

February 2023

W.L. Thompson - Visionary Scholar and Dutiful Son

This is the story of what it means to love one's mother and to grasp God's vision, as echoed in the life of W.L. Thompson - husband to Edythe Thompson, and father of Bill Jr., Jim, and Don Thompson (who writes these words.)

First, an account of dad's love and devotion to his mother Gertrude Thompson, known as Grammy. Dad was the fourth of five children born to Grammy and her husband William Lester Thompson I. The birth order was Helen, Louise, Samuel, William (W.L.), and John. Tragically, their father died in the summer of 1935 when W.L. was 17 years old.

Dad hardly spoke to us of his father, probably because he lost him at such an early age and may not have known him very well. However, dad did say that his father died of lung cancer, having been a lifelong cigarette smoker. The dangers of tobacco were poorly understood in those days, long before the Surgeon General warned Americans of its impact. So, we know little of Grammy's husband, but we know a lot about Grammy. She lived her last several years with us in Aurora, IL and Reno, NV for six months of each year, the other six months spent with her daughter Louise in Colorado Springs. Grammy lived into her 90's and was a blessing to all of us.

Grammy raised five children, nearly by herself, working as a talented seamstress, dressmaker and owner of a Wedding Gown shop. W.L. was a devoted son, as evidenced by his composing a handwritten letter to her every week, from the time she lost her own husband in 1935 through the end of her life. Here are excerpts from his Mother's Day, 1974, letter:

Today is Mother's Day, 1974; I'm wearing a red carnation to tell everyone I meet today that my mother is living and that I love her:

You have been my mother for 56 years. It is not easy to think and feel like a mother when you aren't one. As I write to you and look back through the corridors of time, I see how your motherlove and your faith in God take on fresh significance for me. You are one of the great molders of my life, character and personality. You taught me reverence for the church and for the Bible. I can

remember you always had a Bible near enough to your chair so that you could reach out and pick it up you and share scripture verses at your command.

Your perseverance in the face of a variety of odds has built into me a disposition to stick to a job to see it through. Our move west in 1926 must have been traumatic. To take five children with your husband and travel by rail from Vincennes, IN to Chicago and then to Sacramento took real courage. Such a trip was a real undertaking. I remember the seven houses that we lived in near Folsom, CA in the span of 12 years, during the time surrounding the market crash of 1929 and the subsequent depression. I've never asked you what was behind those moves, but you never complained or criticized father.

I'll always be thankful for your persistence regarding Sunday school and church attendance. You were frequently too tired for church since you had to work 14 to 16 hours a day the other days of the week, but you always took us to church and were frequently there yourself.

This past week I watched the Pittsburgh Pirates play in Philadelphia and I kept my eyes on the pitcher. In fancy I saw myself in his shoes. I remember when you and dad discussed my interest in baseball. I'd been selected for the junior legion team. However, that team played its games at 9:00 AM on Sundays, and you thought Sunday school and church were more important than baseball. Dad kept saying "Oh, but you'll be proud to have a son in the big leagues someday." But your conviction won out. I'm so glad it did. No career or fame or money can replace the meaning of life that Jesus Christ has for me. Thank you for the firmness of your conviction!

The Great Depression and dad's early death at age 54 when I was seventeen placed the burden of four children on your shoulders. You persevered! There was little if any insurance and really no retirement. Social Security didn't exist then, so you just kept doing what you always did: you worked.

The floor of your fitting room was your dedicated pulpit. Hosts of women of high reputation as well as modest reputation put on garments that you made: formal gowns, beautiful suits, exquisite skirts and blouses to say nothing of coats for outside wear. While you fit them they talked of their life and their needs and you gave them a garment of righteousness, love and patience. Hundreds know you and love you because you exuded inner charm as well as outer grace. Your life has been a ministry of Christ, powerfully preaching God's gospel in both words and deeds.

On this Mother's Day I write to you with my love. Your life is a testament to God's will, deep faith and prayer. Your life is a sermon that you preach. Because of you I have seen a sermon, and I'd rather see one than hear one any day.

Now, let us turn to some milestones from the journey mom and dad took together for 40 years, before W.L. passed away in 1981.

- 1935 W.L.'s father, William L. Thompson I dies.
- 1936 W.L. graduates from high school in Sacramento.
- 1936 W.L. moves to Fresno to become a member of the civil engineering crew that built Highway 180, the road to King's Canyon National Park.
 - Dad's crew was rough, tough, and profane. He was the youngest one, so he was frequently teased. Dad told me of one particular incident. The crew would dump rocks and dirt into a large ditch as they paved the highway. One day, they asked dad to go down into the ditch to retrieve a lost canteen. But, there was no canteen. The crew had dropped a rattlesnake into the ditch as a practical joke. Dad found it, while avoiding the snake's bite. It terrified him and probably contributed to his decision to find a different career!
- 1937 W.L. enrolled at Taft Junior College. After one semester he decided to enter the ministry. So, he transferred to Northwest Christian College (NCC), in Eugene, Oregon.
- 1941 W.L. completed a Bachelor of Theology degree at NCC.
- 1941 Married Edythe Farr, whom he had met when he was serving as a student minister in Oakridge, Oregon, at a church where Edythe played piano and organ. Edythe worked as a junior high band director and music teacher in Oakridge, having recently completed her Bachelor of Music degree at the University of Oregon.
- 1942 W.L. earns a Bachelor of Arts degree in Classical Greek at the University of Oregon. The NCC President, Kendall Burke, who had taught W.L. at NCC, told him to complete his graduate work, promising that he could then return to teach Greek at NCC.
- 1942 The couple moves to Indianapolis so that W.L. can enroll at Butler School of Divinity.

- **1943 NCC President Kendall Burke dies – ending W.L.’s hope for a faculty post at NCC.**
- **1944 William Lester Thompson III is born in Indianapolis, IN.**
- **1946 W.L. earns a Bachelor of Divinity degree in Classical Honors.**
- **1946 He then earns a Master of Arts degree in Church Doctrine and Church History.**
- **1946 W.L. & Edythe move to the Bronx, New York. W.L. enrolls in Union Theological Seminary in order to complete a Ph.D. degree in Theology.**
- **1948 James Chester Thompson is born in the Bronx, NY.**
- **1948 Edythe did not like NYC. Quite an adjustment from growing up in southwest Oregon. So, they move to Lock Haven, PA. W.L. becomes the pastor of the First Church of Christ, Lock Haven.**
- **1952 Donald Mark Thompson is born in Lock Haven, PA.**
- **1957 They leave Lock Haven, moving to Aurora, IL where dad serves as the Executive Director of the Christian Missionary Fellowship, helping raise funds for the organization to send missionaries worldwide.**
- **1966 W.L. earns the Doctor of Sacred Theology degree from Milligan College.**
- **1968 W.L. transitions to the Executive Director position of the European Evangelistic Society (EES), helping raise money for American students to do doctoral work in theology at the University of Tübingen, Germany.**
- **1967 through 1981 W.L. and Edythe continue to work for EES while also serving as interim pastor in Reno, NV and Pittsburgh, PA before returning to Aurora in the late 70’s.**
- **1981 Dad dies of Leukemia at age 63, ending their marriage of 40 years.**

Vivid Memories

- **Dad wore a tie (clip-on) most every day.**
- **While living in Pittsburgh, before the days of left turn arrows at traffic lights, Dad liked to turn left as soon as the light turned green, thereby beating oncoming traffic – we called this “Pulling a Pittsburgh”.**
- **Dad would frequently come to the kitchen to get a midnight snack: shredded wheat with milk and sugar.**

- Dad had connections with a Chevrolet dealer in Indianapolis who donated a new Chevy to us every 2-3 years. The car dealer was a member of John Greenlee's congregation and happily made this donation to help dad's ministry.
- One time, the Chevy gift was a *Chevy II* which was a bit sportier than the usual Chevy models. One of us would borrow the car for a date, and then disconnect the odometer cable to hide how many miles were piled up. It worked well until dad noticed that the previously filled gas tank was now half full, after only traveling "3-4 miles".
- WL advice on driving was:
 - Never back up any more than you absolutely have to. It is better that you drive forward.
- WLT advice on Careers and one's Pride & Quality of Workmanship:
 - If you end up being a Ditch Digger, make sure that the walls of the ditch are plumb, and the floor is level.
- W.L. loved loved to travel, worldwide – from Brazil to India to Germany to Ethiopia to Japan.
- He knew hundreds of pastors and churches around the world.
- Dad was not interested in \$ for himself. His fundraising efforts had to pay his salary and he always paid himself last.
- By necessity, W.L. and Edythe were frugal. Staying in a motel almost never happened. Even more rare was to get a room at a motel that had a swimming pool.
- My father never lost his cool. Never yelled. Never used profanity.
- Neither Mom nor Dad ever drank.
- Dad was a born athlete – he played golf regularly and shot in the low 80's. He could beat anyone in tennis, ping pong, racquetball or handball.
- Dad would never allow an American flag in the church sanctuary. He said: "We are part of the church universal, not the American church."
- Dad loved Dairy Queen cones, A & W root beer, and apple pie alamode.

W.L. and Edythe were followers of Jesus who lived lives of service and simplicity. They loved each other and they loved us. Their lives were gifts to all they knew, that flowed from God's love. Thank you, Lord for our parents.