

# Billy Graham Turns 90

*Thousands of letters from around the world tell the 20th century's most famous preacher how his ministry changed their lives.*



[] Billy Graham, whose simple message of salvation through Christ has not changed in more than 50 years, celebrated his 90th birthday on Friday by receiving in his mountainside home thousands of heartwarming letters from around the world.

"I never expected to live this long, and it is hard to believe I have reached the age of 90," Graham said in a statement. "Every day is a gift from God, no matter how old we are."

The massive letter-writing tribute to the world-renowned preacher has been an ongoing project of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) for the last several months.

Family and friends who wanted to honor Graham's faithful witness for Christ collected tens of thousands of testimonies by mail and online () from people whose lives have been changed by Graham's ministry.

"Dear Billy," wrote one person, "I first heard you preach in San Diego in 1958. I went forward that day and began my walk with Jesus Christ. I actually ran down from the bleachers because I didn't want to get there too late! Best decision I've ever made in my lifetime. Today, I would like to wish you a blessed birthday with the presence of our God being with you."

In another post, a 29-year-old South African evangelist said Graham's books helped disciple him after he accepted Christ 10 years ago. "Today, because the Lord used your ministry to inspire me, I am a full-time evangelist," he wrote. "Your integrity, love for Jesus and compassion for souls will always motivate me and my wife as we continue winning thousands of young people for Jesus Christ."

In more than six decades of ministry, Graham has preached to more than 200 million people in person and in 185 countries. He has also prayed with and counseled every American president from Harry Truman to George W. Bush.

Yet friends say Graham's humble faith consistently placed the fame of his potent influence in check. "Billy always encouraged us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought," Cliff Barrows, a longtime friend and co-worker of Graham's, told *Charisma* in the past. "He warned us not to reach up and touch the glory of God."

After Barack Obama won the presidential election, Graham encouraged Christians to pray for the "many challenges" the president-elect faces. "I urge everyone to join me in pledging our support and prayers as [Obama] begins the difficult task ahead," Graham said.

Apolitical attitudes stem from Graham's long-held worldview—one that is charity-based and nondenominational. His wide embrace of both Christians and nonbelievers has not been without criticism, but Graham has always managed to rise above controversies. "It's been in Dad's heart his whole life to see unity in the body of Christ," son Ned Graham told *Charisma* in 2005. "But that has not happened, and it has grieved him and caused him massive internal pain. But he would never criticize or condemn anyone."

Suffering from frail health for years, Graham has spent most of his time in the Ashville, N.C., home where he and his wife, Ruth, raised their five children: Gigi, Anne, Ruth, Franklin and Ned.

Those closest to Graham say his grief over the loss of his wife in 2007 is constant. "I look forward even more to the time when I will be reunited with my wife in heaven, and neither of us will ever experience again the physical aches and pains brought about by age and illness," Graham said.

Graham has participated in ministry board meetings as his health has allowed, ever since handing over BGEA operations in

2000 to his son Franklin, who along with Graham's grandson Will lead evangelistic crusades worldwide. "I am proud of Franklin's leadership ... and the way [he] is showing the love of Christ to a hurting world, and using new technology to share the gospel message," Graham said.

Parkinson's disease has riddled Graham's body with pain and discomfort in recent years, and he has suffered everything from a broken hip to prostate cancer to the installation of a brain shunt.

But Graham said it's important for Christians to remember the pain of their physical bodies is only a temporary burden. "I have discovered that just because we grow weaker physically as we age, it doesn't mean that we must grow weaker spiritually," he said. "In fact, we ought to be growing stronger spiritually because our eyes ought to be on eternity and heaven—on the things that really matter."

Friends and family say Graham's mind is sharp, and he is writing another book about growing older to help people prepare emotionally and spiritually for what he says can be the most fulfilling years of life.

Graham will mark his birthday with a family dinner in North Carolina on Friday night.

**—Paul Steven Ghiringhelli with Sandra Chambers**