



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Everyday Heroes Using 'Sight & Sound Theatres' to Proclaim the Good News – Part 2

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. I'm Roger Marsh, and today we're continuing our conversation with Glenn and Shirley Eshelman. Now the Eshelman's were dear friends of the Dobsons and they're also the visionary founders of Sight & Sound Theatres who have brought the gospel to millions through their spectacular Bible story productions. As a matter of fact, Dr. and Mrs. Dobson celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania watching a Sight & Sound presentation in person. On the last edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the Eshelmans shared the remarkable journey from a small Pennsylvania farm to creating theatrical experiences that literally rival Broadway. But every great story of faith includes moments of testing. On today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, you'll hear about the devastating fire in 1997 that destroyed their entire theater taking with it all of their sets and leaving 300 employees wondering about their future. The Eshelmans faced a gut wrenching decision, either walk away from their calling or somehow rebuild from the ashes with \$40 million that they simply didn't have. Their response and the miraculous provision that followed proves that setbacks truly can become God's setups. Here now is Gary Bauer once again with today's guests.

Gary Bauer: Welcome to Family Talk. We're happy today to welcome back Glenn and Shirley Eshelman to talk to them about the incredible lives that they've had and the wonderful programs that they have developed that bring the gospel to just literally millions of people. So Glenn and Shirley, let's get right back into it.

Glenn Eshelman: Thank you. It's good to be back again.

Shirley Eshelman: Thank you, Gary. It's an honor.

Gary Bauer: Shirley and Glenn, both you mentioned that no life is without some bumps in the road and some setbacks and so forth, and you ended up facing one of those because you built this new, larger, improved facility and just a few years later, really a tragic event took place. Tell us about that and how you dealt with it.

Shirley Eshelman:

Well, years ago, Glenn and I liked to ski and we were up in British Columbia skiing and we got a call one morning. Glenn answered the phone, our oldest daughter Kim, said, "You might want to stay at your lodge." She said, "There is a fire at the theater at this point, we don't know how serious it is, so we'll stay in touch." And it wasn't too long after that until our CEO called and said, "You'll need to come home. It's not good at all."

And what had happened, we were having, because of the weight of the sets were getting heavier and heavier, we needed to have a new stage installed. So we had an outside contractor come in and somehow or other, a spark from them working on the stage ended up going down into the basement and lighting one of the sets, and that's what started the fire. So of course we left British Columbia right away and came home and as we were coming down the road seeing the devastation, it was hard. And at the time, I know what I dealt with. I said, "Lord, we're doing Bible stories to honor You. Why did this theatre burn?" But I learned a great lesson. Sometimes our hard times in life will bring us out on the other side with something even much better, which it did. So we of course had to shut down until we could dismantle and completely get rid of the old theater, build the new one, and we couldn't begin to do today what we're able to do in the new theater if we still had the old theater. And I know someone asked us one time, "Would've you got rid of the old theater to build a new one?" And we said no. So like I mentioned earlier, God had a better plan, learned a great lesson. Sometimes God uses our hard times to take us to the new level.

Glenn Eshelman:

I would like to speak to that. I preach a sermon called "Our Setbacks Can Become God's Setups," and we have seen many of them happen in our lives. That fire happened in January of '97. We had about 300 employees at that time. Several hundred thousand tickets were sold for Noah for that year of '97. So after we had the fire, we lost everything. All the sets burned, the buildings were gone. But praise God, no life was lost. So what happened was we had no place to meet. We had no place to bring our people, no place to go with our employees. So we met in our farmhouse for three solid days. The family, the leadership team, the board of directors, just trying to get through the upfront, the logistical end of this thing. It was the end of the third day and I remember Shirley looked over at me and she said, "Glenn, we're getting older. We worked hard all of our lives."

She said, "Do you know what this is going to mean to come back again?" I said, "Shirley, I haven't even thought about coming back again. I'm just trying to get through the front end of this thing." Then it got quiet and she looked over at me again and she said, "Do you want to come back again?" That was a punch in the gut. I wasn't thinking about that, and the more I thought about it, the pressure was building. I already did enough of homework to know it's going to cost about \$40 million to come back. I also knew that we had very little insurance. We were still old school. So I looked over at her and I said, "You're in this as much as I am." I said, "Do you want to come back again?" And here was the nail in the

wall that I shall never forget. She looked at me and she said, "To me, Sight & Sound is not a business..."

Shirley Eshelman: It's more than a business.

Glenn Eshelman: More than a business. And for her to say that, that's a mouthful because she's the business side of this. Then she looked over at me and she put it back in my court. She said to me, "Sight & Sound is more than a ministry." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "To me, Sight & Sound is not just a calling, but it's a very high calling that God has put on our lives right after we got married. If we don't come back again." She said, "I don't think I could ever sleep with myself another night or live with myself another day." And when she said that the Holy Spirit hit me so hard in my spirit, I looked at her and said, "Shirley, you are absolutely right. A fire can destroy a building, but it cannot destroy the calling. If you're willing, I am willing. We will come back again no matter what it costs or what it takes." After six months of cleaning that hill off, we went to putting up the next auditorium. And right after that conversation with her, I sketched the Millennium Theater inside and outside. I made an eight inch scale model of it, called the 300 employees together and said, "I have an announcement to make to you. We're coming back again." And then I held the model up of the Millennium Theater and I said, "Here's what it's going to look like." God was faithful right through it all. We opened the doors to the Millennium Theater September 1, 1998, a 2100 seat theater. They all rolled up their sleeves, went to work to help clean up and help to rebuild that building. It was a moment in time. I relive so many, many times and certainly build my faith in a true living God who meets and provides all of our need according to His riches in glory.

Gary Bauer: There are a lot of people of lesser faith who experiencing that and the financial hit from it and just being physically worn out from all the hard work may have gone in another direction and said, well, maybe God wants us to do something else. But the fact that you saw in this an opportunity to do even more, and I've had many people tell me that they did experience a religious event at one of your shows. So you're absolutely right. Over the years, it's opened a lot of hearts from people that might not have responded to other things, but seeing the artistic presentation of the gospel the way you all have done it, did you guys have to go into a lot of debt during that period or were you able, even with the lack of a lot of insurance, were you able to do this without taking too big of a risk financially?

Glenn Eshelman: Absolutely. It took five banks to put that financial package together and Bank of Lancaster County was the lead bank on it, and they said it was the largest loan they ever did in Lancaster County, and thankfully God put it in their hearts to give us that loan. Could I share one other thing with you?

Gary Bauer: Of course.

Glenn Eshelman:

We have seen miracle after miracle in our lives, and I could sit here the rest of the morning and tell you the miracles that we have seen God perform and it's incredible. But what happened? We started to pour footers in October of 1997 for the Millennium Theater, but we still didn't have a financial package in place, and the contractor already started by faith. It came January of 1998. He was putting steel up over the stage of this auditorium, and we still didn't have a financial package in place.

So I got a call from the man that owned the construction company one morning and he said, "Glenn, I don't like to do this to you," but he said, "we cannot keep building, not knowing if we're going to get the money, you're going to get the money or not." I said, "I totally understand." I said, "I don't think I could have gone as far as you did. I thank you." So he said, "I'll tell you what, I'm going to give you two weeks. And he said, if you don't have the financial money in place, we're going to have to pull out." I said, "I understand. You got to do what you got to do." I only told Shirley about it that night we were sitting in the kitchen again. There's something about a kitchen in a farmhouse and a good wife. We were sitting in the kitchen and all of a sudden she popped this question to me.

We had a girl work for us. Her name was Jennifer. She was in the cast. She was from Florida. Her parents were from Florida. We never met her parents. All I knew was their name. That was it. His name was Dick. We were sitting in the kitchen and Shirley said to me, "I just feel I should call Dick tonight. I don't know, I just feel in my spirit I should call him." I said, "Then you do it." So she called him and one of the first words out of his mouth was, "How's the building project coming?" And she told him something I would've never told him. She told him about the phone call that morning. I couldn't believe it. He said, "I'll tell you what, my wife and I have been followers of Sight & Sound for many years. We really believe in your ministry, the work you're doing."

He said, "I have just sold a very large radio station in Colorado and I have over \$4 million laying in the bank unspoken for." He said, "I would be willing to give you that \$4 million to carry you through till the banks come through." And then he made a statement of faith that I shall never forget. The words came out of his mouth were "the banks will come through." Without signing any papers, no attorneys present, he put \$4 million in our bank account and the contractor kept on building. It was unbelievable of what happened with that phone call from my wife. But after his money, it was all but run out. It was like Elijah and the widow woman. We were down to the last bit of meal in the barrel and oil in the can and no pancake for tomorrow morning. I got a phone call from our CEO saying, "I just got a call. Lancaster County has approved your loans. It took five banks to put it together. Tell the contractor to keep on building," and we opened the door September 1, 1998 as was on schedule with the production of Noah. Praise God and give Him the glory.

Gary Bauer:

Boy, Glenn and Shirley, God's hand just seems to have been in this every step of the way. It's just one miracle after another. Now, at some point along the way, you started doing DVDs of the theatrical productions correct and then making

those available. But then not too many years afterwards, you decided to branch out and build another theatre. Share that story with us. I believe the other one is in Branson, Missouri.

Glenn Eshelman: What happened was we get phone call after phone call to plant a theater somewhere in the world. And for many years we had been looking at other places. We were all over this country. We were asked to put one in Jerusalem. The reason that we decided Branson, Missouri was we were out there on a vacation one time and realized Branson is really God and country. That sets right in the Bible belt of this country and also, it's theater. They have many, many theatres and productions out there. So we came back and shared it with the family, with the board of directors, prayed about it, and we felt this would be the place to plant a theatre. So we started looking for land out there and God gave us 35 acres of wonderful dirt to put an auditorium. So we opened that auditorium. It's the same model as we have here in Strasburg in 2008. We opened it with the show of Noah.

Right after we opened that production, gas prices just went to the ceiling and the economy went down the toilet, and there we were holding a major debt for that auditorium, the new kid on the block, and people were not coming. We experienced six years of struggle there. But what was interesting, Strasberg stayed strong through the downturn of that economy and helped to support and bring Branson through for six years. But out of that, we see now what God has done even through those hard times. Branson has the production of David running in it right now. It is selling out show after show. So we knew God had called us there. But the interesting thing was through those six years, the banks kept pushing on me saying, "You need to get rid of this place while you can." I kept telling them in the meetings after meetings, God has called us there and I have to believe He's going to see us through, of which He did. After six years, it broke out and Noah has been a very successful ministry today. But again, it was a very difficult time in our lives. I call them the midnights of our life when it was very dark.

Gary Bauer: Every time I talk to people that have been successful in business, particularly business that involves having large groups of customers that come to you or have to be there in order to experience something that you've done, how did you guys deal with COVID and survive all of that?

Glenn Eshelman: Very interesting. COVID was another setback for us. And the interesting thing what happened with COVID, Strasberg had to close their doors, send our people home. Missouri, Branson, stayed strong because of the government out there. So while Strasberg carried Branson through those six years of hard times, now Branson was carrying Strasberg through the times of COVID. It's how God was working. But out of that came a very interesting thing to Sight & Sound. We had just run the premiere of Esther on Friday night, Saturday morning, the government called us from Harrisburg, you have to close your doors, which we were closed for a good part of that year. But what happened was God was again providing, TBN, Matt called us and said, "We understand you have the Jesus

show shot in high definition edited, ready to put on the air. Is that correct?" "Yes, we do." "Would you be willing to let us take the Jesus show and run it for the Easter weekend" of which we agreed to do and we said, "We'll go further than that. We'll give it to you free to do because that's our mission, to present the gospel and nothing more important to present at a time like this than Jesus." So they ran it for that weekend, and just in that weekend, it played to over 3 million people, 3.5 million people. We said as a family, there's no way we could have enough of theaters to reach that amount of people in one weekend. So out of that, out of those hard times, God gave us the vision to put together our own TV network called Sight & Sound TV, in which anybody around the world now can get on that app on Sight & Sound TV and for a small amount of money, watch any of our shows that we have produced here at Sight & Sound. So again, it expanded our ministry to the world, and it also was, again, approving of God's faithfulness through the most hard and difficult times.

Gary Bauer: Well, Glenn, I'm getting ready to get together with our extended family in a few days, and you've just given me an idea about what we're going to do one of those evenings. We're always struggling to find something that's suitable for everybody in the family, no matter what their age. And it sounds like using this app to see one of your productions because we're all followers of Jesus Christ. So it sounds like something that would be right up our alley. So you continue to grow and adjust to the new times, and I understand you've got a couple of motion pictures that you're working on. Tell us what's coming down the road. Are you guys ever going to retire? It doesn't sound like it.

Glenn Eshelman: Oh, no. No. I can't find that in the Scripture.

Gary Bauer: No, me either.

Glenn Eshelman: I tell Shirley I'm going to die with my boots on either doing paintings or productions. But we have a son-in-law, married to our fourth daughter. He actually took my place at Sight & Sound as a producer, as the president. He's a director. Our children are very involved with this. Our one son-in-law married to our third daughter. He is the CEO of the company. All of our daughters are on the board of directors. Along with that, many of the children are involved with Sight & Sound even down to the great grandchildren. What has happened with Josh, our son-in-law, he's always had a vision for movies, and he stepped out of producing shows here, and our grandson stepped into his shoes of producing shows right now in which he is producing a show right now called Joshua, which is going to be in this theater next March of '26, but also coming out in '26 is a new movie that we did, a new film.

Our first one was entitled, *I Heard the Bells*. It was on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, powerful movie. It did very well. I think it played like number two in the nation for a while. We are doing a second film at this point on George W. Whitfield. It's called *The Great Awakening*, and what greater film can we do at a time like this than the Great Awakening? So that's going to be coming out next January or February in theaters all over this country. So again, we're expanding

the ministry. I do want to say this to you, Gary. Our mission statement is this, to sow the Word of God, present the gospel of Jesus Christ to all of our customers through live theatrical stage productions and be wise stewards of our God-given talents and resources. So everything we do, we wrap it in that envelope, that mission statement.

Gary Bauer: Glenn God's hand is still in this, obviously this new project, *The Great Awakening* about Whitfield. There've been a couple great awakenings in American history, and each of them played an unbelievable role. One in the years leading up to the Civil War, which helped the country eventually come to grips with the end of slavery and understanding that no man can own another man that we're all made in the image of God. So the country had to deal with that, and we eventually did. But I've heard many, many people say we need another great awakening now at this point, facing so many challenges and dangers. I don't think it's an accident that that would be what your next movie project is going to be about next year.

Glenn Eshelman: That's right. Absolutely. Amen.

Gary Bauer: Well, Glenn and Shirley, you are truly everyday heroes for the faith, and we love the role you've played standing alongside Jim and Shirley Dobson and supporting the ministry. We can't thank you enough for what you've done for the millions of people that have seen your creativity and your bringing of God's word to them. Not everybody wants to sit down and open that book and start reading it. They get intimidated or whatever, but when it can be brought to them in an entertaining way, they hear a message that they may not have heard otherwise. So I have a feeling that whenever you guys are down the road standing before the throne, you're going to be welcomed by a whole lot of people that came to God and to Jesus because they went to one of your shows. That's something that is a very unique thing that you'll be able to say at the throne. We love you guys. We hope you have many more years ahead of you, and we look forward to seeing you again soon.

Glenn Eshelman: Love you too, and thank you for this wonderful interview with you.

Shirley Eshelman: Yes, and Gary, I say so often, the glory goes to the Lord.

Glenn Eshelman: Amen.

Shirley Eshelman: And a wonderful team of people that have surrounded us all these many years, the glory goes to our wonderful Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Gary Bauer: Well, thank you and God bless you both.

Glenn Eshelman: God bless you. Thank you.

Roger Marsh:

Our setbacks can become God's setups. What an incredible testimony of God's provision in the lives of Glenn and Shirley Eshelman, and a powerful reminder that nothing can destroy the calling that God has placed on our lives. You've been listening to a special edition, Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, featuring our inspiring conversation with Gary Bauer, the host of the Defending Faith, Family and Freedom podcast and Gary's conversation with Glenn and Shirley Eshelman, the founders of Sight & Sound Theatres, dear friends of the Dobsons for many, many years. Now, to hear this program again or to share their story with friends or family, go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. While you're there, be sure you also check out information Noah, the signature piece from the Sight & Sound Theatres collection, and it's coming back to the big screen to celebrate its 30th anniversary. That presentation starts beginning September the 18th. For more information about Noah from Sight & Sound Theatres, go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

Over the past few weeks, we've been reflecting on the remarkable life and enduring impact of our beloved founder, Dr. James Dobson, who peacefully entered into eternal rest on August 21st. In fact, we had a chance to sit down with Glenn and Shirley Eshelman just a week before Dr. Dobson went home to be with the Lord. We welcome you to honor Dr. Dobson's ministry by visiting his dedicated memorial site, and once you're there, you'll find the opportunity to explore the inspiring journey of his life. Also, to share your own heartfelt remembrance and to contribute a special memorial gift to sustain the mission of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, go online to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. You can click on the link for a memorial site and also leave a donation as well. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. You can also make a gift over the phone. Call a member of our constituent care team at 877-732-6825 is the number to call.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh and from all of us here at Family Talk, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another 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.