

# Gettin' Religion

by Charlie Wireman

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*The speaker shares his life story, from a childhood of poverty and violence to a conversion experience that led him to become a preacher of the gospel.*

**Duration:** 40:35

**Scripture:** Genesis 32:28, Psalm 23:6, Psalm 37:23, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 7:7, Acts 16:31, 1 Thessalonians 5:17

**Topics:** "Religion"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on his past experiences and the choices he has made. He mentions his admiration for a man who remained steadfast and uncompromising in his beliefs. The preacher then shares a personal story about being in court and facing the possibility of going to prison. However, to his surprise, the judge presents him with a petition signed by the commonwealth attorney and others, asking for his release. The preacher expresses his desire to continue preaching the gospel and asks the judge for permission to return to a revival. The judge, moved by the preacher's words, allows him to go back to the revival.

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## Transcript

Now, on the 13th day of March, 1890, a mighty pretty little baby boy was born in a two-room mountain hut in a remote section of the mountains of eastern Kentucky. So you can figure that I'm 81 years old past. And I was born into an average home in that section of the country.

My father and mother were typical Kentucky mountaineers. Lots of people don't even know that mountains have ears. I know they do.

I happen to be one of them. Now, my father was a laboring man, working at menial labor, for meager wages to support my mother and us nine children. There was no relief for poor folk in those days.

Every fellow had to scratch gravel for his own family, as it were. And if he couldn't make it, that was just his bad luck. So we were very destitute of this world's goods.

Very poor people. We had the cladboard loft and the function floor. Some of you are old enough, perhaps, to remember those days.

Now, Kentucky, as many of you know, has been known as the fighting state since the days of the celebrated Daniel Boone and others. And I fear has lived up to her reputation, even to this day, too well.

And while my mother was a typical mountain woman, she did not believe in human beings fighting.

She said, if there's any fighting to be done, it should be done by the cats and the dogs, not by human beings. We lived in the outskirts of a small county seat mountain town. And when Mother would send us downtown on an errand, it was a strict order to go to that particular place and return immediately without any loafing or ordering on the way.

With a further admonition that if we got into trouble with any of the neighbor children, she would punish us severely. Now, my mother never investigated a brawl to find out who was the instigator of it. All she needed to know was if one of hers was mixed up in it and he got what was coming to him.

Not any investigation. And the bad boys of the town took advantage of it by not being allowed to fight back and abuse me when they'd catch me downtown. I resented it and thought the day will come and I'll get revenge some way.

And when I was about 12 years of age and the school opened for the fall, and in those days we only had three months school during the year, in the fall of the year. There was no compulsory school law. It was up to the parents to say how much the children went to school.

And I got to go. It's a general rule about half that time and the rest of the time I had to stay home and dig taters and pull potters to help keep the wolf from the door. And then there was a bad boy at school that took advantage of my not being permitted or allowed to fight back and embarrassed me all during the school days for abusing me and insulting me in the presence of the other children.

And I told my mother I didn't want to go to school and gave her these reasons. And particularly the fact that that boy would abuse me during the school service. She insisted that I must go.

I said, all right, I'll go. But the first thing I'll proceed to do when I get on the school ground this morning will be hunt that fella up, take him by surprise, jump on him and give him a whipping. She said, if you do and I hear about it when you get home, I'll give you a whipping.

I knew very good and well my mother was going to hear about it because I had sisters in school. And so I whipped that boy the next day. And when we got home that evening or afternoon, sisters broke the news to mother.

And she took me off behind that old woodshed and those familiar scenes linger with me still. She's just off of Peachtree Shillelagh and I do believe that my mother had handled one of those days with the greatest perfection of any human being I ever saw. She had nine children to practice on, practiced on some of us almost every day of her life.

And she got it down to absolute perfection. She laid it on. I cried.

She quit and I felt better. Now some people have the idea that crying and feeling better is getting religion. I know better than that.

Had that been so, I'd have been one of the most religious boys that ever grew up in this country. So it takes more than crying and feeling better to really get religion. And when she finished with me that day, I said, now Maul, tomorrow I'll give that rascal a worse one than I gave him today.

He said, if you do, I'll give you a worse one than I gave you today. I did and so did Maul. And when she finished with me that day, a murderous devil has entered into my heart at that tender age of about 12.

And I said, now Mother, tomorrow I'll virally leave life in that fellow. Just virally leave him alive. And if he ever gets over what I'm going to give him tomorrow, you with me, the next time I lay eyes on him, I'll kill him.

I meant that as much as I mean to leave this tabernacle at the end of this service. The next day, I'm ashamed of this, but I beat that boy until he bled profusely to nose and ears and mouth. And they carried him home in a semi-conscious condition.

Called the doctor who all but despaired of his life. Got home that night, I didn't wait for Sister to tell Mother. I told her myself.

Sister chimed in, telling her how awful he was beaten. And I said, now Mother, if you're going to with me, get it over with. But if you do, the next time I lay eyes on him, I'll finish the job.

Mother had such enough to know that I meant every word of that. That if she were with me, I'd kill that boy. To save the other mother's boy from being killed and her own boy from being a murderer.

Of course, she didn't whip me. But that was the beginning of a fighting career that was destined to be a bloody one. Now the boy had reached the age of 12 or 14.

And that section of the country in those days did not carry a pistol. He was looked upon as a sissy. No mountain boy wanted to be called a sissy.

I was no exception to that rule. But pistols cost money. And money was the scarcest article in the mountains.

We finally made the revolt and bought a pistol and not long after that, we had a man in that community who had a reputation of being the worst man in those parts. And I shamed him, his reputation, in my ignorance. And thought now if I can get in combat with that man and win the fight, it'll put a feather in my cap.

You know the young men who were ambitious would be mad to sit up and take notice. And the time came when that man and I fought a bloody fight. Those little shots were fired.

He was striking me with a heavy whiskey bottle. I was striking him with a small .32 improved double action Smith & Wesson. And broke the trigger guard off and sunk the trigger into the man's scalp.

And he fell bleeding insofar as anyone knew dying. And I was so demonized with no compunction of conscience. I walked over wearing hog nail boots and stopped him in the face and eyes like you would that of a snake.

No compunction of conscience. And that did put a feather in my cap as it were. And it went out that I'd quit the bully.

And then fight after fight, gun battle after gun battle, followed for some time. And that's why I was dubbed Bulldog Charlie. And go by that name even to this day, especially in that part of the country.

And all in all, this wild career of sin and folly, gaining momentum all the time, getting worse day after day, after week and so on. And finally I got low enough down to become a deputy sheriff. Now that's no reflection on deputies.

Some deputies are many fine, noble, good men serving in that capacity all up and down the country. And they're not pigs either. I'm a pig.

God have mercy on you. Now the reason I said I was low enough down, no man with any self-respect put any premium on human life, had any respect for his family, would serve as a deputy sheriff in those mountain towns as in those days for he knew if he did, he'd put himself up as a target for all the bad men in the mountains. And the high sheriff would have to run on his own when he was elected.

He had to resort to such men as I. Boy, of course, a little backside even to this day. See a man coming down the street with a big pistol buckled on him, ask who he is, they'll tell you his name, and then proceed no doubt to tell you how long he served in the penitentiary, how many men he killed before he'd become a deputy sheriff. That's the kind of men for the most part in that part that serve in that capacity.

That's why I say I got low enough down to become a deputy sheriff. I served 18 months as chief deputy of Wolf County, the wildest, woolliest place in the history of those mountains, that mountain section. I participated in and witnessed many, many gun battles during that 18 months.

Some of them I engaged in where men were killed on both sides and wounded on both sides of the battle. I've oftentimes said I do not believe I would exaggerate. If I were to tell you I've had my hand full of shots and bullets fired at me and was never fazed with a bullet in my life, touched lightly twice with a knife, but never touched with a bullet.

You say, Brother Wyman, how do you account for that? The only reason I know is the fact that almighty God saw the day coming down the road when I did repent of that life of sin and be born again and called to preach the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and go up and down this country for more than 58 years, shooting the old gospel gun as fearlessly for God as I ever fought for the devil. That's why I'm here tonight. I believe with all my heart.

And finally got too low down to be a deputy sheriff and the sheriff fired me off the job. Then it was that the turned-out ball popper put up a beer and whiskey joint, gambling den, and a dance hall on one of the most conspicuous corners on Main Street, that little town of Sheeptown. I ran it in open violation of the local option laws that were supposed to be in effect in that town in those days.

I warned all the law enforcement officers of the county never to try to arrest me. I told them, I know that you can get me, but while you're getting me, just one of me, I'll get more of you than you will of me. The high sheriff did slip in behind me in the feed store one time, grabbed me from behind.

I threw the poor man between two sacks of feed stuff, took his pistol away from him, and threw some more feed stuff on top of him and left him squirming and never did take his pistol back until the day after I began to seek the Lord. While running that place, the town was being ruined through the influence of that joint. Harlots were being made, homes were being broken, drunkens were being made, and divorces were being sought and granted through the influence of that hellhole that the devil used me as a handyman of his to run.

And I remember well about two weeks before they had the revival that I was saved in, the old Methodist church decided to have a revival meeting and they went about it like they meant business. They entered and prayed in every home in the little town of 612, except one. One old infidel judge wouldn't permit them to pray in his home.

Other than that, they prayed in every home and town before they started the meeting. And then they sent down to Wilmore, Kentucky and got some of their Lord's revanches, like brother Ben and some others I could think of around here, and brought into town the whole revival of the old Methodist church. Now that is back when the Methodists had religion and the women wore both clothes and hair and they believed in revivals and had them.

And the revival in those days was the center of attraction in that town. Whenever a body went, both saint and sinner, didn't have the things that it's like to have today. Young and old alike, saint and sinner, tended regularly a revival meeting.

And it had been in progress a few days, as in the month of November 1913. And the boys would go up and hang around and listen to him, the revival, and come and sit around the game tables and the drink bar and tell what the evangelist had said. And he finally got to pay his respects or disrespects to the bootleggers and so on.

And they told me about it and I resented it. And I said, I'd like to see that fellow. I'd like to look him over.

I'd never seen him, to recognize him. One night the boys came in and said, all right now, calling me by my nickname, if you want to get a squint at the evangelist, he's coming down the street. Big whites low on the ground, moonshining on most lively stage.

We had places arranged where we could look out and see what was going on on the outside without being seen on the inside. Going to one of those places and peeking out, I saw a little sawed off, hammered down, double ugly sort of fellow come walking down the street. I said to the boys, is that it? They said, that's it.

I said, I don't think I'd use a thing like that, but I may break that out of town if it keeps on talking about my business. And it went out all over town. That's the bad man of the town threatening to run the good man out.

People who knew me were required to believe I was honoring, sorry, low down, mean enough to do it. And they lived in expectancy of it every day. As the meetings went on from day to day, one night Sister Kenoi was called and she lived up the street about a block and a half perhaps from my place of business here on the corner of Main Street.

And the Methodist Church was about a very short block back from my place. And the high wall ran down the side of this place. And Brother Roberts, T.P. Roberts, in those days they called him Night Hawk Tom.

He was the evangelist. They claimed he could go into a town and stay three days until all the meanness was going on in that town. And the sinful elements did not know that God could reveal things to his man.

And they thought he snooped around town at night and got his information, so they dubbed him Night Hawk Tom. And it was Night Hawk Tom who came to hold the meetings. He said, I've noticed so many young people in this little town.

How would it be possible, if at all, to reach them with this revival? Here's the sad and awful indictment that Sister Kenoi, that saintly mother in Israel, brought against me. She said, Brother Roberts, this young man they call good old Charlie that runs this awful, awful place on the corner down here is being used as a handyman of the devil. There's no other man we ever had in this part of the mountains.

Homes are being wrecked. Lives are being ruined. And sufferings and horrors are being made through the influence of that awful place.

If we could only get that wicked young man to God, it would turn the tide forward in this town. The man of God, the man of faith, looked her in the eye and said, Sister Kenoi, there's absolutely nothing too hard for our God. Our God is able.

Suppose that you and I enter into a covenant here tonight. Call us into the covenant in the day service tomorrow and the night service tomorrow night. And we'll fast and pray until God either saves that wicked young man or moves him out of the way of revival in this town.

And that was a mighty good way to pray. Say what you please. And one day a miserable, indescribable temptation settled down over me such as I had never experienced before.

I didn't know what it was, but I was among all men most miserable. I went about that diabolical business with the interest I had given to one night. One afternoon, I stepped out in front of that place to get a little pleasure.

The evangelist was coming down on the opposite side of the street. He saw me standing there. He did not know that I was the man for whom he called this fast and prayer.

But he walked diagonally across the street and he saw me and took hands with me and invited me, said, I'm holding the Bible. He met the church up here. I don't believe he's been with us, you know.

He must have been with us in the revival. Now, the pastors of the town never knew. And they let me on the street for a speech in their mouth.

If I knew my humor, I'd speak to them dirty things. As a matter of fact, if I was out of humor, I'd curse them and beat them. And they never knew what to speak to me.

And they let me on. But that day, that man spoke to me. And when he walked away, that came up in my wicked heart a feeling of appreciation and admiration towards that man.

And I watched him as he walked away. And I thought, now, why would a good man, like he evidently is, cross the street to take hands with a poor, debauched, broken outlaw such as me? I found the secret in this book. The steps of a good man were ordered of the Lord.

And that had a pure, absolute fire of conviction in my soul, though I didn't know exactly what it was. I don't have a feeling it's been that rough in a long, long time. I walked out on the front porch.

Then to walk right along the street back and forth as a few great spirits fluttered over my head with a downpour. All the powers of heaven there flurried before the house of God for the revivals and fathers that I had sworn that I'd never enter another church no more while I lived in this world. As I'd walk into and go there, all the powers of hell that had forced my going to the house of God pulled me the other way.

And all at once, that old church bell began to toll. And with every toll of that bell, the house of conviction had deepened in my wicked soul. I'd heard it ring for my religious funeral.

I'd heard it ring for other funerals. I'd heard it ring for many seasons. But I never heard that old church bell sound like it sounded to me that month.

If I were to build 10,000 churches in the biggest village the church is in, I'd have been sick to the last tick in putting an old-fashioned church bell on the last one of my little sons. I could hear them, but they don't mean to me what an old-fashioned church bell means. For God only knows the part that bell had and the first thing I knew I was on my way to the church.

When I got to the door and started in, the gang outside took off. And down to my place in Oklahoma, there was a lot of people from going up to the church. There was old dogs all the way up there going to run the evangelist house.

They didn't know that I'd gone there for better and bigger business than that. I walked in that door just for the advantage that I had to be. There was a menorah sitting in the choir where you could see the door.

And others looked around and saw who it was. My knees were shaking and went over the crowd. They thought I'd gone to try out.

Not yet. I dropped down on the most convenient seat I could find in the rear of the church. And when I entered that door, however, it was annoyed about a war-hoofed gang of dogs who ran to the church.

Others thought I'd gone to try out for good to run the good man out of town. But that desperate gang of dogs who had wept through the night and prayed through the night and prayed through day and night knew I was there and ran to the church. That preacher began to preach.

His black eyes were as wide as his front jaw. I never heard such a thing. They didn't make it.

All for the looks of mortal man as that man preached that night. Well, the time before the prison of the old dog was gone along the bull's-eyes broke and my will was saved. He hadn't been preaching for a little while and I was feeling like this emerging Roman must have felt from here on that gold-leathered Jesus had been living my life.

And before he was had a girl I wondered when he'd ever quit preaching and give me a chance to get to that born as gangster. If he had been a calm servant with needs to get to that born must not push it but he would have been a good and good I got up from that altar and I said, Mr. Grace, I'm sorry about the way I treated you, but you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I'll never molest you.

I want to get right with God and go to heaven. The Peter leaned down his face and he whipped my hand. He said, Father, bygones are bygones so far as I'm concerned.

The good and the noble and the like came. Oh, darling, get right with God. He told me a lady was never as happy with any man in the world, for more or less.

I looked at him and I told him that. Now I was getting ready to leave. That night at the end of the service, I went down and had almost five cocktails while I did it.

But I poured out every drop of pure wine and liquor in that joint. And they stood around there drooling and begging me to give it to them. I couldn't bring myself to give it.

So I brought up every piece of card from every pile of dice in that hell hole and locked it up and went out of business with the devil. The next morning I went over to the sheriff's office, carrying his pistol in my hand. And I opened the door.

He was sitting on his crib beside his desk. When he turned around and saw who it was, he turned his face to my shirt and said, Charlie, what do you want? What did you do up here? He saw my pistol in the water. I thought he was frightened.

I laid the pistol over on the table nearby. I said, John, it seems it's horrendous in there. I'm trying to get religion into the Bible across the street.

And I want you to forgive me for what I've done to you, John. Well, he said, we have a new judge. I knew that.

Our regular judge was indisposed for some reason. And the governor had appointed a judge from Louisville to decide if this would be delivered from a court. And that was a small encounter in that part of the country.

There were 14 murder cases besides that long term of court records. And when I threw him back his pistol, he said, now, I'd heard what was going on in the court. They'd been leading from the Gothic Commonwealth of Kentucky against Charlie Lyman, charged with this offense, Commonwealth of Kentucky against Charlie Lyman, charged with the other offense, and so on.

So Martin sent a judge who was then criticized. And when that blame was judged, it came to the notice from the deputy of the sheriff, who turned out to be waiting on the court. Where is this man, Lyman? You have some folks up against the district days.

We haven't got him yet. We had other prisons, the bars. Who wouldn't tell that strange judge about us less than a block or more than a block from that courthouse? Well, the sheriff said, Charlie, all I know to do is take you up to hold a new judge.

The court hadn't convened that morning yet, but the judge was in his office. We went up and walked into the judge's office, and the sheriff intervened. He said, this is Mr. Lyman.

The sheriff looked at me and said, are you Charlie Lyman? I said, yes, sir. He said to the sheriff, where did you get him? He said, I didn't get him. He surrendered in my office.

It was a while ago. He said, you know, now he knew that men were less against him than I had. Was God's law and stay out in those mountains for years without getting apprehended? It ain't even the law.

And he couldn't understand, knowing what they had against me, why I surrendered to the sheriff. He said, how'd you come to surrender to the sheriff? Well, I said, I'm going to get religion, Mr. Survivor. I want to get right with my fellow man, with my country and with my daughters, and go to heaven when I die.

He said, it looks to me like you're going to the penitentiary. I said, if I do, I'll go to heaven, I will, on the penitentiary. I'm determined to pay the price and get right with God.

He said, can you give bond reappearance for trial in March? Of course, at some later date, I said, I'm sorry, Judge, there isn't a man in this county who'd sign my bond, not bond. No, I can't give bond. Then he said, all I know to do with Yates' permission is jail.

I mean, such time as repeats by Yates in the future. I said, Judge, this is an honorable way. You can let me go back to that revival.

I won't run away. I'll come back when the revival's over. I can't give bond.

It seemed to me, talk about running from the revival, it actually seemed to me I'd die if I couldn't get back to that revival room in the home of the people of God. The word's gone out everywhere now. Clearly said, that's all I know to do with it.

At that time, the tears were in the old sheriff's eyes. He said, Judge, now I speak with you privately. I walked over in the corner and cried on and off a voice on the tape in just a few brief moments.

When they broke away, I heard the sheriff say, I'm sure he will. That's Judge Thurman Winston Wyman, the sheriff tells me he's known you since you were in your swaddling clothes. That you're father and mother among the best friends he has.

That you was at Keith's for a year and a half. He knows the kind of methods you're made of. And he feels sure that if I just take your recognition without requiring bond, that you'd come back after the revival and appear in my court.

Would you, Wyman? I said, if I live, I will, Judge. And if you can do that, I can appreciate it. He said, we'll appreciate it more than I can appreciate it.

He said, lift your hand. I felt like I was converted then. Almost.

I lifted my hand. He said, you took my recognition to come back. And on and on, day after day, seven days and nights, making confessions and restitution, taking back stolen articles, promising to pay outlaw debts, getting religion.

And one night, one memorable night, one never to be forgotten night, the rain poured through at that morning's bank. Hollywood King and I'd rather walk with Jesus alone. Half of my pillow I'd take to the storm.

Living each moment with his face in tears, and he'd wink to my flat face and say a little thing. I'm going through, I'm going through. I'll take a fight.

Whatever others do, I'll take the win. We used to sing it before God's tonight, tonight. If God despised a Jew, now we sing it with God's anointed feet.

But God's gifts are just as despised today as they ever have been. Those that are living the life. When salvation broke in to march in the night, and so would the splendor and grandeur that it takes to stand and raise that old church.

I've just come to preaching. And I'm going to be a preacher in Christ's name. The next morning, I went over to the judge's office for convening.

When I stepped in, he had some papers in his hand. It's like a legal paper for some time. He looked at me as I entered.

He said, where is your back line? And I said, I'm back. He knows all about it. They're up on the conviction.

He beat the end of the conviction. One of my best customers, legal customer, is a search and court clerk, a young lawyer. And he told someone, when Bulldog comes and tells me himself he's teaching God, I'll believe it.

I went and told him. He went to the Bible and preached the end of the conviction. He became a mighty preacher.

The doctors all agreed what kind of job he was doing. That Bible broke up the court. He had to close it down.

A juror of the same service is teaching God when he needed him. He just closed the court. So that was over.

He said, you know, are you ready to go to the penitentiary? I said, yes, please. I'm ready. He said, I got the witness for it.

It was how God had saved me. God must be. I was a new preacher before.

He said, you know what I happen to have in my hand when you walk in here? I said, I have no idea. He said, I have a petition here signed by the commonwealth attorney. You can call him perhaps the state attorney.

Commonwealth attorney, and by every warrant that has you indicted in this court, ask him to throw everything out and give you a clean slate and let you go your way. He told me I'd spend my life in the penitentiary. I've spent it preaching the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ up and down this land and country.

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