

What You Need to Know about David Wilkerson's 'Urgent Message'

How people are responding to his warning of riots, fires, and economic collapse in NYC.

Ted Olsen | posted 3/16/2009 12:08PM

What did David Wilkerson say that got so many people talking?

On March 7, evangelist David Wilkerson posted an ["urgent message"](#) to his [blog](#), ministry website, and mailing list. It began:

I am compelled by the Holy Spirit to send out an urgent message to all on our mailing list, and to friends and to bishops we have met all over the world.

AN EARTH-SHATTERING CALAMITY IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN. IT IS GOING TO BE SO FRIGHTENING, WE ARE ALL GOING TO TREMBLE — EVEN THE GODLIEST AMONG US.

For ten years I have been warning about a thousand fires coming to New York City. It will engulf the whole megaplex, including areas of New Jersey and Connecticut. Major cities all across America will experience riots and blazing fires — such as we saw in Watts, Los Angeles, years ago.

There will be riots and fires in cities worldwide. There will be looting — including Times Square, New York City. What we are experiencing now is not a recession, not even a depression. We are under God's wrath.

Aren't such prophecies relatively common online?

Prophetic words in general are not very rare. For example, you can subscribe to *Charisma* magazine's ["Prophetic Insight"](#) newsletter to get the latest messages from those who say they have a message for the church directly from the Lord. The newsletter tends more toward the "words of encouragement" prophecies than "end times" parsing, though you can find lots of those newsletters online, too.

Are most of the other prophecy newsletters as calamitous?

Actually, *Charisma's* latest "Prophetic Insight" seems to be a response of sorts to Wilkerson. [Contra the doom-and-gloomers](#), and despite my own emotional pull to hit the panic button, America will not collapse economically or politically," wrote R. Loren Sandford, pastor of New Song Fellowship in Denver. "We are not under judgment. Destruction is not just over the horizon."

If prophecy is so common online, why is this getting so much attention?

Wilkerson has more credibility and name recognition than many other online prophets. He is the author of *The Cross and the Switchblade*, one of the most popular books in evangelical history. (It ranked #32 in *Christianity Today's* list of ["Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals"](#)) His Teen Challenge ministry is very prominent in discussions of drug treatment and social service partnerships between church and government. And Times Square Church, which he founded, reportedly draws 8,000 people weekly and is known for its many social service ministries.

Still, Wilkerson's message probably wouldn't have received as much notice without the [Drudge Report](#) prominently promoting it at the top of its page under the headline: "Famed pastor predicts imminent catastrophe."

What does Wilkerson say people should do about his message?

There's "no need to hide. This is God's righteous work," he said. But he added, "I give you a practical word I received for my own direction. If possible lay in store a thirty-day supply of non-perishable food, toiletries, and other essentials. In major cities, grocery stores are emptied in an hour at the sign of an impending disaster."

Doesn't that sound like the warnings about Y2K that some Christian groups were giving in 1999?

Many critics think so. "It does not resonate with my spirit when he claims that God told him to 'lay in store a thirty-day supply of non-perishable food, toiletries and other essentials' because when disaster comes 'grocery stores are emptied in an hour,'" [John Piper](#) wrote on his blog. "God might have said this. But it doesn't smell authentic to me. Too prudential. Too reminiscent of the embarrassing Y2K excesses. ... [M]y own effort to be discerning says: Stick with the Bible, David. It is scary enough. And it is absolutely true. And your credibility will never fall."

Prison Fellowship's [Roberto Rivera](#) was also reminded of Y2K to such a degree that he has dismissed Wilkerson's comments as (borrowing from philosopher Jeremy Bentham) "simple nonsense ... rhetorical nonsense — nonsense upon stilts." "Check your thorazine, because you're probably hallucinating," Rivera wrote.

How has Wilkerson responded?

He posted a [follow-up note](#) on his blog: "I can only answer by sharing what the Holy Spirit is speaking to my own heart and what I am to do. I shared that I was led in a practical way to lay aside a month's supply of food — because I have witnessed the panic in the wake of terrorism. That has to be a personal word for every individual."

Wilkerson's son, Gary, says it sounds less like Y2K to him than pastoral advice resonant with the Bible: "Joseph heard God say to store up food for the season to come (Genesis 41). Moses heard God say to receive gifts from the Egyptians for their journey (Exodus 12). We as well can hear from God for our situation."

Are mainstream media paying attention?

So far coverage has been very low-key. Tampa's [WFTS](#) ran a piece essentially just quoting a few excerpts from Wilkerson's original blog post. Hartford, Connecticut's [WVIT](#), meanwhile, openly mocked Wilkerson: "Perhaps Wilkerson has stock in some company that makes toilet paper and this is his plan to replenish his 401k," wrote LeAnne Gendreau. "Anyone who cannot sleep at night knows you can find Bible thumping doomsdayers on television." Illustrating the photo is a goblin-looking creature in front of a bonfire.

Does anyone agree with him?

He seems to have a number of supporters in various blog comment boxes. Among the more prominent defenders (of sorts) is Focus on the Family's [Ted Slater](#). "I honestly don't know what to think of Wilkerson's vision," he said. But regardless of "earth-shattering calamity," Wilkerson's advice just seems "fairly reasonable. For example, the U.S. government recommends that we keep several days' worth of food and water on hand, in case of emergencies. And it's always the right time to place your faith in the Lord."

Are there critiques other than the echoes of Y2K?

Several online critics are pointing to an Internet list of visions and prophecies Wilkerson has had that [have not come true](#). Among them: a prophecy that the stock market would crash in 2000, and a 1994 statement that "I sense in my spirit that there will be no more so-called gospel television networks. They will all fall into bankruptcy and absolute ruin."

But even the author of the now widely circulated critique credits Wilkerson's humility. "In prayer, I have told the Lord I am ready at any time to confess I am wrong — that I must have spoken from my own fears or that I have spoken unadvisedly," Wilkerson said after the market climbed in 2000. "Recently, when the market reached record highs, I wondered if those calling me a false prophet were right."

So should we listen to Wilkerson?

Not surprisingly, it depends on whom you ask.

"Wilkerson is not like the Old Testament prophets who spoke, 'Thus says the LORD,' " pastor [Dave Watson](#) wrote on his blog. "If anything, he is like those of whom Paul says 'for we know in part and we prophecy in part' and 'we see in a mirror dimly' (1 Corinthians 13:9-12) 1 Corinthians 14:29 says 'let two or three prophets speak and let the others judge.' "

Piper, meanwhile, is concerned that Wilkerson is not handling Scripture carefully. Wilkerson's warning quotes Psalm 11:4 this way: "He fixed his eyes on the Lord on his throne in heaven — his eyes beholding, his eyelids testing the sons of men." Piper responded: "This does not have the feel of authority to me because what Psalm 11:4 really says is: 'The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man.'"

Dallas Morning News columnist and Beliefnet blogger [Rod Dreher](#), meanwhile, says Wilkerson's comments create a real dilemma for Christians who believe that prophecy is real. "Personally, I don't take it seriously, but I will note that a friend in NYC who used to go to Times Square Church said that in the three months before 9/11, people in the church were constantly praying for the city because they had a sense that something terrible was about to happen," he wrote. "The question is, how do you know when to take a particular prophecy seriously, and how do you know when to disregard it? History is replete with prophets whose predictions amounted to nothing."

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