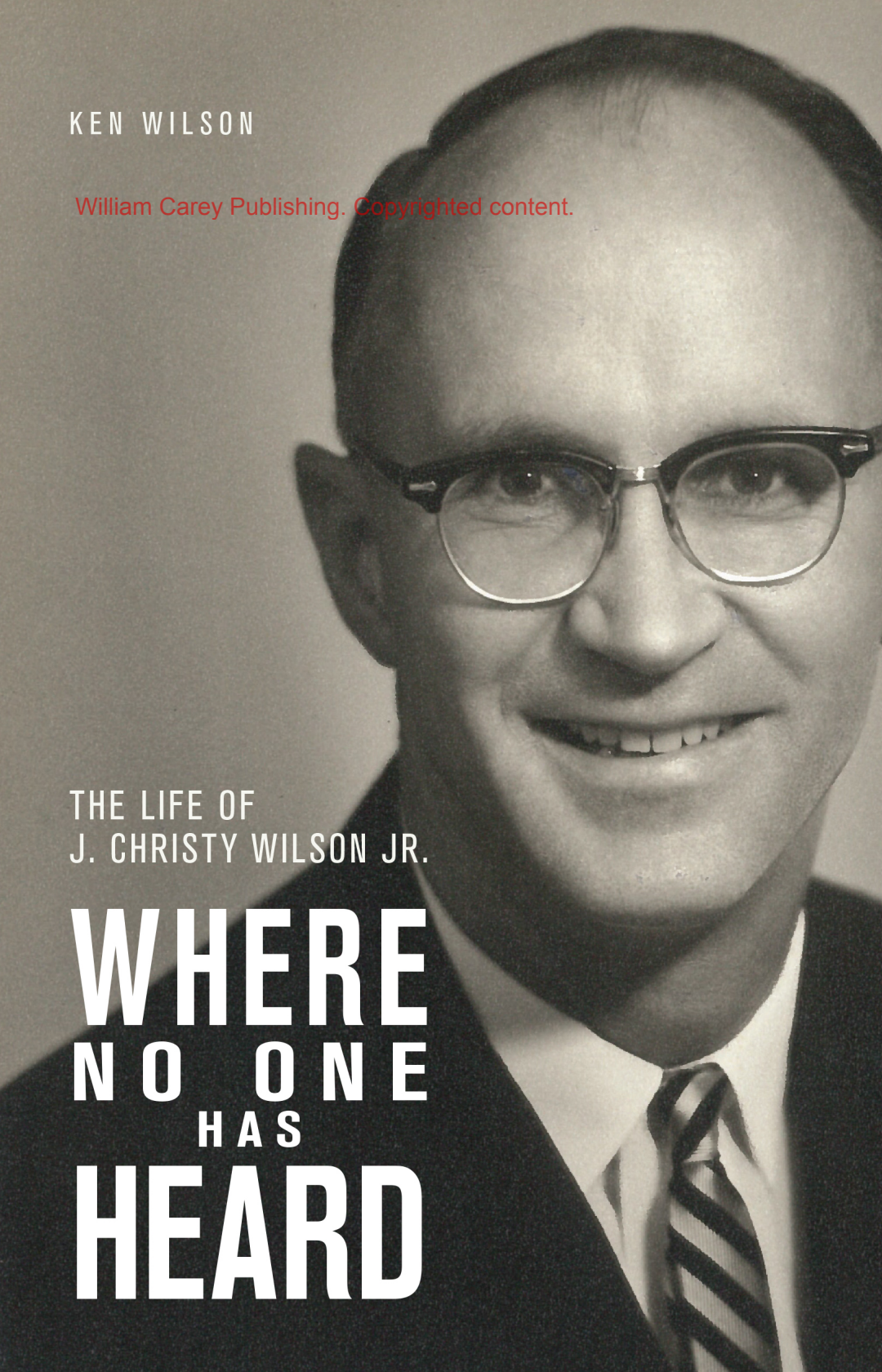
KEN WILSON

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THE LIFE OF
J. CHRISTY WILSON JR.

WHERE NO ONE HAS HEARD

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CHAPTER 1
FAMILY ROOTS

And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed–all because you have obeyed me.
Genesis 22:18

The year was 1918. J. Christy Wilson (Sr.) had just obtained a crisp new ticket for passage on a ship preparing to cross the Atlantic Ocean. He was a passionate and ambitious Princeton student, eager to begin serving as a chaplain for the troops fighting in "the war to end all wars." However, on Monday, November 11, the day before he was to set sail, Germany signed an armistice in a railroad carriage in the French town of Compiègne. The Great War abruptly ended. And Christy's chance to serve was seemingly lost.

Most of the world greeted that historic day with an overwhelming sense of joy and relief. Christy Wilson was certainly among them. But now he also felt an unsettling blend of confusion and uncertainty. How could such timing have occurred? And now that he could no longer serve as a chaplain for the fighting soldiers, what would his immediate future hold?

One of Christy's classmates and friends at Princeton Theological Seminary, William Miller, hung a map of the world over his bed in his dormitory room to serve as a prayer guide. He would regularly kneel and pray, "Lord, I'll serve you anywhere in the world you want me to. Show me where you want me to go." Shortly after the armistice, sensing his friend's dismay, he approached Christy and said, "You're so disappointed you couldn't go overseas for your country. How about going overseas for your Lord?"

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Christy and his new wife, Fern, soon joined the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). Along with more than 100,000 other young people, they signed SVM decision cards that read "God helping me, I purpose to be a foreign missionary." They volunteered to go to Persia, Christy being the hundredth volunteer that William Miller had recruited for foreign missions. The following year, Christy, Fern, their young son Jack, and William departed together from New York. They were destined for the other side of the world, determined to bring Christ to the people of Persia.

Revolution was wreaking havoc in Russia as their ship crossed the Atlantic, passed through the Mediterranean Sea, and docked in Istanbul. Another ship transported them through the Black Sea to Russia. Finally, crossing several war zones, they journeyed by train and stagecoach until they reached their destination—Tabriz, Persia. Their journey from New York to their new home in Tabriz, close to Russia's southern border, had taken three months. Christy Wilson was just twenty-eight years old when he first arrived in Tabriz; he was to spend the next two decades of his life ministering in the land now known as Iran, the place where he would also raise his children.

• • •

J. Christy Wilson Sr. was born in Columbus, Nebraska, in 1891, the first son of Charles C. and Lillie Gray Moore Wilson. The initial "J." in his name was added as an afterthought: his father liked the way it looked in the signature. (Lillie wanted only the name Christy, but she decided that the "J." would be acceptable as long as it did not stand for Jay. While the signature may have looked attractive, the added initial caused considerable confusion in future years.)

Christy would grow up to be a strong Christian, with the defining mark of his life being a passion for the word of God. He was a dedicated and lively man who often had a twinkle in his blue eyes. Friends could tell when he was nearby, because he was usually whistling a tune, humming a song, or jingling his keys. When he needed to focus on something, he possessed an acute skill for tuning out everything around him.

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One of Christy's early career ambitions was to be a sports broadcaster, and he played many sports as a child and young adult—baseball, football, tennis, and boxing. However, he also sensed a call into vocational ministry at a young age. During the hot summer months of 1914, after earning his bachelor's degree from the University of Kansas, Christy commenced two years of service as the newspaper editor for the *Daily Post* in Idaho Falls, Idaho. Finally, answering his call to ministry, he ventured east to New Jersey and enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary.

During his years at Princeton, Christy had several professors who provided backbone to his faith and conviction to his theology. "They straightened me out," he later admitted. He had previously picked up liberal ideas, but these respected professors brought him to a thoroughly evangelical position. Benjamin B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen left the most notable handprints upon the heart and mind of this young seminarian.

On July 19, 1918, Christy was ordained by the Lehigh Presbytery in the United Presbyterian Church, and a year later he received his two degrees from Princeton. 1919 was also the year in which he journeyed to Tabriz under the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. While his primary ministry was that of an itinerant evangelist, his servant's heart also led him into a variety of other roles that others did not want. During a season of unusual suffering, Christy smuggled wheat across the Russian border to feed starving Armenians.

During Christy's twenty-two years in Persia, an unwritten agreement governed all mission ventures within the nation: the Presbyterians would minister in the northern part of Persia and the British Anglican mission society in the southern part. They worked closely together, and Christy headed up the mission collaboration in the Middle East. He also had the opportunity to participate in archaeological expeditions in the neighboring closed country of Afghanistan.

Christy loved fun. One of his hobbies was playing tennis, and he built a tennis court for the people of Tabriz. This peculiar game puzzled the Persians, however. They would sit and watch, confusion

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written on their faces. "Why do you waste your time chasing that little ball?" they asked. "Why don't you let your servants chase that ball and you sit and drink tea?"

In 1941, shortly after World War II had commenced, Christy began a twenty-year tenure as associate professor of missions and dean of field services at Princeton Theological Seminary. He followed in the large footsteps of Dr. Samuel Zwemer, his mentor and spiritual hero, who preceded him as professor of missions at Princeton. During his years on the faculty at Princeton Seminary, Christy authored several books and traveled with Dr. Frank Laubach's Literacy Campaign in Afghanistan as interpreter and linguistic aid. This relationship would play a vital role in the life of his second child, Christy Jr.

Throughout his years in Persia and at Princeton, Christy was blessed with a devoted partner in marriage and ministry. When he was a student at the University of Kansas, people kept telling Christy about a cute co-ed named Fern Wilson. "Is she your sister?" they would ask, curious about the common last name. "No," he would always reply. "But I'd better meet her," he sometimes threw in as an afterthought. He eventually looked her up, and the two fell in love soon after meeting.



J. Christy Wilson Sr. at the University of Kansas
Courtesy of the Wilson family



Fern Wilson as a young mother in Persia
Courtesy of the Wilson family

Christy proposed to Fern by telegraph while he was at Princeton. After joyfully accepting, she traveled across the country to meet

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him in Washington, DC, where they were married. This was to be the beginning of a fifty-six-year partnership in marriage, missions, and ministry.

Fern Wilson was the youngest of eleven children, the daughter of a Civil War veteran father and a Cherokee mother. Like Christy, she was a strong Christian; she felt that her job in life was to pray, and it was this passion for prayer more than anything else that her children caught from her. She walked five miles on most days and would pray as she walked.

Fern had an uncommon gift of seeing into people's circumstances, traits, and character. She loved to sit at airports and watch people go by. "Children at home, more than one," she might say, and usually she was correct in her assessments. Perhaps as a counterpart to her sharp intuition, her speech could be cuttingly direct at times. She wasn't one to mince words with anyone, and this made her somewhat intimidating.

Fern's training in teaching and home economics served her well on the mission field of northern Persia: she was a good housekeeper, a good cook, and a good mother to her children. She also helped her husband with the mission work, teaching and working in the church. An unusual exchange of gifts reveals the playfulness and synergy of their partnership: Fern loved roses and knew how to take care of them, so for her birthday Christy would give her a bag of manure as fertilizer. For Christy's birthday, since he did the dishes after every meal, Fern would give him an apron.

Christy and Fern gifted the world with four children. Their first, Jack, was born while Christy was at Princeton, and was just a toddler when the family departed for Persia. Jack was never a good student and didn't graduate from high school. When he was old enough, he joined the army. Since they let him choose where he would be stationed, he asked for placement in Hawaii—but his timing was fateful: he found himself in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He served as a truck driver, and when the Japanese bombs began to fall from the skies, he hid underneath his truck.

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