

The Relentless Crusade:  
William Wilberforce and the Fight Against the Slave Trade

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William Wilberforce was a British politician who advocated for African slaves. Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759, in Kingston upon Hull, United Kingdom. He died on July 29, 1833. He was buried in the north transept of Westminster Abbey on August 3, 1833. Much of Wilberforce's determination and efforts to stop the ongoing slave trade were based on his religious beliefs. His conversion to Christianity was around 1784 to 1785. John Newton, a former slave trader who had repented from the horrific trade, became Wilberforce's spiritual adviser during this campaign. On May 12, 1789, the Abolition speech was given by Wilberforce, and he delivered it in the House of Commons, the lower house in the British Parliament. The topic of the speech was the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Wilberforce gave this speech because of the cruel deaths and sufferings the native African slaves endured before, during, and after the destination of the ship's voyage. The total abolition of the slave trade was his determination. This speech reference the events of the African slave trade to the United Kingdom and the transit of the slaves in the West Indies.

Wilberforce's made many points in his speech that stood out like bold letters. These points were very important because they displayed Wilberforce's compassion towards everyone, exhibited his relentless determination to end evil at all cost, and presented hard grounding evidence of the horrific suffering slaves endured. In the speech, he remarked this: "We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others; and I therefore deprecate every kind of reflection against the various descriptions of people who are more immediately involved in this wretched business" (Wilberforce, 1789 Abolition Speech). This direct quote was important because he owned up to this horrific trade and did not shift the blame to the leaders of his nation nor to those who participated in the trade business. This really showed Wilberforce's heart toward the slaves, slaves' traders, and his own

countrymen. Everyone had a hand in this pot one way or another because the slave trade affected every part of the nation's economy. He did not only want those that suffered to find freedom from their bondage of slavery. He was determined to free those who mistreated the slaves as well from a life of shame and guilt because of the business.

Another statement Wilberforce made was, "I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition" (Wilberforce). This amazing statement displayed Wilberforce's determination to stop evil at all costs, and perhaps even at the cost of his life. It was not typical for a person of value during that time to fight so bravely for people that were not considered a human being. It was more typical for a person of importance to advocate for another person of importance. However, when Wilberforce made this statement, whether he knew it or not at that time, this specific statement strengthened many of those in the hearing of the speech, especially those who had been freed from slavery. This gave them hope which was the hope of freedom from slavery. Not only that, but this would one day also encourage many individuals to fight for human rights.

A third declaration Wilberforce made was, "Death, at least, is a sure ground of evidence, and the proportion of deaths will not only confirm, but if possible, will even aggravate our suspicion of their misery in the transit" (Wilberforce). Wilberforce was able to differentiate the false testimonies made by the ship's masters concerning the slave treatments during the journey to the West Indies. The ship's masters had claimed that the slaves were not mistreated in any way, and as a matter of fact, they received the same privileges as the crews regarding food, water, and living space. They claimed that at times the slaves danced to the music being played and were fed with their own best country provisions. However, Wilberforce determined that death was an indication of the cruelty and suffering the slaves tolerated. Death provided strong

ground to evidence that these slaves did not celebrate their captivity as claimed by the ship's masters. The fact that so many slaves perished during these voyages displayed cruelty and suffering.

Evidences from the speech help one to understand why Wilberforce gave this speech in the House of Commons. Evidences such as deaths, diseases that ran rapidly, mistreatments, and sufferings that took place in the ships motivated Wilberforce to advocate for the slaves. Wilberforce presented the evidences of deaths and diseases when he stated, "that exclusive of those who perish before they sail, not less than 12½ per cent. perish in the passage... the Jamaica report tells you, that not less than 4½ per cent. die on shore before the day of sale, which is only a week or two from the time of landing. One third more die in the seasoning, and this in a country exactly like their own, where they are healthy and happy as some of the evidences would pretend. The diseases, however, which they contract on shipboard, the astringent washes which are to hide their wounds, and the mischievous tricks used to make them up for sale, are, as the Jamaica report says, (a most precious and valuable report, which I shall often have to advert to) one principle cause of this mortality. Upon the whole, however, here is a mortality of about 50 per cent. and this among negroes who are not bought unless (as the phrase is with cattle) they are sound in wind and limb" (Wilberforce). Wilberforce's description here exhibited the death rates percentages and diseases that ran rapidly. These are some evidences that helped Wilberforce to gained ground as he delivered his speech.

Wilberforce described inhumane action that took place on the ships like this, "one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings" (Wilberforce). This showed the mistreatments and sufferings slaves experienced. The slaves

mourned and wept as they were shipped off. They cried bitterly, without hope as they witnessed their own countryman perished during the voyage. During all these chaotic sounds, the ship's captain threatened to flog the women instead of feeling sympathetic. Wilberforce obtained this evidence and used it to demolish slavery in his speech. I have seen and witnessed something like this. After attending numerous funeral services for the Hmong community, there have been times when people's mourning turns into a song which displays the deepest agony. It can be quite frightening and scary to hear them mourned in that way because it is not something you see or hear daily.

One last piece of evidence that displayed the slaves suffering was their living space. Wilberforce remarked, "when surgeons tell you the slaves are stowed so close, that there is not room to tread among them" (Wilberforce). At times, there will be surgeons that travel in these slaves' ships. The things they witnessed are unimaginable. Some of them wrote down what they had seen. Here was a good description of what a surgeon saw in person. All the slaves were shoved into a very tight area during the voyage. They were so close together that the surgeon himself could not maneuver around them. This gave Wilberforce more evidence of the suffering the slaves went through.

Life in the United States was about the same as it was in Liverpool. Notice Wilberforce referenced the whole world in this statement: "When I consider the magnitude of the subject which I am to bring before the House—a subject, in which the interests, not of this country, nor of Europe alone, but of the whole world, and of posterity, are involved..." (Wilberforce). This indicated that daily life in the whole world, including the United States of America. Life was very similar to that of Britain. Another indicator of what life was like in the United States was when Wilberforce mentioned the "total blindness" Mr. Norris had as one of Liverpool delegates

regarding the treatment of the slaves (Wilberforce). Mr. Norris claimed the slaves were treated well, fed much, and enjoyed their captivity. Much like Mr. Norris, the United States probably had a familiar mind setting. Everything went on as nothing was wrong while countless people died in anguish because of a nation's growing economy.

Six years before Williams Wilberforce delivered this speech on May 12, 1789, America had won its independence from Britain after a long-fought War for Independence (Yawp, Ch 5). By 1788, the majority of States in America had ratified the Constitution and the document was in effect (Yawp, Ch 6). George Washington would take the presidential office in April of 1789, a month before the Wilberforce speech (Yawp). Eventually, ten of the amendments would be added by 1791 (Yawp). After Wilberforce's delivered his speech in 1789, it would be another sixty years before the United States abolished slavery completely.

All those that made fortunes from the trade opposed him greatly and tried to delay the approval of the bill with many tactics (William W). When the bill was first introduced, it was rejected by the House by 163 votes to 88. An individual by the name of William Cobbett attacked what he saw as Wilberforce's hypocrisy in campaigning for the slaves to have a better working condition while the British workers living situations were terrible (Hague). He made this statement to Wilberforce, "Never have you done one single act, in favour of the labourers of this country" (Cobbett). Cobbett's life was a lot different than Wilberforce's. He was more connected to the working class than to the parliamentary class (Carroll). Therefore, Cobbett saw that Wilberforce's proposal of the abolishment of the slave trade would have a direct impact on workers.

A question I have for William Wilberforce that has been left unanswered by his speech would be this: "Why did the speech only focus on the slave trade and not the whole aspect of

slavery in Britain's Empire?" The explanation for this is found on his tomb. On Wilberforce's tomb, this was engraved: "The Blessing of God, removed from English the guilt of the African Slave Trade, and prepared the way for the Abolition of slavery in every colony of the empire..." (William Wilberforce & family, Westminster Abbey, n.d.). Trying to abolish slavery as a whole in the empire was nearly impossible from the start. In a way, Wilberforce must gain a foothold on slavery. On March 25, 1807, the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was established, and the Slave Trade ended. However, as much as Wilberforce tried to advocate for all slaves in the empire, Parliament refused to ban slavery, and it was not until parliamentary reform removed the majority of its supporters (William W). After Wilberforce wrote one last petition regarding this matter, and on July 26, 1833, the Abolition of Slavery bill passed in the House of Commons. Wilberforce died three days after hearing this wonderful news. The foothold that was established three decades prior to this finally paid off. Slavery was prohibited altogether in Britain.

In conclusion, Wilberforce was known for giving the Abolishment speech. About two years after his speech was given, John Wesley stated this to him, "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils ... Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might, till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away before it" (Wesley). This indicated how much of an impact the speech made to the world. The legacy of William Wilberforce's speech and life "tells man what a believer can do, and what the world would be without Evangelical truth and vital godliness" (Wilberforce). The religious factors in Wilberforce's life are what motivated his effort to suppress the slave trade (Samuel W). Wilberforce is known for being the great abolitionist and one of the Presbyterian Review's spiritual heroes (Ritchie).

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