

Dr. Erwin Lutzer – A Personal Testimony

Interview with Dr. John Ankerberg

Dr. John Ankerberg: I'm talking with Dr. Erwin Lutzer, Pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. I want him just to share with you how God has worked in his life. The reason I want you to hear this, many of you that are young people, you say, "How in the world does a guy ever get to be pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago? How does it come about?" It is very interesting how God has brought these things around and how God has led Erwin and has been instrumental in his life. And God can be instrumental in your life. And I want him to share this with you. I think it's just a hoot listening to what he's going to say, and besides that, many of you, you don't know this information, so, Erwin, I'm just fascinated. Talk about your parents, where they came from and how they got together.

Dr. Erwin Lutzer: John, I'm going to make this brief but I think this is fascinating. They were born in the Ukraine. They were German-speaking people but in the Ukraine. Now, when World War I broke out in 1914, the Russian government feared that the Germans within its borders might mutiny and side with Germany, so they made them refugees. My mother's family went to Siberia – a lot of suffering, children dying, the whole bit. My father's family went to Afghanistan. His mother, my grandmother, died in Kabul, the city that is on the news regarding all of the things that have happened in Afghanistan. And she was just put in a mass grave with other women because so many people died. My father was 14. He threw himself across the bed and wept. Thankfully, his father continued to live, my grandfather, whom I never met; but nonetheless, he then and his brothers came back to where they were. After World War I was over, in 1918, my father comes to Canada because he has a relative there. He comes alone. He cries the whole way. I mean, he was so lonely. My mother and her sister come. One is 21 and the other is 22 years old. And my mother wants to know how to be "born again," so she attends this little church a half mile from where she worked, hears the Gospel and is gloriously converted.

My father is in that church, too, through God's providence. She hears him pray. In those days the men prayed on one side of the church, the women on the other. My father said to a friend, "Now, if you were me, which of these sisters would you marry?"

And the man said to my dad, "I would take Wanda." So he walks my mother, Wanda, home a half mile – this is their first date – and asks whether or not she would marry him. And she said, "Well, I have to think about it." But within two and one

half weeks they were married.

Now, they had no courses on how to raise children; no James Dobson. They just believed that you prayed, you worked hard, you taught your children to fear God and to hate sin, and that was the context.

All right, they have five children – I happened to be the last. In our home we read the Bible all the time, that is to say, in German they'd read it to us. We got on our knees every morning right after breakfast and prayed. We had to go to school, of course, and so forth with a horse and buggy and with a sleigh in the winter. I was born in a little townhouse – my mother never even went to the hospital – about five miles from a little town of about 75 people.

Now, here's the remarkable thing. At the age of six or seven, I would come home from the church and impersonate the pastor because even though there were no preachers on either side in my family, there was something within me that would stir. It was as if for this cause came I into the world, you know, this desire to preach. That's why I became so enamored with Billy Graham.

Ankerberg: So at six years of age you're practicing being the preacher.

Lutzer: Well, I don't want to exaggerate. Maybe I was seven or eight, but I remember I was mighty young. And I would come and I'd go into my room and I'd open a hymnal because I was preacher and the song leader, and I would preach. And then when Billy was rising to fame in the early 50s, of course I latched onto him. And as a teenager, my generation of teenagers was into Elvis Presley, and I, of course, was "into" Billy Graham. One day I was with him in the study, and I said to him, "Billy, all my life I've wanted to tell you something."

He said, "What could that be?"

I said, "I just want you to know, Billy, that I was into you as a teenager. I read your biography, and you'll never know how much you've meant to me." And Billy Graham pursed his lips and he said, "Oh, that's too bad." After all that, you know. And he said, "Nobody should ever follow me." He said, "I'm such an unworthy servant of Christ, nobody should follow me." Typical humility of Billy Graham.

But, nonetheless, okay, I'm a teenager and for some strange reason I want to preach. I go to a Christian high school and most of the students went to the Bible school that's on the same campus. I go to fill out my application to go to that Bible school, and God said, "No." I never wrote my name on the application, even though I was promised a scholarship, because a friend of mine was going to Winnipeg Bible College and he said, "Go with me."

Well, I wanted to stay with my friends, but I went to Winnipeg Bible College, and the first week I cried my eyes out and wanted to go back and the whole bit. Winnipeg Bible College! Nobody had heard of it in those days. Sixty students, in total. Why did God lead me there? In my third year a man by the name of Elmer Towns came and Elmer Towns was a very strong leader and an enthusiastic teacher. And he said, "Erwin, you should go to Dallas Seminary." Never heard of Dallas Seminary; I mean, I was brought up on a farm milking cows. And because of his influence and because of a letter he wrote to the seminary, they let me in.

There at Dallas Seminary I met my wife. We met in a church. I asked her to the Senior Banquet and she was dating someone else and at that time, I was dating someone else. And yet it didn't work out for me to take the one I was dating, and her man that she was dating was somewhere else – and we joked about having our honeymoon in Colorado. Isn't that a hoot? You know what? We got married and we had our honeymoon in Colorado because that relationship she was in didn't work out, mine didn't work out, and God brought us together.

Ankerberg: And she's a terrific gal, Rebecca, I'll tell you.

Lutzer: She really is. She really is. And then, we went to Canada; and then I was going to come to the United States here to go to school at a university, Drew University, way on the East Coast, and I never got out of Chicago. I came into Chicago because of a summer school I was attending and I stayed here. God would not let me go to Drew. I had no reason to know why, but it's just as if God said, "This is the place you're to be."

So I went to Loyola University where I studied philosophy, became the pastor of Edgewater Baptist Church which was wonderful, and still trying to figure out, now, exactly why did God have me here in Chicago.

And now we come to Moody Church. All right, so I resign Edgewater Baptist Church the last Sunday of April 1977, and I'm going to teach at Moody Bible Institute in the fall, which I did, and in between time, work on a dissertation for Loyola University where I was working on a Ph.D. in Philosophy – which incidentally, I never did write the dissertation because of Moody Church. That's the story I'm coming to.

But anyway, we wake up Sunday morning in April, the first Sunday in April, and we have no church to go to. Rebecca, God bless her, she wants to go to Moody Church; I wanted to go to Circle Church, which was in Chicago at that time. Now, John, please don't tell anyone this – this is just between us, all right? But God often leads me through my wife. Now, whether it's supposed to be that way or not, I don't know. But that's the way God is. She said, "No, let's go to Moody Church."

I said, "Okay. Let's go down to Moody." We're going down and she says to me along the way, "You know, it would be so nice to be able to sit with you because as long as you're a pastor, I can never sit with you because you're on the platform." All right, we have only two children at that time, so I drop her off. You know how difficult parking was that time. It's much better now, but in those days parking was as tight as a drum at Moody Church. I said, "I will make sure to meet you in the lobby but I'll go park the car."

Lo and behold, John, I see somebody walking across LaSalle Street. He's fidgeting in his pockets, getting his keys. I said, "You know, that guy's pulling out." Sure enough, he pulled out; I backed in. I walk into the lobby of the church. I find Rebecca and she again says, "Hey, great. We can sit together." Warren Wiersbe, who was the pastor at that time, whom I had come to know, is walking past me in the lobby. He's got his topcoat on. He does not see me but I see him. I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Warren, what you are you doing here? It's ten minutes before the morning service."

He said, "Erwin Lutzer. I'm sick. I'm on my way home. Will you preach for me this morning?"

Ankerberg: Poor Rebecca died!

Lutzer: So I turned to her and I said, "Honey, is it okay if I preach at Moody Church this morning?" And she, of course, said, "Sure." So I went to the back, I took an envelope, and I wrote down an outline of a message I had preached previously, obviously, on the renewing of the mind based on Psalm 1. And John, this is incredible, but when I stood in the pulpit, half seriously, perhaps also half kidding, something within me said, "If they ever call you, say, 'Yes.'" All right, I preached that morning. Everybody says, "Who's this guy who preached without any preparation and so forth?"

We never did get to Circle Church. We began to attend Moody Church. I taught a Sunday School class. Whenever Wiersbe was gone, he always asked me to fill in, and so the people got used to my preaching.

Then, in the summer of 1978, Pastor Wiersbe resigned from Moody Church and eventually then took "Back to the Bible." And now the question was, "Who would be the pastor?" So they asked me to be the interim and the agreement was this: that I would preach whenever they did not have a candidate, and I was very happy to do that. At that time Rebecca was wondering whether or not I should become the pastor because she didn't quite know what all that meant, so I simply encouraged the committee to find a pastor. And I said, "Take as much time as you want to."

Now, John, here's the remarkable thing. I remember saying to Rebecca in those days that I will become the pastor of Moody Church. This was not a prideful statement. In fact, I was scared.

Ankerberg: It was just something that God showed you.

Lutzer: It was scary. I said, "I will become the pastor of Moody Church" and I remember saying to her one time that "It is as just as certain as the end result of a geometric theorem." What I meant was, you know in geometry if you have this angle and this angle, this one follows necessarily. I just saw the handwriting on the wall. I saw this coming. So after a year and a half of looking for a pastor, even people in the congregation began to speak to the committee and said, "Don't you realize, God has brought us a pastor?"

And then the committee said, "Okay. Now we're serious. Are you willing to talk?"

And I said, "Yes. Now we're willing to talk." So I became the pastor on January 1, 1980, which has been some time ago. My whole life, John, has been a life of providences.

Let me give you one other illustration and then we can talk about some of the lessons of God's leadership. I didn't know I could write, but what happened was, when I was here in Chicago in 1969, attending the summer school, I wrote a dissertation on Situation Ethics. Do you remember Joseph Fletcher who taught Situation Ethics?

Ankerberg: Yes. I remember when you went up against one of our professors on

that topic and got into that conversation.

Lutzer: Right. All right, now, what happened was, I took this dissertation that I wrote – it was about 60 pages – and what do you do with things like that? You put it in a file folder or you put it in your desk drawer and you forget about it. Right? Then I was attending Trinity Seminary, attending only one class. It was by John Warwick Montgomery, someone that you and I know, and Montgomery loved to debate people and he said, “I am going to be debating Joseph Fletcher in California,” he told us. I went up to him later...I was scared, you know. Here’s this Dr. Montgomery and remember, I’m just a farm boy from Saskatchewan, Canada, right? So I said to him, “You know, I wrote a dissertation on Joseph Fletcher.” He said, “Well, bring it to me.” So I brought it to him and he read it on the plane on the way to California. He used it in the debate. And I remember when the debate was typed up and printed out, there was a footnote to me. Something like on page 83 or something. I thought, “Wow!” But I remember Montgomery came back and he looked over the classroom and said, “Erwin Lutzer, who are you? Where are you sitting?” He said, “You know, what you wrote is so good that it should be published.”

Ankerberg: You could die and go right to heaven!

Lutzer: I thought angels would carry me out of the room, John. This was coming from someone I respected and he was saying I wrote something worthy of being published! So I gave it to Moody Press and they said, “Well, you have to re-write it. You have to add to it. You have to tweak it. And in those days, I didn’t know how to type. It was all done by hand; the first 10 or 12 of my books – all written by hand.

Ankerberg: Goodness!

Lutzer: This many pages, every other line, you know, on foolscap. And so I re-wrote it; it became my first book, **The Morality Gap**. And you know, I was hooked. Ever since that time, you know, of course, I’ve been writing. I don’t know, it’s more than 20 books or whatever, and I think I still have a few more in me if God grants me the ability to live. And everything is dependent upon God. But here’s the thing, John. If it wasn’t for John Montgomery, giving me that word of encouragement, do you know what I think? I think that that dissertation would still be in my desk drawer. But it was another providence in God’s leadership.

I remember when I was at Winnipeg Bible College, there was a young woman there that I was interested in, and I remember getting on my knees and saying, “God, is this the right one or isn’t it?” And I’ll tell you, it was just as if God said, “No.” I said, “All right, that settles it for me.” And then in Dallas, I dated someone and that turned out to be a difficult experience. That’s a whole different experience, so all of my stories aren’t sweetness and light, you know. Before I dated Rebecca and before we were married, the relationship that I had was a very, very painful one because I thought that God was in it and yet clearly He wasn’t. I mean, that’s a whole story that I sometimes share with young people. But the simple fact is that at the end of the day, what is it? Why is it that God has blessed me? Let me underline: it has nothing to do with me.

Let me tell you this story. This past summer – and this interview is taking place in

the year 2003, so we're talking about 2002 – this past summer my father turned 100 years old. My mother is 94 and they're still, at this point, in good health in the sense that I talk with them; they go for a walk every day – they take their canes and walk every day. They are a very cute and godly couple.

But here's the thing. At their 70th anniversary, I said to my mother, I said, "Mother, do you actually know the names of all of your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren – you know, all these kids running around?" She said, "Oh, yes, Erwin. I have a prayer list," and she said, "I mention their names to our Heavenly Father every single day." Is it any wonder that I have two sisters and both of them were missionaries – one in Africa more than 30 years, the other, she and her husband were in Mexico with Wycliffe Bible Translators? And you know, my parents often prayed. They said, "When we came from the Ukraine," – they never spoke English too well and, of course, they taught themselves English; they basically taught themselves how to read, they read both in German and in English – but they said, "We often prayed that since we don't know the language well enough to share the Gospel, that our children might be able to share the Gospel."

Well, they've had two missionaries and their youngest child also has had the opportunity of sharing the Gospel on your program, in many different pulpits, and at Moody Church these many years. It's a "God thing," John.

One further word because you said let's encourage the teenagers out there. They may said, "Oh, yes, well, that's Pastor Lutzer. Look at the books he has written. Look at the sermons he has preached" and so forth. I believe, with all of my heart, that I am very ordinary. Sometimes I'm sitting at my computer writing or preparing a message and I don't know what the next paragraph should be. I just call on God and say, "God, I don't know what to say. Help me." And God helps me. And John, I believe that I have done things beyond my ability, even beyond my intelligence, because of the prayers of God's people and because God, in His grace, has granted me certain gifts, and these are the kinds of gifts He has been pleased to use. Why God would take a boy born five miles from a town of 75 people out in the Canadian winter, the Canadian prairie, and give him the opportunity to be led here to the city of Chicago and be the pastor of Moody Church staggers my imagination. Do we have time for a footnote?

Ankerberg: Yes.

Lutzer: My mother's father was in the city of Chicago before World War I. We're talking 1913. His intention was to bring his entire family here. All right, World War I breaks out – or at least he's hearing about war. He takes a ship back to be with his family; and what an awesome providence that was because it was the last ship he could have taken. All other ships afterwards were used only for war and material. So he's able to be with my mother when they go to Siberia, as I mentioned, which was very important because he was able to keep the family together and make bread and everything. But when he was in Chicago that year, he wrote back and said, "You know, the buildings in Chicago" – now this is 1913 – "the buildings in Chicago are so big that God must have built them." But you know, I've often thought, I bet you it

never once crossed his mind that someday he would have a grandson who would be a pastor in the city of Chicago.

But if you begin to put all the pieces together, John, I want to end with this note. It is not about me; it is not about what I've been able to accomplish. It is wholly and totally a "God thing." And I've never gotten over the wonder because there are times when I say, "God, why did you choose the most unlikely person to teach the Word and to have positions of responsibility as God has given to me?" Totally the glory goes to Him. And I'd say to the teenager and the young person watching, don't ever think that somehow I was born with all these wonderful abilities. This has been the result of years of training, and hard work, and agony at times, and sweat and tears and blood, and tons of mistakes, and occasionally doing something right, and learning from my mistakes and going on. So carry on. You never know what God has just around the bend. You know something, John? We can't see around corners, but God can.

Ankerberg: Erwin, thank you for sharing all of that with us and, folks, I just wanted you to hear it. I think that there are so many things in Erwin's own testimony of what God has done in his life that speak to all of us, so I just wanted you to hear it.