



WILLIAM WILBERFORCE 1759 - 1833

You probably wouldn't have chosen young William Wilberforce as a moral crusader. Born to wealthy parents, educated at Cambridge, he started out life as quite a playboy. He was sent to a prestigious boarding school and, from that point, was on the fast track to a political career. At age 21 he ran for a seat in Parliament and won. He began to display the speaking talent that would make him a legend.

While on a trip through Europe in 1785, Wilberforce borrowed a book from a friend, Phillip Doddridge (perhaps best known as the writer of the hymn "O Happy Day") titled *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. Reading this, and following along in Scripture, Wilberforce became convinced of the truth of the Gospel.

For several months he continued to live the high life. Christianity was in his mind, but had little bearing on his daily decisions. Yet a conviction grew within him: If he was to follow Christ fully, he would have to say no to his worldly ways. In fact, he thought about giving up his political career. He sought advice from John Newton (author of "Amazing Grace") who convinced him that God could use him exactly where he had put him – in the midst of the political arena.

Slavery was one of those hidden scandals comfortably out of sight of the average Englishman, who benefited from it but never had to see first-hand its unspeakable human misery. Wilberforce knew what he had to do. It would be over twenty years of exhausting conflict in Parliament before the slave trade was finally abolished in England in 1807. It would take an additional 26 years to emancipate the existing slaves – just a few days before he died at age 74 in 1833. He had seen his life's dream accomplished.

Wilberforce was known to be involved with over 60 organizations in his driving concern to spread the Christian message and lift the moral climate. This included work for prison reform, opposition to pornography, and funding Christian schools for the poor. He served as co-founder of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Church Missionary Society.

Wilberforce endured one setback after another, often laid low by frail health and the attacks of opponents. Yet his position against slavery eventually won. His life remains an encouragement to all who are willing to fight social evil no matter how many setbacks are encountered.