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THE MIDDLE EAST





Born: October 12, 1971, Downey, California

Nationality: American

Graduated from Moody: 2000

Country of Service: Lebanon

Mission: OM/Christian & Missionary Alliance

Ministry: Clinic worker

Martyrdom: 2002, age 31, Sidon

Bonnie Penner Witherrall

“Help me to remember these four words: ‘This is My doing’”

Bonnie is the latest, but almost certainly not to be the final, martyr of Moody Bible Institute. She was an energetic, full-of-life, risk-taking woman who loved God and loved showing His love to the unloved. But Bonnie was more than a martyr. She was a living example of how God can take a young life and mold it over time into one fully surrendered to Him, making it a delight to Himself and to others.

Bonnie walked and talked with God. Not that she was perfect, as her husband, Gary, would attest. She was a woman who over time learned to commune with God. She recorded her conversations with Him in a journal. Through it they talked back and forth with each other—like God desires all His children to do.

Total Abandon

Bonnie may well have been talking to God on that fateful November 2002 morning as she walked from her seaside apartment to the prenatal clinic where she cared for disadvantaged pregnant women. She could have been so caught up with God’s presence that she was unaware of being followed by a gunman who was intent on taking her life.

Arriving at her destination, she stepped up to the entrance, turned a key, and gained entry to the small Christian complex that housed a chapel and clinic. This Christian outpost was centered in the midst of an overwhelmingly Muslim majority population and served the disadvantaged. Displaced, expectant Palestinian mothers especially took advantage of the clinic’s prenatal services. Loving care rarely found anywhere else, but provided by Bonnie along with two other staff members, drew these women to the clinic.

Bonnie and Gary knew they were living and ministering in a cutting-edge, high-risk corner of God's harvest field. They lived next to an area so fanatical and violent that it was off-limits even to the local police. Their surroundings were a stark contrast from where they had come.

Two years earlier they had chosen to leave their comfortable American lifestyle in Portland, Oregon, to minister on the bleeding edge of humanity where nothing was certain except violence and great spiritual need. They did not go in ignorance. They knew the risk and understood the potential cost, but went anyway. They were certain God had called them there. They were totally abandoned to His will.¹

Bonnie now passed along the side of the chapel and then climbed a set of stairs leading to the second-floor clinic. Turning a second key, she entered the clinic's main room. It was then that she realized someone was behind her. As she turned to greet the person she expected to be her first patient of the day, three shots rang out. Bullets fired at point-blank range struck her squarely in the head. Instantly her body fell to the floor. Streams of blood flowed from her wounds. Her spirit soared into her Savior's presence. She was now with her closest Friend.

Bonnie had not always experienced an intimate walk with God. Like a blossoming flower, her relationship with God was one that developed and grew over time until reaching full bloom.

Growing Up in the Northwest

Born in southern California, she was raised in Vancouver, Washington, where her father worked for an oil company and delighted in raising his family on a quaint hillside farm. In this idyllic setting Bonnie Penner grew up riding horses, walking fields, watching stars,

and sledding across the frozen pond. In this environment she developed into a strong-spirited girl who did not shy away from adventure.

Blessed with loving parents, she learned early about God's provision of a Savior. One Sunday morning after church when Bonnie was ten years old, her mother led as she placed her trust in Christ.

However, Bonnie was a strong-willed child, and there were many times as a teenager when her willfulness got her into trouble. She was sensitive enough toward the feelings of others, though, that if she knew she had hurt or offended someone, she would ask forgiveness and make things right. She went through emotional highs and lows and spiritual ups and downs, but was learning to let God have His way. God's molding was refining her stubborn, willful character.

Preparation and Life Partner

Following high school Bonnie placed herself in another of God's molds—training at the Moody Bible Institute. A few months of study with Torchbearers in southern Germany helped her gain a deeper appreciation for God and His Word. Moody became her school of choice for further learning and character shaping.

Not all was smooth sailing at Moody. While there she experienced struggles with doubt and rebellion that brought her close to jettisoning her relationship with God altogether.

In the end, though the process was excruciating, God won her heart. Totally surrendered from that point on, she never questioned God's plan for her and His presence in her life.

It was then that she began her regular intimate times with God:

Father, I want most of all to be completely surrendered to You. Lord, more than anything I need Your fellowship . . . If there is something in my life that is keeping me from experiencing You in a deeper way, forgive

*me. I need You. Lord, create in me a clean heart. Reveal to me even now where I need to change to be more like You!*²

In a beautiful wedding, Bonnie was married to classmate Gary Witherall in 1997. Despite a happy marriage and successful professional careers in Portland for both of them over the next three years, the mission-trained couple was feeling dissatisfied and out of place. They had it all—money, cars, a house—but keenly felt the emptiness of the secular mold into which the world had squeezed them. Surely God had more in store for them than this.

They began searching out ministry possibilities, but they became frustrated over several overseas ministry options they pursued that never panned out. Finally one day while on her knees pleading with God, Bonnie distinctly felt Him say to her, *I have not called you to a place; I have called you to Myself.*³ That realization made all the difference in the world. She and Gary were now completely surrendered to whatever possibility God had for them. Bonnie could now write in her journal:

*I don't know what God has for us, but I want to be available to go. . . . I feel like God has me blindfolded and is leading me along a path I don't quite understand. But I will follow Him.*⁴

Sidon, Lebanon

Not long afterward, Bonnie and Gary became convinced that God was pointing them to Sidon, Lebanon. In obedience, they quit their jobs, sold their possessions, packed their bags, said their good-byes, and were off to that Mediterranean port city. Operation Mobilization in partnership with the Christian and Missionary Alliance had a strategic ministry waiting for them:

*Lord, here we are in the Middle East. How many people will die in this city of Sidon today without knowing You? How can I worry about my life or Gary's life when tens of thousands of people may die and face eternal damnation today? Lord, my life is already hidden with You. I know You. I have the truth. There is nothing they can take from me!*⁵

In September 2001 Bonnie started working at the prenatal clinic. She struggled with God about her new job and her long desire to have her own baby.

*Dear Lord, I want to first of all thank You for helping me yesterday at the clinic. I was nervous because it was my first day, but I thank You because You gave me the courage and the strength to do it! God, I just want to surrender all my plans to You today. I want to give You the complete, utter control in my life. I want to lift You high above all else.*⁶

Five months later, Bonnie's walk with the Lord and fellowship with Him was deepening.

Still wrestling with the disappointment of not being pregnant, Bonnie could still say to Him:

*God, You are the Lord of our circumstances. We did not come to Lebanon by accident—we are exactly where You meant for us to be. Lord, I want to worship You in the place where You've put me today. Help me to remember these four words: "This is My doing."*⁷

Then as summer came, Bonnie radiantly announced to Gary that she was pregnant! Her heart was filled with inexpressible joy. What she had waited for so long was now to be a reality. She was going to have a baby! Bonnie began buying baby clothes and making all those preparations expectant mothers do before their child arrives. Since

she worked at a prenatal clinic, she would compare notes about body changes and morning sickness with the others.

Disappointment and Death

But then gladness turned to sudden sadness when in August her dreams were dashed with a miscarriage. Divine molding, though painful, continued to do its work. That devastating disappointment brought the ever-trusting Bonnie into deeper fellowship with her God:

God, I know that You love me and I know that everything that happens in our lives is for our good. God, You alone know how much I wanted this baby. Thank You, Lord, that Your ways are perfect and that You love and care for me so much. God, I want to trust You again for another child. God, I want Your will to be accomplished in my life, not my own. It still hurts, God, not to have this baby, but I know it was the best for Gary and me. I want to thank You for Your mercy and kindness. Even though at the time I don't recognize it as Your mercy, I know You love us and the last thing You want to do is hurt us. God, help me to trust You. Help me to draw close to You during this time.⁸

At a time when many would have cracked, questioned, quit, or turned their backs on God, Bonnie drew ever closer to her intimate friend. He alone understood and could bring comfort.

Two months later, just days before her life was taken, Bonnie reflected on the importance of the unconditional love she was asked to give day after day at the clinic. She reminds all who would serve God by serving the poor and the weak and the oppressed with the thought:

Jesus says to us that when we give a cup of water to “the least of these” we do it unto Him. Every time someone at the clinic asks me for a cup of water I give it to them, knowing I’m giving it to someone Jesus loves and cares for.⁹

Bonnie died on that cold cement floor in a pool of blood while giving that cup of love.

Lasting Impact

Since Bonnie’s death, Gary has been speaking powerfully throughout North America and Europe. He is seeking one thousand students who will become missionaries—one thousand who will fill Bonnie’s shoes. After speaking in two chapel services at Moody in December 2002, dozens of students packed the front of Torrey-Gray auditorium to surrender themselves anew to Christ and His cause. At Nyack College in February 2003, the stage set up in Bowman Gym became an altar flooded with students surrendering themselves to devotion and service to Christ. This same kind of impact is being repeated again and again as Gary continues to speak in schools, churches, and youth groups, telling Bonnie’s story.

To those who would ponder her selfless example, Bonnie has left a lasting challenge from her journal:

Dear Jesus, Today I read in Your Word about loving our enemies. God, we have so many enemies these days. . . . In Romans 12 You tell us not to repay anyone evil for evil, but rather to be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. To live at peace with all men.¹⁰

1. www.fisherofmen.net, "A Tribute to Bonnie Witherall" by Greg Kernaghan.
2. Gary Witherall, *Total Abandon*, 41.
3. *Ibid.*, 54.
4. *Ibid.*, 55.
5. *Ibid.*, 69.
6. *Ibid.*, 73.
7. *Ibid.*, 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 85.
9. *Ibid.*, 88.
10. *Ibid.*, 119.