

Billy Graham: Growing Old Greatest Surprise of My Life

Growing old has been the greatest surprise of my life. The young live for the here and now. Thinking ahead seems to be in the form of dreams that promise fairy tale endings. Though I am nearing 93, it doesn't seem so long ago that I was one of those dreamers, filled with great expectation, planning a life that would satisfy my every desire. Since there were few things in life that I loved more than baseball, as a young man I dedicated myself to the sport and hoped that my passion for the game would lead me straight to the major leagues.

My goal was simple: stand at home plate, with bat in hand, immersed in an important game. I often pictured myself hitting a big-league grand slam into the stadium seats and hearing the crowd roar with thunder as I ran the bases—nearing home.

I never would have guessed what lay in store. After giving my heart to the Lord Jesus Christ—repenting of my sin and putting my entire life into His hands—I laid down my dreams, along with my bat, and fully embraced God's plan by faith, trusting that He would lead me all the way. He did, He is and He will.

As I look back, I see how God's hand guided me. I sense His Spirit with me today, and most comforting is the knowledge that He will not forsake me during this last stretch as I am nearing home. If that doesn't give me a sense of hope, nothing else will.

I have remained a baseball fan, not necessarily of one team over another but of the game itself—the teamwork, the strategy and the challenge of defeating the opponent. But baseball was not God's plan for me. Nevertheless, He taught me how to integrate these important components into service for Him. The Lord has blessed me with a loyal team of men and women whose

hearts are united with mine—set on leading others to an eternal home with Christ. Our team strategy has been to fulfill the Lord's command to go into the whole world and preach Christ for the purpose of defeating the opponent—Satan.

When I started preaching, it was never my intention to preach inside a baseball stadium or any other stadium for that matter. I was accustomed to preaching in churches when I was pastoring and in auditoriums when I was traveling with Youth for Christ (YFC). At the close of the war in 1945, several of us on the YFC team had the privilege of preaching at Soldier Field in Chicago.

The details are sketchy now, but I recall the first time I stood in an outdoor arena to preach the gospel. I had been invited to hold an evangelistic citywide meeting in Shreveport, La. When the local auditorium could not hold the crowds, the organizers had no choice but to move the event outside. Uncertain as to how people would feel about attending an evangelistic rally in a large arena, I was rather nervous.

Then I thought about my boyhood dreams. Instead of bat in hand at home plate, I had what I now know is a much greater privilege: to stand behind a pulpit, with Bible in hand, immersed in the power of the Holy Spirit. I was not performing before fan-filled bleachers but pronouncing the Word of God to sin-filled hearts searching for truth.

Life, indeed, is full of surprises.

Now, all these years later, I still enjoy watching a batter successfully cross home plate, but nothing thrills me more than seeing the Holy Spirit at work in hearts as the gospel is carried into stadiums, across the airwaves and around the world. A baseball may be driven into the farthest corner of the largest stadium, but the Word of God travels to the farthest corners of the earth, proclaiming the Good News of salvation. It still excites me just to think about the impact.

Jesus Christ did conquer death, and by His resurrection He was victorious. Before He left earth, He imparted to His followers the greatest of all strategies: Go into the world and preach the gospel. After listening to His words, they looked up to see their Savior nearing home.

I wonder. What home are you preparing for? Some people spend their lives building ultimate dream homes so they can enjoy their twilight years. Some find themselves exchanging their bank accounts for residence within the gates of a retirement center. Others spend their last days in nursing homes.

For those of you who do not know Him, choosing your eternal home is the most important decision you will ever make. For the Christian the last mile of the way is a testimony to God's faithfulness, for He said, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2).

Excerpted from Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well, by Billy Graham. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tenn. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version.