



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Everyday Heroes Using 'Sight & Sound Theatres' to Proclaim the Good News – Part 1

Guest(s): Glenn and Shirley Eshelman

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the broadcast ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and today we're bringing you an extraordinary story that began with five tubes of oil paint and two paintbrushes on a Pennsylvania dairy farm. Our guests today are Glenn and Shirley Eshelman, the remarkable couple behind Sight & Sound Theatres in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and also Branson, Missouri. Glenn was a dairy farmer with an artist's heart. While Shirley brought her business acumen to support his creative vision. Together, they built something that now reaches millions with the gospel. Their journey reminds us that when we place our gifts, no matter the size in God's hands, He can multiply them beyond our wildest dreams. Now the Eshelmans were dear friends of the Dobson family and they sat down for this interview just shortly before Dr. James Dobson went home to be in glory. Here now is our own Gary Bauer with our special guests on today's edition of Family Talk.

Gary Bauer: Hi, welcome to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Gary Bauer, senior vice president of public policy here at JDPI, and I'm also the host of the Defending Faith, family and Freedom podcast. On today's program, we're going to introduce you to a remarkable couple, the husband and wife team behind one of the most incredible theatrical ministries in the United States. If you have ever been to a Sight & Sound Theatre show in either Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where it started, or Branson, Missouri, you know what an amazing experience it is. Bible stories are brought to life by a cast of hundreds on a massive stage, and it's just unbelievable family entertainment, and we all know how hard that is these days, but no matter how incredible this is, it's hard to remember or it's hard to really even imagine that it all started with humble beginnings.

God led a Pennsylvania dairy farmer who took photos of landscapes. He loved the beauty of nature, and God led that man and his wonderful wife to build a multimedia experience that is so unique that there really is nothing else that compares to it. Glenn and Shirley Eshelman are the husband and wife duo behind the whole Sight & Sound Theatre experience. They're dear friends of Dr. Dobson and Shirley. They've watched their little slideshow ministry that started

48 years ago grow into a multimedia powerhouse that now includes television as well as major motion pictures. They are truly everyday heroes of the faith. It's our pleasure to have them join us here today to ask them to share their story with us. The Eshelman are the parents of four children, the grandparents of 16. They also have 15 great-grandchildren as well. Glenn and Shirley, it's wonderful to have you with us today on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Glenn Eshelman: Thank you, Gary. It's an honor to be with you today. What a pleasure to be able to share our story on Family Talk to the world.

Gary Bauer: Well, it's a wonderful story. Now, of course, we're all about family at Family Talks, so Shirley, how did you and Glen meet and end up starting your family?

Shirley Eshelman: Well, when we first met, I actually was with a friend of Glenn's and we were double dating. He had another girl, I was with his friend, and so we got to know each other that evening and I never expected that we might not ever see each other again. But a number of weeks after that, we both grew up in the Church of the Brethren, a very wonderful church, and every so often, various denominations would come together and have a roller skating party, and it just so happened Glenn and I were both there and skated together and on the way out of the roller skating rink, he said, "Are you busy this weekend?" And I did have a night available, and so he took me to his church and that was the beginnings of our relationship.

Glenn Eshelman: Praise God.

Shirley Eshelman: Amen.

Gary Bauer: It's always fun to hear how people first met and then how God used that meeting to bring you together and form the family that you did and all that followed from that. Glenn, as I mentioned in the introduction, you grew up on a farm, but my understanding is you also had a very real interest in painting, and of course that leads to a lot of other things, but how did that develop being on a farm and having this interest in art and painting?

Glenn Eshelman: Yeah, it's a very interesting beginning. As you said, I was raised on a dairy farm and I am today. I came from producing milk in a dairy barn to producing productions in a theatre. When Shirley and I were young in the church, we were not allowed to go to a theater and now we run one today, but it's not quite the same kind of a theatre. But it all began with the gift of that. I discovered at the age of five. The Bible is very clear on God being a very creative God. He's an artist. He's a God of the most beautiful colors and detail, and I was always just very impressed with the creation itself. And I used to come in from the fields at night in from the barn with the animals, and I would sit at our kitchen table and I would take my sketch pad and my pencil and I would draw what I saw that day.

And then I took my five or six crayons and I would color this. My parents saw this gift of art in me, the power of encouragement to somebody else, to your children, to your partner in life where that can take you in life, only God knows. But they encouraged this gift of art with me and saw the gift in me that by the age of eight, I got five tubes of oil paint and two paintbrushes. Well, the Bible says God orders the steps of the righteous. What I didn't know back then, my plans were to be a dairy farmer. The Bible says, God says, "I know the plans I have for you," and He was already developing these in my life. So after I got my oil paints, I had a Sunday school teacher who was an artist, how God used people in our lives to get us where we are today, it's incredible. But he saw this gift in me as well and encouraged it and said, "Glenn, I understand you got oil paints. If you need help to get started to paint, let me know. I'll help you." Of which he did. When I learned to paint, I took off like a racehorse with this. By the age of 12, I painted a painting of our home farm. Again, my parents encouraged me with it. It was about a five foot long painting. They encouraged me to put it in the local farm show. Again, God was ordering my steps that I knew nothing about for the future, so I put it in the local farm show, I won a blue ribbon with it. But more than that, other farmers saw this painting and said, would you paint a painting of our farm? Now, I was helping daddy on the farm and trying to fulfill the orders of other farmers who asked me to paint their farms, but by the time we got married, I went full-time as an artist painting mainly Lancaster County Farms, which then led to photography. But it all began with five tubes of paint and two paintbrushes, the power in the gift of what God can do. When you take the little bit that He put into your hands and you put it into the hands of the Lord Jesus, He'll multiply it and He can feed the world with it. It's incredible.

Gary Bauer:

I mean, I said it was humble beginnings, but that really is a humble start. And of course Dr. Dobson has been talking for years, not only about let God lead your way, but also a point that you made earlier that we all have to have somebody in our lives that encourages us. And it's particularly true that children need parents that will encourage them to reach their dreams. One of the horrible issues we have is that so many of our children today either don't have a father or mother in the home, and that's one of the reasons Dr. Dobson spends so much time talking about the strength and power of the family. So you're doing this, developing this talent that God gave you and you're doing these paintings. And Lancaster County, by the way, is a great place to be painting farms. My wife grew up there and so I'm familiar with the area and it's a beautiful part of the country. But then you started turning, if I understand correctly, those paintings into slides that you would then show, talk to us about that because that was the next step in this journey that leads to the incredible Sight & Sound phenomena that you guys built.

Glenn Eshelman:

Again, it was how God ordered steps at that time. Doing these farm paintings, I used to go out in the field and sketch these farms, and then I'd come back into the house and I would paint them, and many times I would forget colors, I would forget, I was sketching in a hurry and I forgot windows or how many doors. So I bought my first camera to reference these farms that I was painting.

And while I was starting to use this camera to photograph God's scenery, I soon fell in love with photography as much as I did with painting. After a couple years with that camera, a lady from our church called and said, "Glenn, would you show some of your slides for a family night at our church at Homesteaders Banquet Hall?" At first, we turned her down because I remembered how boring slideshows could be.

So I said to Shirley, I said, "Why don't we make this more interesting? Put some music to it, scripture, poetry" of which we did. And in 1965, we took one projector. Shirley was dropping the needle on the turntable for the music. We were reading into a small microphone, and little did we know that night when we were showing that to about a hundred people, that this was Sight & Sound's premier showing. So after we had shown this with an intent to only do it one time, other people started to call and ask for it. So we made it portable. We put our voice in the sound on a reel to reel tape, and we made it available to take into other churches, other organizations, which grew into a large business for us in the future. It eventually grew into such a business that we had three tables with four projectors on that table, traveling as far west as Colorado, New Mexico, Maine to Florida, and it became a huge business for us and a ministry. But I would like to say at this point, what I started to see happen was the power of seeing and hearing. And I also discovered this in the Scriptures, how many times the Word of God spoke about the eye and the ear. Isaiah, Jeremiah spoke about it. Jesus spoke about it. He said He spoke in parables because in seeing, they don't see. In hearing, they don't hear because He said their hearts have become hardened, and that's where my name come from, Sight & Sound.

And also got the vision from that Jesus staged His sermons and parables. He took a lamb, He took soil, He took whatever He could get His hands on, and He demonstrated, He illustrated it by staging it before their eyes. And in doing so, He said by the seeing and by the hearing of combining them together, their eyes, their ears were opened and thus they believed. And I said, when I read that, if it worked for Jesus back then why would it not work today?

Gary Bauer:

Shirley, what was your reaction to all of this? I mean, were you both surprised about how this just kept growing and obviously Glenn referred to the fact that during these early presentations you were helping run the sound and so forth. So, here you are starting out with your husband in this thing that in the beginning, just in Lancaster County, but all of a sudden, you're trailing around the country and it's become a major undertaking and a successful business.

Shirley Eshelman:

Well, I did all I could with God's help to support what God was calling us to do. My gifting is more in the business world, but at the time, we also had a photo studio. We photographed many weddings, many senior pictures, and so of course, traveling so much on the road with our shows. But I was so much involved in the business end of it, which I felt was my calling and my gift, and I praise God I was able to do it. So God, I think had a plan. He knew Glen's the creative one and will do the creation and all the beautiful photography and art that he did, and I was very blessed with the ability to be able to support him

with the business work that needed to accompany his giftings in life and the glory goes to the Lord. We just thank Him for being with us and supplying our needs. And it doesn't mean we didn't have valley experiences. We all do, but we know that God is faithful and praise Him every day for His goodness in our life.

Glenn Eshelman: Shirley is a major pillar in Sight & Sound with her business ability, with her gifting, and she is the missing part of me. We have worked very well over the years together. We laugh about it, we work well together, but we're different. I say still, I'm the throttle and she's the break, and I tell her, without my throttle, you'd have got nowhere in life, but she's quick to remind me without my break, you'd went over the cliff and crashed. It took the both to make a successful journey, but together, God has blessed and honored the two of us coming together, blending our gifts together and using them for the glory of God.

Shirley Eshelman: I remember one day I watched him paint for a number of years and I thought, this really looks easy. I believe I could do it. So I drew a lighthouse, which looked pretty good, but till the painting was done, I turned it in a Christmas tree. It was my first and last painting, I'll stick to doing the bookkeeping.

Gary Bauer: That's a great story. I couldn't help. There's an old joke, and it's not true, but it goes something like "behind every successful man, there's a surprised wife," but it doesn't sound like either of you were surprised, but in fact this was a team effort and you both brought something, some gift that God gave you. And just like husbands and wives are brought together with, we each bring something to the marriage. Each of you brought something to this business or it wouldn't have worked. So in the beginning when you had the theater that was called the Living Waters Theater and around what year are we talking about now, when you began to do a major production in that theater.

Glenn Eshelman: That was in 1976, Gary. And what led to that was we had four of these slideshow tables on the road with six operators, and I was coming home in the Pennsylvania turnpike one Saturday night from a show that I did in Philadelphia. And on the way home, I guess I was weary in well-doing and I was complaining to the Lord. I said, this is not my kind of a life. This is not my cut of the cloth to live on the road. I still have too much farm blood in me. So while I was complaining, the Holy Spirit spoke to me, not audibly but in my heart, and it was so clear. He said, "Glenn, did you ever think of having the people come to you rather than you go to them?" And I said, "No, I never thought of that, but it's sure a good idea."

So I came home and told Shirley about it and she said, yeah. She said we could try it. So we rented the Lancaster Bible College in 1973 for 10 weeks in the summer when the students were home and out, we put a show together called "The Wonder of It All," and in that auditorium we put an 80 foot screen, it was IMAX before Imax. We put 15 high intensity projectors in there, 1500 watt each. And in those 10 weeks, that show sold out every night and it played to over 30,000 people. And I looked to the Heavens and said, "Lord God, you were right. The people will come to us." So that gave me the vision to build our own

auditorium, of which we opened up the Living Waters Auditorium in 1976 with 750 seats primarily doing multimedia shows in there, which then led to live stage productions.

Gary Bauer: And what a amazing thing that you would get this thought driving home tired and who likes to be on the road all the time. I don't think everybody, unless God had laid it on their hearts, I don't think everybody would've said, "Oh yeah, I can get everybody to just come to me." I mean, that seems to me to be a leap of faith right there. But so you do this Lancaster Bible College. I'm very familiar with it. That would've been a natural place to begin. And then you build this theater with 750 seats. When did you do the first full-length Bible production in that theater? Tell us a little bit about that.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, that's a great question. 1985, God gave me the vision to do our first all live stage production of the Scriptures and put the Bible on stage. And it took me two years to produce it, but I produced the show on the life of the Lord Jesus, which is the most important thing in my whole life. And that show was entitled, "Behold the Lamb." And when we opened the doors to "Behold the Lamb" in that auditorium, it exploded and really put us on the map. We were selling out, we were doing up to 15 shows a week with that production and it was selling out every show, and eventually we just outgrew that auditorium because of "Behold the Lamb" and putting the Bible on stage, which then led to the next auditorium, which we opened in 1991 and was a 1400 seat auditorium, that auditorium. Then we did "Behold The Lamb" in. But then the one that really put us on God's radar was in that auditorium in 1995 when we produced the show of Noah. Noah is our signature show. It's still the ultimate evangelistic show that we have. When God shuts the door, I think more people have weighed out their salvation than any other time because it's over. You're either inside or outside. So that has become a very powerful production, and that was a 1400 seat theater.

Gary Bauer: Now you actually have an arc replica and animals and the whole nine yards, right? People always come away from that, the production amazed by everything you do to make it a real experience.

Glenn Eshelman: I know Family Talk is about family. That show is a family show, and it's running this year in the Strasburg Millennium Theater, and I think the shows are basically sold out up until nearly the end of the year, and it's a great demand for family productions, quality, life-giving, family productions today.

Gary Bauer: Of course.

Glenn Eshelman: A couple years ago I walked into the upper level of the theater through one of the productions, and the theater was full as it many times is, and there was a man sitting there on a chair. I liked to connect with people, so I walked up to him and I said, "So good to have you here." I said, "Have you been here before?" Oh, he said, "I come all the time." I said, "Come on. No." He said, "I come all the time." I said, "Where are you from?" He said, "I'm from New York

City." I said, "Where do you go to church up there?" He said, "I don't go to church." I said, "Come on. No." He said, "I'm an atheist." I said, "You're an atheist and you come here?" "Yeah." I said, "Why would you come here to a biblical production such as this if you're an atheist?" He said, "I come here because of the epic look of it." He said, "I can't find another place that has sets this big and this large in the country." So he said, "I'm just taken by the enormity of these sets." I never said another word to him. When I walked out, here's what I had to think, Sight & Sound. He comes to see, but he can't get away from the hearing and he can't go home and lay his head on the pillow at night without remembering also what he heard. So it's always my prayer at a time like that for the Holy Spirit to do His work. We sowed the seed, now You do the rest of the work, and the point behind it is this, the epic look, the bigness of it is the bait to get the fish into the lifeboat.

And whether they're believer or unbeliever, I see what happens when they come to a show like this and they can't help but walk away and it will do its work. So putting the Bible on stage with these great Bible stories, it's become a worldwide ministry for us, and we're so thankful for the millions and millions of people we can reach every year.

Gary Bauer: Glenn and Shirley, what an inspirational story this is, and I've got about a dozen more questions I want to ask you because we haven't brought this wonderful story up to all the fantastic things are happening now. So I know how busy you are even at this stage in life, but you think you could spare a little bit more time and come back with us for another day?

Glenn Eshelman: Absolutely. It would be good to be back with you again.

Shirley Eshelman: Absolutely, Gary.

Gary Bauer: Fantastic.

Roger Marsh: A truly innovative approach to sharing the gospel, indeed. People may come for the spectacle, but what they see and hear stays in their hearts long after the curtain falls. You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and our conversation with Glenn and Shirley Eshelman, the visionary founders of Sight & Sound Theatres. To hear this inspiring story again, and for information about their theaters in Branson, Missouri and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And don't forget the special presentation of Noah, the Sight & Sound Theaters signature presentation coming to the big screen on September 18th. We'll have information for that as well at drjamesdobson.org.

Now, in recent weeks, we have been remembering the life and legacy of our founder, Dr. James Dobson, who went home to be with the Lord on August 21st, and we invite you to join us in celebrating the life of Dr. Dobson by visiting his memorial website. That's drjamesdobsonmemorial.com. When you visit that

page, you'll have an opportunity to view Dr. Dobson's life story. To leave a personal tribute and to make a ministry gift to continue the work here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Your stories, your encouragement, and your generous gifts will mean so much. Now because of your prayers and faithful financial support, the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute is strategically positioned to impact families for generations to come. To make a secure donation over the phone, you can call us at 877-732-6825. You can also send your donation through the U.S. Postal Service. Our ministry mailing address is Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, P.O. Box 39000, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 80949.

I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at the JDFI, thanks so much for listening. Be sure to join us again next time for part two of our conversation featuring Gary Bauer's discussion with Glenn and Shirley Eshelman discussing Sight & Sound Theatres. That's coming up right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you can still trust, for the family you love.

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.