. And tears.

Streaming down his face. Eyes. 283.

Nose. 16. Majority for abolition.

267. February. 24.

1807. That was the first 20 years of his back. Because all that had been settled.

Was the legal standing of the trade. Not slavery. The new battle.

Begins. He didn't. Miss the celebration.

However. Some of you have read the stories about this evening. I mean, it's 4 a.m. in the morning.

It's snowing outside. These guys are frolicking like children. He turns to Henry Thornton, his best friend.

Slaps him on the back and says. Well, Henry. What shall we abolish next? By the way.

His answer later that night was. The lottery. The lottery.

He didn't make that his life goal. But that's the word that came out of his mouth as a possibility. William Cooper, the poet.

Friend of John Newton. Wrote a sonnet for Wilberforce. That begins like this.

To give him tribute for this. Thy country, Wilberforce, with just disdain. Hears thee by cruel men and impious called fanatic.

For thy zeal to loose enthralled from exile, public sale and slavery's chain. Friend of the poor, the wrong, the fetter galled. Fear not, lest such as thine be vain.

William J. Was a pastor in the Sinting Church and a good friend of. Wilberforce. He wrote.

His disinterested, self-denying, laborious, undeclining efforts in the cause of justice and humanity. Will call down blessings of millions and ages yet to come will glory in his memory. And that's true.

I do so. Today. Now, let us analyze together for a few minutes.

His perseverance. Because this is what has gripped me in reading this man's life. I want to be like this, don't you? Whatever cause you take up.

And I hope you take up the one we're about this weekend. And others. I preached on Martin Luther King weekend.

On racial justice. I preached on the next weekend. On justice for the unborn.

And I argued. At root. Their personhood issues and therefore one who cares about one.

Autocom. Autocare. About the other.

I wanted my people to become coronary Christians. Not adrenaline Christians. Adrenaline.

Adrenaline gives you a spurt for a moment. And then when it retreats, you fall exhausted. Coronary Christians are Christians like your heart.

Morning, afternoon, night, day after day, week after week, month after month. Year after year, decade after decade. It is the most quiet, wonderful servant in your life.

Never gets bent out of shape by your attitude. Might speed up or slow down, but it never takes a day off. It says, I quit.

Change your attitude. Not going to serve you anymore. Don't like your attitude.

Your heart just keeps going on serving you and serving you. Like Wilberforce served England and served England and served the African American. Just African in his day.

They didn't make it to America, most of them. Got to West Indies. Let's talk about his perseverance for a minute.

In 1804, three years before the victory came for that first phase in the battle, somebody pointed out to him that something really encouraging had happened by way of somebody's election and change of vote. And he said, I have been so often disappointed that I rejoice with trembling and shall scarcely dare to be confident until I see the order in the Gazette. In other words, he had been knocked down so many times by hoped for victory that never became victory, that he had become an even keeled.

I'm not going to get excited about prospects. I'm just going to keep on doing what I'm doing here. His adversary saw this in him and trembled.

One of them complained, Wilberforce jumped up whenever he was knocked down. A more creative adversary said it like this. It is necessary to watch him as he is blessed with a very sufficient quantity of that enthusiastic spirit, which so far from yielding that it grows more vigorous from blows.

In other words, you knock him down. He gets up stronger. What are you going to do with somebody like that? Can't knock him down.

He gets up stronger. Leave him up. He grows stronger.

John Wesley is 87 years old in 1790. Right after this battle began, he wrote to Wilberforce. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of man and devils.

But if God before you, who can be against you? Two years later, he wrote, I daily become more sensible that my work must be effected by constant and regular exertions rather than sudden and violent ones. Are there any Wilberforces in this room? I pray hundreds. I'll say that again so you can all pray that God would make you this way.

I came to see that my work in the cause of abolition must be effected by constant, regular exertions rather than sudden, violent ones. So when you go home, brothers, here we had a sudden, violent one. Now, the test is, will we become the constant, exerting ones? Will we be lub-dub lovers of justice or will we be adrenal lovers of justice? On his 41st birthday, 1800, you know you do serious things in the year 1800.

Serious things when centuries turn, don't you? You take stock of your life and on your birthday, he wrote, Oh Lord, purify my soul from all its stains. Warm my heart with the love of Thee. Animate my sluggish nature and fix my inconstancy and volatility that I may not be weary in well-doing.

Now, to make you see the wonder of this man's perseverance in the cause of racial justice, for those 20 years and then the next 20, he died in 1833. The first victory was won in 1807. The last victory was won in the decisive vote to make slavery illegal three days before he died in 1833.

And he got to hear the news before he went to be with Jesus. What was so remarkable about those 50 years of investment is the obstacles that he overcame. So let me give you some of those.

Some of them you are facing and some, God willing, you won't have to face. First, the massive financial interests of the opposition. You've heard about that from the other speakers so far.

If we unilaterally abolish the trade, Portugal won't, France won't, and they will simply gobble it up, make all the profit, take over all the plantations, benefit from all the finances, and it will become massively injurious to the English economy and to the international stability. A plausible argument for most for 20 years. That's what he was up against.

International politics and massive financial investments. Another thing, public criticism and vicious slander. You touch these kinds of things, you will be publicly maligned.

Even by your friends, you will be publicly maligned. Age 47, he wins the victory. His public achievement brought him personal moral authority, Pollock says, greater than any other living man.

His name in England in 1807 was synonymous with moral and political authority. He was loved and known across the nation as a man who stood for the poor and a man who stood for the disadvantaged at home and elsewhere. And as a triumphant lover of justice, how fickle is public approval.

Because before he was done, he took some stands. For example, Queen Caroline had an affair. At least, Wilberforce thought she had an affair.

And he was very indignant about it and made it a public issue, which put him out of favor with a lot of people. And he was scathingly criticized. And he wrote, July 20, 1820, what a lesson it is to a man not to set his heart on low popularity when after 40 years of disinterested public service, I am believed by the bulk to be a hypocritical rascal.

Oh, what a comfort it is to have to fly for refuge to a God of unchangeable truth and love. The severest criticism he ever got, however, was from a slaveholding William Corbett in 1823. And this just shows you how when you're laboring in one direction, making some progress, and you've done some things over here, but not as much as you could have done had you done everything over here and not done that.

The person who hates what you're doing here, because he owns some of them, will look at the defect over here and make it a plausible indictment to the nation. This happens over and over again in politics and in churches. Listen to this.

This man stands up and publicly says this. I'll read it. You seem to have a great affection for the fat, lazy, laughing, singing, dancing Negroes, but never have you done one single act in favor of the laborers of this country.

Now, he knew that statement was false. If your interests are at stake, you don't have to tell the truth. You just have to make lies sound plausible.

You make your appeal in Piccadilly, London, amongst those who are wallowing in luxuries, proceeding from the labor of the people. You should have gone to the gravel pits and made your appeal to the wretched creatures with bits of sacks around their shoulders and with hay bands around their legs. You should have gone to the roadside and made your appeal to the emaciated, half-dead things who are there cracking stones to make the roads as level as a dive for the tax eaters to ride on.

What an insult it is and what an unfeeling and what a cold-blooded hypocrite must he be that can send it forth. What an insult to call upon the people under the name of the free British laborers to appeal to them in behalf of black slaves when these free British laborers, these poor, mocked, degraded wretches who would be happy to lick the dishes and the bowls out of which the black slaves have breakfasted, dined,

and sucked. If you're good enough with words and you get a fragment of the truth and you appeal to some deep-seated prejudices, you can ruin a man's life.

Wilberforce had seen too much. It didn't faze him. It didn't faze him.

I love Wilberforce. He walked away from that, and when somebody asked him about it, he said he'd never seen below deck. I could document for you all the political schemes that he did for what were called the wage slaves in England, the children, the little children that were hired to climb up the chimneys for the chimney sweeps who were afraid they might get stuck and pull all the soot down over them to make the chimneys clean.

I know what Wilberforce did for the children and for the poor. This is a man who, in classic form, uses a fragment of what was left undone in order to attack what he didn't want done at any cost because he owned about 1,300 slaves. So let's learn how to take criticism, brothers.

There were other obstacles that he had to overcome. All of you who are married and family men know that in the ministry, there are many burdens, and you know that if the family is whole, you can stand almost anything. But if the family is broken, if the pain is big there, every other burden is doubled, right? And so when I see what he endured with regard to several things in his family, and then I saw what he had to do from endure from outside, I admire him all the more.

His wife, Barbara, was not like him. One witness said, while he was always cheerful, Barbara was often depressed and pessimistic. She finally worried herself into a very bad health which lasted the rest of her life.

The women who knew her said, two of them that I read, said she whined when William was not right beside her. So that's what you get when you court for two weeks, or two years and miss it, or not miss it. It's just what's appointed for you.

His oldest son, William, Trinity College, Oxford, fell away from the faith. January 10, 1819. Oh, my dear William.

Oh, my dear William. That you might be led by grace. Oh, God.

That was his diary. March 11. Pours out his grief in his diary.

Oh, my poor William. How strange he can make so miserable those who love him best, and whom really he loves. His soft nature makes him the sport of his companions, and the wicked and idle naturally attach themselves to him like dust cleaves to him and burrs.

I go to pray for him. Alas, could I love my Savior more and serve him? God would hear my prayer and turn his heart. Henry Venn wrote to him that William was wasting his money, buying extra horses, playing.

His father faced a crisis. He finally withdrew his allowance and ostracized him in the sense of not letting him come home until there was some reformation. And he was suspended from school.

And Wilberforce wrote, Alas, my poor William. How sad to be compelled to banish my own eldest son. So that's the kind of burdens he took to parliament every day.

William did come back, by the way. All of his sons were believers. Three of them were clergy before they were done.

It did break his heart to see them become high church at the end of his life. And three of the four became Catholic after he died, which would have broken his heart, given his own attitude towards Catholic doctrine, the way he understood it. On top of the burden of family, his daughter Barbara, daughter Barbara, not wife, in 1821, age 32, died of tuberculosis.

Oh, my dear friend, he wrote, it is in such seasons as these when the value of the promises of the Word of God are ascertained both by dying and attendant relatives. The assured persuasion of Barbara's happiness has taken away the sting of death. Now, that sounds strong.

I know that sounds strong. Sting of death taken away. But he was so sick at the time already, it broke the last bit of strength that he had there in 1822.

And he wrote a few days later, I am confined with a new malady, the gout. And when he said new malady, it should signal you that he already had some. And he did.

He'd tell you about this man's obstacles of health. In 1788, he wrote, My eyes are so bad, I can scarcely see how to direct my pen. We don't know what the eye problem was, but a very serious eye problem.

Years later, he wrote of his peculiar complaint of his eyes. He said he couldn't see well enough to read or write during the first hours of the day. One medically astute commentator wrote, This was a symptom of a slow buildup of morphine poisoning.

What does that mean? Morphine poisoning means this. In 1788, he came down with ulcerative colitis. Terrible diarrhea, unstoppable for months.

And they had one medicine that worked in those days. Opium. He lived on opium the rest of his life.

Three pills after breakfast, three pills after lunch, three pills in the evening. Now, in that culture, you could get it over the counter, and it was regarded as a medicine. It was highly addictive.

Witness China. And Pollock observes this. This is the biography by John Pollock.

Will before certainly grew more untidy, indolent, absent-minded as the years went on, though yet not in old age. It is a proof of the strength of his will that he achieved so much under a burden which neither he nor his doctors understood. In other words, it's very likely that his eye problem and his indolent problem and some of his emotional problems were owing to this heavy dependence on opium to control a bowel that would have utterly otherwise incapacitated him.

The payoffs of medicines fall out. Then there emerged a lung problem, and most significant of all, near 1812, he died in 1833, he decided to resign his Yorkshire seat, not to leave Parliament but to take a small seat. Evidently, you could juggle around.

You leave a big seat and be elected by a small seat that didn't have so many people turning to you for help. He gave the public announcement, it's for the sake of my family and my children, I want to spend more time with them, which we'll come back to in a moment. But it was just in the nick of time because two years later, he developed a curvature of the spine, a very serious one.

Here's the description of it. One shoulder began to slope and his head fell forward a little, a little more each year, until his chin rested on his chest unless lifted by a very conscious movement. He could have looked grotesque were it not for the charm of his face and the smile which hovered about his mouth.

You see pictures of the old Wilberforce sitting in a chair. It does not look quite strange. It just looks like he's trying to strike some kind of pose.

You know? He wasn't trying to strike any kind of pose. He had a spine that was so curved that his head was forced down like this. And in that way, he served out the last 10 years of his parliamentary ministry.

So here's the question I want to ask. What was the key to this man's perseverance through the obstacles? What was the key? And I'm going to argue that the key was exactly what he said it was in his book. But I'll focus on a piece that I didn't mention.

I just called it religious affections. You've got peculiar doctrine down here as the root giving rise to renewed religious affections which transform the morals, which transform the political culture. That's the philosophy of his life.

This level of religious affections is the key for how you triumph over obstacles and keep on and keep on and keep on in the battle until you die. And I'm going to pick on, as you might guess, joy. Because it's there.

Listen to this. I just document the role of joy in this man's life. The indomitable joy.

The kind of joy... Now pastors, you picture yourself like this. You're not a politician, but you go to church, you have a hard business meeting. Some hard things are said about you at the business meeting.

Your children are not there. The business meeting is over about eight, say. And you go home.

And your children are happy. Daddy's home. What do you do, guys? Where do you get the wherewithal to play with him that moment? He did.

He was a childlike child lover. Nothing dominated this man's spirit. He'd go home from a parliamentary defeat and played with his children.

How did that happen? Let's read a little bit about that. Miss Sullivan, 1815, wrote just a description of the man from a contemporary. By the tones of his voice and expression of his countenance, he showed that joy was the prevailing feature of his own mind.

Joy springing from entireness of trust in the Savior's merits and from love to God and man. His joy was quite penetrating. Robert Southey, the poet, alongside William Wordsworth, wrote this, I never saw any other man who seemed to enjoy such a perpetual serenity and sunshine of spirit.

In conversing with him, you feel assured that there is no guile in him. That if ever there was a good and happy man on earth, he was one. 1881, Dorothy Wordsworth, William Wordsworth's sister, who had spent some time with the family, wrote, Though shattered in constitution and feeble in body, he is as lively and animated as the days of his youth.

His sense of humor was good, vigorous, and unmistakable. I love the story of, now you've got to picture British Parliament, right? These are pretty proper men. Although it can get raucous in the Parliament, in

the House of Commons especially evidently.

And John Russell was quite the rhetorician and somebody had made some stupid remark and Russell rose and held forth with a beautiful oration that made the remark look as ludicrous as it was and it said that Wilberforce was so convulsed with laughter he fell off of his chair. So here was a man who had a belly laugh and a childlike way about him. He's probably a lot like Carl Ellis.

I mean, Carl Ellis likes to laugh. It's just clearly obvious that he likes to laugh. Whether anybody else gets his jokes, he's going to lead us in laughter here.

There's a health about laughter, especially the kind that will let you fall off your chair. It means it's going to be very hard for you probably to go home at night and simply stew, brood, and plan your revenge for the thing that was said about you in the Parliament. Marianne Thornton, the daughter of his best friend Henry, wrote about their childhood, Wilberforce would interrupt his serious talks with my father and romp with us in the lawn.

His love for and enjoyment in all children was remarkable. He was an unusual father for his day. He had six children, four sons, two daughters.

He and Barbara had those in the first nine years of their marriage. He had lots of little kids around. And then they were growing up.

And remember, he was 37 when he married. And so he had children. Then the youngest child, what would he have been? 46 when his last child was born.

He lived till he was 74. So you do the math. His big, energetic, embattled parliamentary life was when he had lots of kids at home still.

Most fathers of his wealth and position, one author writes, rarely saw their children. Servants and a governess took care of the children. They were to be out of sight most of the time.

Instead, William insisted on eating as many meals as possible with his children. And he joined in their games. He played marbles and blind men's bluff and ran races with them.

In the games, the children treated him like one of them. I think one of his sons broke his big toe with a bowling ball. Robert Soothe visited the house again when all the children were home.

And he commented on, quote, the pell-mell, topsy-turvy, chaotic confusion of the Wilberforce apartment. And then he added, in which Barbara sat like patients on a monument while her husband frisks about as if every vein in his body were filled with quicksilver. So this is these two personalities.

She's sitting there looking, and he's down there playing with them on the floor. 1816, Joseph Gurney, the Quaker, stayed with Wilberforce for a week. And he wrote, As he walked about the house, he was generally humming the tune of a hymn or psalm as if he could not contain his pleasurable feelings of thankfulness and devotion.

There was about him, and this is the mark of all healthy people, and the more you have it, the healthier you are, there was a mark of wonderful self-forgetfulness, non-self-consciousness. People who are always thinking, How am I coming across? How am I coming across? How am I coming across? are sick people. And he was not sick.

They're called second-handers. That's the way Ayn Rand described them. They're called codependent in contemporary pop psychology.

The rest of us know that they're just not well. And they're sad. And there's hundreds of them in this room.

And we're all then to one degree or another. And the healthier we are, the less we worry about what people think about us. Richard Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, very big name, met with Wilberforce.

Now both these men were somebody. And Wellesley wrote to Wilberforce this sentence, You have made me so entirely forget that you are a great man by seeming to forget it yourself in all of our intercourse. That's a statement of profound Christian health.

That is, his identity, his joy, his peace was rooted in another. Not in himself or how he came across. James Stephen recalled Wilberforce's death, after his death, like this, Being himself... By the way, I'll precede this.

I'll get you ready for this sentence. Of all the reading that I have done of Wilberforce since last June, I think this is my favorite sentence. So just to get you ready.

I love this sentence about Wilberforce. I love what it says about him. What was in him.

Being himself amused and interested by everything, whatever he said became amusing and interesting. His presence was as fatal to dullness as to immorality. His mirth was as irresistible as the first laughter of childhood.

Every phrase in that sentence is amazing to me. He was so interested and fascinated by everything. So he'd walk from Parliament one mile to his house, and he'd see children, and he'd see the poor, and he'd see the rich, and he'd see carriages, and he'd see skies, and he'd see trees.

And he took everything in as a gift of common grace. And he'd be singing. He could recite the entire 119th Psalm in the 15 minutes that it took him to walk from Parliament to his home.

He was saturated with the Bible. And when he wasn't saturated with the Bible, he was absorbing everything around him. It didn't land on him like it does on many of us.

Now here's the way people are wired differently. And God uses all kinds, so don't feel yourself useless when you find yourself in the majority category here. You know what most people do when they walk 15 minutes from work to home? They complain.

The street's dirty. There's one of those jerks. There's a person that drives like that.

It's cloudy instead of sunny. Supper probably won't be ready. That's the way most people are.

Instead of saying, aren't those clouds beautiful? Thanks for clouds and sun. The Bible has lots to say about rejoicing at all times and being thankful for all things, everything working together for good. Brothers, our absence of joy is a profound indictment of our soul and a dishonor to our Savior.

Hannah Moore, the rich benefactress who paid for many of his righteous schemes, commended him that he was serving the nation's rich well by being an articulate, parliamentary Christian overflowing with joy so that he undercut their preconceptions about the dour Calvinists. And here I'll stick in my little parenthesis

about Calvinism. He said, I'm not a Calvinist.

I read him hoping he'd be a Calvinist. I looked at every doctrinal sentence in his own book and every one in every biography. I found not one sentence that contradicts Calvinism.

I found dozens that sound exactly like Calvinism. But he repudiated the name and he said, I don't want to get involved in names and refined squabbles. Now I just think that that was a little bit of what we've been talking about here.

A little bit. So was he or wasn't he? Well, I like his doctrine. So I don't need to put a name on it.

You read what he has to say about depravity. You read how he treated the nature of conversion and how the Holy Spirit had to do the work. You read what he says about the nature of the atonement and the effective work of Christ and what it brings about.

And you read about faith and how it sustains it and the necessity of the Holy Spirit. And it all sounds like cat grace to me. So by any other name, William, you can have your non-named theology.

That's fine. I was unpacking my favorite sentence here. Being amused and interested by everything, whatever he said became amusing and interesting.

People love to be around this man. Just love to be around him. Because he was so interesting, so amusing.

And then this sentence put it negatively. His presence was as fatal to dullness as to immorality. In other words, if you come into his presence unhappy or immoral, you're going to get changed.

You're going to get fixed so that you cease to be immoral and you're going to get fixed so that you cease to be unhappy. What a combination! Oh, that we might be people, pastors like that. So that our presence is fatal in our pulpits and out to dullness.

Oh, brothers, don't curse Calvinism with dullness. Or your own theology, whatever it is. Don't curse it with dullness.

And don't think that the only way to spice it up is with ten-minute stories. No exegesis to stories, because exegesis is boring and dull. That's only because you experience the Bible that way.

When you start experiencing the Bible as life-giving and powerful and beautiful and satisfying, your exegesis and exposition of it will have the same effect on your people. If you have to tell twenty-minute stories because exposition is boring, you're in trouble. Your heart is in trouble.

His mirth was as irresistible as the first laughter of childhood. He was a childlike, child-loving, self-forgetting, Christ-trusting, indomitably happy man. That was the key to keepin' on, keepin' on.

You knock him down, he gets up happier. Strange man. Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.

When somebody accused him one time that joy is something to be mistrusted, distrusted, here's how he responded. I think this was his response to the Calvinism he did not want to associate with. He wrote, My grand objection to the religious system still held by many who declare themselves orthodox churchmen is that it tends to render Christianity so much a system of prohibitions rather than privilege and hopes and

thus the injunction to rejoice so strongly enforced in the New Testament is practically neglected.

Let's say that again. Because I have a name for this, you know, it's called, it's called Christian Hedonism and so whenever I find it in 200-year-old men I underline it and I read it in crowds. Lest anybody think I made this up, I just put a name on it, I didn't make this up, I read this again because it's all over the 18th century.

The problem I have with European Christianity, sir, is that it is a system of prohibitions rather than privileges and hopes and thus the injunction to rejoice, you know that word, injunction, command? The injunction to rejoice so strongly enforced in the New Testament is practically neglected and religion is made to wear a forbidding and gloomy air and not one of peace and hope and joy. He wrote again, we can scarcely indeed look into any part of the sacred volume without meeting abundant proofs that it is the religion of the affections, we'd say emotions, emotions which God particularly requires. Joy is enjoined on us as our bounden duty and commended to us as our acceptable worship.

A cold, unfeeling heart is represented as highly criminal. Close quote. Come on, Wilberforce, write my books.

That's all I want to say. Say it. Say it to your people.

This book enjoins joy in suffering and not escape from suffering. It gets us on the road into the battle and keeps us on the road with indomitable joy. And I'll just close by taking you back where we began, the peculiar doctrines.

The thing that feeds this joy, this indomitable joy that's so practical, it enables you to get up when you're knocked down, enables you to be a father playing with your children when you've just been beat up at your church. That miracle joy comes from peculiar doctrines. Peculiar doctrines.

And I'll just end with the one he focuses on the most, namely justification by faith. He says, if we would rejoice in Christ as triumphantly as the first Christians did, this is a quote from Wilberforce, if we would rejoice as triumphantly as the first Christians did, we must learn like them to repose our entire trust in Him, Christ, and to adopt the language of the apostle, God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of Jesus Christ. Who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

And lest anybody doubt where this man stands in the major battle of our day on the doctrine of justification and his day and every day. I'll close with this quote. The bulk of the nominal Christians failed to see, he said, that they lacked true religious affections because, quote, they consider not that Christianity is a scheme for the justifying of the ungodly by Christ's dying for them, when yet sinners, a scheme for reconciling us to God, when enemies, Romans 5.10, and for making the fruits of holiness the effects and not the cause of our being justified and reconciled.

Now there's the key. Where does 40 years of justice pursuing in the face of indomitable seemingly obstacles come from? He says, it doesn't come from a heart trying to get justified, trying to get liked by God. Trying to get into heaven doesn't come from there.

It never will come from there. It comes from making the fruits of holiness the effects, not the cause of our being justified. Do you know that doctrine, brothers? That on the basis of the righteousness and blood of Jesus, by faith alone, apart from works of the law, we may be united to the One who becomes for us our righteousness and our pardon, so that in Him, sinners though we be, we are now freed from the wrath of

God and there is now no condemnation, so that like children frisking with mercury in our veins, we may play with our children after being knocked flat.

Because if God is for us, who can be against us? And we can get up when we're knocked down in a church conversation. Or when you go to a round table out here and you ask a question and two brothers say, you wouldn't even ask that if you got it. And you just want to go home and say, I tried.

How are you going to stay on the road? I close with this because for the last year, what's burdened me most about the racial reconciliation, racial harmony thing is trying to become and build a kind of person who'll stay in the conversation when they've just been hurt pretty bad. That's the biggest battle, I think. You know, all this other stuff about how we're going to worship, how we're going to do the identity thing and the reconciliation thing.

I think that'll be a mess till Jesus comes. I think the worship services will always be a mess. I think conversations and conferences like this will always be a mess.

I think microphones will always be mixed up. I think dinners will be a mess. I think the whole world will be one big mess.

But if you're content to leave it that way and just go get a nice cabin by the lake, you're not going to heaven probably. The question is, how do you get in the mess and shine for Jesus day after day after day when you've tried and somebody shoots you down? Everybody goes home. Everybody takes his ball and goes home.

Why didn't black do that? I want to find out, how do you become the kind of person who doesn't do that? And Wilberforce was one. And that's why I've been reading it for six months. And I've done my best to try to unpack what was the key.

I think the key was peculiar doctrines like justification by faith, giving rise to new religious affections, namely indomitable joy that enables you to get up off the ground, know that God's on your side. Jesus loves you. He's working everything together for your good.

Go home, play with your kids. The church may or may not survive. I'm surviving and I'm going to love Jesus and go for Him.

I'm surviving and I'm going to love Jesus and go for Him. I'm surviving and I'm going to love Jesus and go for Him. and go for Him.

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