

LIFE AND MINISTRY OF WATCHMAN NEE

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GOD'S DYNAMIC SALVATION WORK

Beginning in the sixteenth century, many Protestant missionaries were sent to China from Europe and America. In the opening years of the twentieth century, following centuries of faithful labor and catalyzed by the martyrdom of many Christians in the Boxer Rebellion, the Lord's move in China advanced dramatically. Many "native" preachers were raised up by the Lord and became prevailing in gospel preaching, especially around 1920 among China's new generation of high school and college students. A number of brilliant students, among whom was Nee Shu-tsu (Watchman Nee), were called and equipped by the Lord to do His work during this time.

Nee Shu-tsu, whose English name was Henry Nee, was born of second-generation Christian parents in Foochow, China in 1903. His paternal grandfather, in fact, had studied at the American Congregational College in Foochow and became the first Chinese pastor among the Congregationalists in northern Fukien province. Nee Shu-tsu had been consecrated to the Lord before his birth. Desiring a son, his mother had prayed to the Lord, "If I have a boy, I will present him to You." The Lord answered her prayer, and soon afterward Nee Shu-tsu was born. His father later impressed on him, "Before you were born, your mother promised to present you to the Lord".

Prior to his salvation Nee Shu-tsu was an ill-behaved student, yet he was also exceptionally intelligent. He always ranked first in his class as well as in his school, from elementary school through his graduation from Anglican Trinity College in Foochow. He had many grand dreams and plans for the future and could have had great success in the world. Yet Nee Shu-tsu, acquainted with the gospel since childhood, had the deep realization that if he received Jesus as his Lord for salvation he must also serve Him. In 1920, after a considerable struggle, seventeen-year-old Nee Shu-tsu, still a high school student, was dynamically saved. At the moment of his salvation, all his previous planning became void and his future career was entirely abandoned. He testified, "From the evening I was saved, I began to have a new life, for the life of the eternal God had entered into me". Later, after being raised up by the Lord to carry out His commission, he adopted the new English name Watchman and the new Chinese name To-sheng, which means "watchman's rattle," for he considered himself a watchman raised up to sound a warning call in the dark night.

EQUIPPING AND TRAINING

Watchman Nee attended no theological schools or Bible institutes. His wealth of knowledge concerning God's purpose, Christ, the things of the Spirit, and the church was acquired through studying the Bible and reading spiritual books. Watchman Nee became intimately familiar with and greatly enlightened by the Word through diligent study using twenty different methods. In addition, in the early days of his ministry he spent one-third of his income on his personal needs, one-third on helping others, and the remaining third on spiritual books. He acquired a collection of more than 3,000 of the best Christian books, including nearly all the classical Christian writers from the first century on. He had a phenomenal ability to select, comprehend, discern, and memorize relevant material, and he could grasp and retain the main points of a book at a glance. Watchman Nee was thus able to glean all the profitable scriptural points and spiritual principles from throughout church history and synthesize them into his vision and practice of the Christian life and of the church life. Watchman Nee received much enlightenment and help from a number of Christian writers, as follows:

SPECIFIC ENLIGHTENMENT SOURCE

1. The assurance of salvation George Cutting, a Brethren writer
2. Life John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress
Madame Guyon's biography
Hudson Taylor's biography
the writings of other mystics
3. Christ J.G. Bellett
Charles G. Trumbull
A.B. Simpson
T. Austin Sparks
others
4. The Spirit Andrew Murray's The Spirit of Christ
5. The Three Parts of Man
(body, soul, and spirit) Jessie Penn-Lewis
Mary C. McDonough
6. Faith George Müller's autobiography
7. Abiding in Christ Andrew Murray
Hudson Taylor's biography
8. The subjective aspect of Christ's death and spiritual warfare Jessie Penn-Lewis
9. Christ's resurrection and His Body T. Austin Sparks
others
10. God's plan of redemption Mary McDonough
11. The church John Nelson Darby
other Brethren teachers
12. Prophecy Robert Govett
D.M. Panton
G.H. Pember
other Brethren writers
13. Church history John Foxe
E.H. Broadbent
others
14. Bible exposition and many other truths, in general John Nelson Darby
the Brethren

Watchman Nee became familiar with many of these books through Margaret Barber, a former Anglican missionary. Early in his Christian life he received much spiritual edification and perfection from her. Primarily through his fellowship with Miss Barber, Watchman Nee realized that to be a Christian is altogether a matter of the divine life. Through her shepherding, he learned to pay more attention to life than to work and to live by Christ as his life.

REVELATION AND LIVING

Through his fellowship with Miss Barber and others, along with his study of the Bible and numerous spiritual books, Watchman Nee received a wealth of revelation. He was truly a seer of the divine revelation. [The core of his revelation was threefold: it concerned \(1\) the living of a crucified life, \(2\) the living of a resurrected life, and \(3\) the issue of such a living, the church.](#) Related to the crucified life, he saw and experienced the subjective aspects of Christ's death. He realized that he had been crucified with Christ that it was no longer he that lived, but Christ Who lived in him. He also realized that in order to experience the death of Christ in a subjective way, he needed to bear the cross. Although he had been crucified with Christ in fact, he also had to remain in Christ's crucifixion in his experience. He learned that to remain in Christ's crucifixion was to bear the cross by refusing to allow the old man or the flesh to leave the cross. He realized that in order for him to have such an experience, God must sovereignly arrange his environment, making it a practical cross for him to bear. This is exactly what God did throughout Watchman Nee's life.

From the very beginning of his ministry, God arranged numerous situations in which he had the opportunity to deny the self and the natural life by bearing the cross and living by Christ as his life. Watchman Nee saw that he had not only died with Christ, but had also risen with Him. The resurrected Christ with the fullness of the Spirit had become his life. It was by the resurrection life of the indwelling Christ that he was able to bear the cross and to participate in the fellowship of His sufferings and be conformed to His death. By the resurrection life of Christ, he abandoned the world, forsook his future, denied himself, was freed from sin, and overcame Satan. It was also by the resurrection life of Christ that he served the Lord, worked for Him, and carried out His commission. His contemporaries bore witness to the fact that he consistently rejected his natural strength in the Lord's service. He feared the intrusion of his natural life into the Lord's work; he therefore dared not minister apart from the indwelling Christ. In delivering messages, contacting people, writing articles, corresponding with the believers, and in mundane matters, he acted not by himself but by the resurrection life. It was by living such a resurrection life that he was able to pass through his extended martyrdom of twenty years' imprisonment, which culminated in death.

Watchman Nee went on to see that the church as the Body of Christ was simply the enlargement, expansion, and expression of the resurrected Christ. His vision that Christ in resurrection was the life and content of the church was far advanced. According to this vision, he not only ministered by the resurrected Christ, but he also ministered the resurrected Christ Himself to the believers for the building up of His Body. He frequently emphasized the fact that anything which is not Christ in resurrection is not the church, and anything not done by the resurrected Christ is a foreign element in the Body. He desired to serve the church with nothing but the resurrected Christ. The more his ministry progressed, the more he ministered the resurrected Christ to the believers and to the local churches. The resurrected Christ became not only his life and living, but also his message and ministry.

BURDEN AND COMMISSION

The divine revelation which Watchman Nee saw resulted in the Lord's twofold burden and commission to him: first, to bear a particular testimony of the Lord Jesus, and second, to establish local churches. The first burden and commission arose from his personal depth of knowledge and experience of Christ's all-inclusive death and resurrection. The Lord specifically burdened and commissioned him to bear testimony to this truth. He faithfully responded to this burden by releasing a number of spoken and written messages on the subjective aspect of the Lord's crucifixion and resurrection, on the principles of life, on the supremacy of Christ, and on God's eternal purpose.

However, Watchman Nee's ultimate burden was not just to elevate the individual believers' experience of Christ, but to establish and build up the practical corporate expression of Christ in the local churches for the satisfaction of God's desire. This was the ultimate commission he received from the Lord based on what he had seen and experienced of Him. [His personal testimony recorded on October 20, 1936 described this commission:](#)

What the Lord revealed to me was extremely clear: Before long He would raise up local churches in various parts of China. Whenever I closed my eyes, the vision of the birth of local churches appeared...

When the Lord called me to serve Him, the primary objective was not to hold revival meetings, help people hear more scriptural doctrines, or for me to become a great evangelist. The Lord revealed to me that He desired to build up local churches in various places to manifest Himself and to bear the testimony of unity on the ground of the local churches. In this way, each saint [believer] is able to function in the church and live the church life. What God wants is not individuals trying to be victorious or spiritual; He wants a corporate glorious church presented to Himself.

SUFFERINGS

Watchman Nee saw an undeniable vision and received a definite commission from the Lord concerning the church, and he suffered greatly due to his faithfulness to them. Because the vision was so clear and the commission so real, it did not matter to him that he was rejected, opposed, and condemned. He anticipated this response and was determined to pay any price for the commission he had received of the Lord. His faithfulness to this commission ultimately cost him his life. His profound revelation combined with his selfless sufferings issued in a rich ministry of life according to the Lord's commission to him: the unique New Testament ministry of Christ and of the church.

Watchman Nee endured much suffering for the sake of the New Testament ministry. Due to his absoluteness in following the Lord and his faithfulness in fulfilling the Lord's commission, he underwent frequent mistreatment as well as lifelong hardships. Because he unwaveringly fought the battle for the Lord's move, he was under constant attack from God's enemy. At the same time, he was also under God's sovereign hand. He recognized the sovereign arrangements of God in his environment not merely as a divinely apportioned "thorn in the flesh," but more importantly, as a means by which God was able to deal with him. Due to both the enemy's attacks and God's faithful environmental dealings, Watchman Nee lived a life of suffering. The majority of his sufferings came from five sources: poverty, ill health, various denominations, dissenting brothers and sisters in the local churches, and imprisonment.

In the early years of Watchman Nee's ministry, the economic situation in China was desperate. Because of what he saw in the Word, he was exercised to live purely and singly by faith in God not only for his living, but also for every aspect of the Lord's work. Hence, he steadfastly refused employment by any person or organization. In the early days of his ministry in Shanghai, there were times when all he had to eat each day was a little bread.

Watchman Nee was also frequently afflicted with serious ill health. For the first eleven years of his ministry, beginning in 1922, he suffered alone, with no wife to help him. During this time he contracted tuberculosis and suffered acutely for several years. In 1934 at the age of thirty, however, Watchman Nee married a true "help meet," Charity Chang, although the Lord was to give them no children. In later years, he was also stricken with a chronic stomach disorder as well as angina pectoris, a serious heart ailment. He was never cured of the heart disease and could have died from it at any moment. In fact, many times he ministered not by physical strength but by resurrection life.

He also suffered for his belief that, according to the Bible, denominations are wrong in that they divide the one Body of Christ. Because his firm stand for the oneness of the Body of Christ was a testimony against the denominations, they caused him much suffering. Some despised, criticized, opposed, and did their best to destroy his ministry. They also spread false rumors about him and misrepresented him to the extent that Watchman Nee once responded, "The Watchman Nee portrayed by them I would also condemn."

A number of brothers and sisters meeting with the local churches became another source of suffering to Watchman Nee. He found this type of suffering by far the most painful. Some of these believers caused a great deal of trouble due to their dissention, immaturity, incompetence, stubbornness, ambition for position, or rebelliousness. Two years after the church life began to be practiced in Watchman Nee's hometown in 1922, he was even temporarily excommunicated by his own coworkers because of his stand for the truth of the

Scriptures, when he protested the ordination of the leading coworkers by a denominational missionary. Although most of the believers meeting with them sided with Watchman Nee, the Lord would not allow him to do anything to vindicate himself. That was a deep suffering to his natural man.

The final source of suffering was his groundless condemnation and imprisonment. Watchman Nee was arrested during the Communist Cultural Revolution in March 1952 and was judged, falsely condemned, and unjustly sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment in 1956.

Watchman Nee was a man of sorrows and suffering. Along his entire path of following the Lamb, he suffered much. Through all these sufferings, however, he learned many lessons. These sufferings not only helped him learn to trust the Lord; they also benefited him in dealing with his flesh, his self, his soul, and his natural life. Due to his obedience to these dealings, he never passed on mere teachings and doctrines, for his messages contained the reality he had acquired through his sufferings. The experience he gained through his suffering served as an immeasurable help to all those under his ministry and also became a rich heritage to all the local churches, a heritage acquired by him at the ultimate price.

His sufferings also helped him to receive further revelation from the Lord. Certain kinds of suffering often issued in corresponding revelation. His sufferings thus often became the Lord's revelation to him. He was purified, dealt with, broken, and constituted by the Holy Spirit with the divine life through his sufferings. Through such experiences of Christ within his sufferings, he, like Paul, was prepared and positioned to receive the Lord's revelation.

MEANS OF MINISTRY

Watchman Nee's rich ministry of life was the issue of his revelation and suffering. He used eight different means to carry out the ministry wrought into him by the Lord: preaching the gospel, teaching the Bible, traveling, contacting people, corresponding with people, holding conferences, conducting trainings, and producing publications.

Watchman Nee not only spoke frequently both privately and publicly, but he was also a prolific writer. His publications included gospel tracts, periodicals, papers, newsletters, books, hymnals, and a chart of biblical prophecies. For more details on his writings and a list of selected titles, please see Publications.

RELATIONSHIP WITH WITNESS LEE

Watchman Nee's closest co-worker was Witness Lee. Having been raised as a Southern Baptist, Witness Lee was saved in 1925 at the age of nineteen. That year Witness Lee began to seek to thoroughly know the Bible and found Watchman Nee's articles and publications to be the most outstanding on biblical truths. He soon began to correspond with Watchman Nee and was astonished that someone only two years older than he was such a mature Christian. It was not until 1932, when Witness Lee invited Watchman Nee to Chefoo, that the two had their first personal contact. During the time they began to spend together, Watchman Nee's stress on the divine life rather than on knowledge caused Witness Lee's fellowship with the Lord to deepen and to grow more intimate. In the same year, believers began meeting in Witness Lee's home; by the following year, this meeting was thriving. Due to the needs of the church, both men believed that the Lord desired Witness Lee to serve Him full-time. Their time together increased, during which Watchman Nee continually perfected and tested Witness Lee, preparing him to bear more responsibility. Realizing that the Lord's work in China must be one and that He had begun it in Shanghai through Watchman Nee, Witness Lee moved to Shanghai in 1934 to be able to work more closely with Watchman Nee. They labored, suffered, spread the work, received revelation, and brought in revivals together. Brother Lee edited Watchman Nee's publication *The Christian* from 1934 to 1940 and was his best man at his wedding.

In fear of annihilation by the incursion of Communism, Watchman Nee sent Witness Lee and a few others to Taiwan in 1949 to continue the work there. The last contact between Watchman Nee and Witness Lee was in March, 1950 in Hong Kong, twenty-five years after Witness Lee first knew of Watchman Nee. At that time, the two of them had extensive fellowship about Watchman Nee's return to the mainland. He told Witness

Lee, "What shall we do with so many churches on the mainland? I must return to take care of them and stand with them for the Lord's testimony."

MARTYRDOM

Watchman Nee was led by the Lord to remain in Mainland China in spite of the threat of Communism, and to sacrifice everything for the Lord's work there. In this respect he was like the apostle Paul in **Acts 20:24**: "But I consider my life of no account as if precious to myself, in order that I may finish my course and the ministry which I have received from the Lord Jesus..." Concerning his decision, Brother Hsu Jin-chin testified the following:

Before Brother Nee left Hong Kong, Brother Lee advised him many times not to return to the mainland. But Brother Nee said, "If a mother discovered that her house was on fire, and she herself was outside the house doing the laundry, what would she do? Although she realized the danger, would she not rush into the house? Although I know that my return is fraught with dangers, I know that many brothers and sisters are still inside. How can I not return?" Brother Lee escorted him three times back from the bus stop to his home in Diamond Hill...

Watchman Nee was arrested by the Communists in March, 1952 for his professed faith in Christ as well as his leadership among the local churches. He was judged, falsely condemned, and sentenced in 1956 to fifteen years' imprisonment. During this entire time, only his wife was allowed to visit him. Although there is no way for us to know what he experienced of the Lord during his long imprisonment, his last eight letters provide a glimpse into his suffering, feeling, and expectation during his confinement. While prison censorship did not allow him to mention the Lord's name in his letters, in his final letter, written on the day of his death, he alluded to his joy in the Lord: "In my sickness, I still remain joyful at heart." Watchman Nee was practicing the word of the apostle Paul in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always." He died in confinement in his cell on May 30, 1972. Humanly speaking, he died in misery and humiliation. Not one relative or brother or sister in the Lord was with him. There was no proper notification of his death and no funeral. He was cremated on June 1, 1972. His wife had died six months earlier, so it was her eldest sister who was informed of his death and cremation. She retrieved his ashes, and they were buried with Mrs. Nee's in his hometown of Kwanchao in the county of Haining, Chekiang province. In May, 1989, the ashes of Watchman Nee and his wife were transferred to and buried in "The Christian Cemetery" in Shiangshan in the city of Soochow of Kiangsu province.

The following is an account by Brother Nee's grandniece, who accompanied Mrs. Nee's eldest sister to the labor farm to pick up his ashes:

In June 1972, we got a notice from the labor farm that my granduncle had passed away. My eldest grandaunt and I rushed to the labor farm. But when we got there, we learned that he had already been cremated. We could only see his ashes... Before his departure, he left a piece of paper under his pillow which had several lines of big words written in a shaking hand. He wanted to testify to the truth which he had even until his death, with his lifelong experience. That truth is - "Christ is the Son of God who died for the redemption of sinners and resurrected after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my belief in Christ. Watchman Nee." When the officer of the labor farm showed us this paper, I prayed that the Lord would let me quickly remember it by heart...

My granduncle had passed away. He was faithful until death. With a crown stained with blood, he went to be with the Lord. Although God did not fulfill his last wish, to come out alive to join his wife, the Lord prepared something even better - they were reunited before the Lord.

During Watchman Nee's imprisonment he was confined, but his ministry was not bound. (2 Tim. 2:9) Under the Lord's sovereignty, his ministry has spread throughout the entire world as a rich supply of life to all seeking Christians.

His ultimate burden was the churches as the house of God, God's tabernacle. Although his own earthly tabernacle (physical body) has been taken down, the churches, which were so much on his heart, are not only

surviving but also continuing to grow vigorously and to spread throughout the earth. By the time Watchman Nee was arrested in 1952, approximately four hundred local churches had been raised up in China through his life and ministry. In addition, over thirty local churches had been raised up in the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Today the Lord has multiplied the local churches to over 2,300 worldwide through the rich and faithful ministries of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

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