

Gospel Singer George Beverly Shea Turns 103

As he turns 103 on Wednesday, **George Beverly Shea's** heart is as joyful as that of a child.

"Karlene and I rejoice in the Lord's overwhelming grace to give me 103 years of life!" he says.

And while he won't be partying like a teenager, the youthful centenarian will celebrate the day in the company of his family and in quiet reflection, reading greetings from around the world now pouring in to him.

Shea says he is especially thankful for the dear people with whom he has ministered and traveled the world since the day he met **Billy Graham** in 1943. "For all these years, the fellowship of the BGEA team has been precious as I have sought to serve the Lord," says Shea.

As we join in celebrating 103 of God's blessings, let's take a journey back to Shea's early days.

What was your life like as you were growing up?

I was born in 1909 in Winchester, Ontario, where my dad served as pastor of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Six of us were born during that time, and when I was 8, we moved to upstate New York. My mother was a church organist, and at home we had a piano that came from England. Mother played it so beautifully. She instilled in all of us a love for the old hymns. She would wake us up oft-times in the morning with an old song titled, "Singing I Go." She would play an E-flat chord, and we would hear her voice: "Singing I go along life's road/For Jesus has lifted my load."

Sunday mornings it was another hymn: "Lord, in the morning

Thou shalt hear/My voice ascending high/To Thee will I direct
my prayer /To Thee lift up mine eye.”

I have always loved the hymns. All eight of us remember the times when we took our Lord Jesus as Savior. In our home we had prayer three times a day around the table. Dad would read from the Bible in the evening—just a couple of verses, and the prayer was brief, because he knew that children became restless.

So you came to Christ at an early age.

Yes, at 5 or 6. But there were times when I needed to rededicate my life to the Lord Jesus. When I was 18, my dad was pastoring a church in Ottawa, and I was feeling not too spiritual. The church was having “special effort,” as they called it, for a week. I remember that on Friday night, Dad came down from the pulpit, and tenderly placed his hand on my shoulder. He whispered, “I think tonight might be the night, son, when you come back to the Lord.” Whatever Dad did or said, I listened to him and respected him.

And, yes, that was the night!

You composed “I’d Rather Have Jesus” when you were 23. How did that happen?

My mother had been to a meeting in New York City and brought me a poem written by Rhea F. Miller, “I’d Rather Have Jesus.” On a Sunday morning, with the poem in front of me, I sat down at the piano, and the melody came to my heart and mind. When I finished that first verse and chorus, Mother, with tears in her eyes, came from an adjoining room and put her arms around me. She had wanted that poem to have an effect on my life, and it seemed that after that morning better things happened all along the way.

What are some of the life lessons you’ve learned about trusting Christ?

My father used to tell my brothers, Whitney and Alton, and me: "There will be many times when you don't feel connected. The Lord is with you. Just look up—keep that vertical relationship. Practice His presence in your life."

I've had moments, even when working for Mr. Graham, where I've felt as if I weren't effective enough, and I've known discouragement. But I go to the Lord, and He extends His grace. On many occasions I go to the piano and play an old favorite. God always encourages through His Spirit and renews our strength.

I have learned to look up, and He's there. He loves us. He has given me more than I deserve.

I'm so grateful for my dear spouse, Karlene, and for my late wife, Erma, who went to be with the Lord many years ago. I'm thankful too for my children and grandchildren.

There are many wonderful stories of this life journey. One is of a gentleman who came to the Haringay meetings in London. He had been brought by his neighbor. He came thinking that he would just sit and make fun of everything.

When I got up to sing, he was talking out loud and probably criticizing as he heard me singing, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." But when I got to the line, "He's got the tiny little baby in His hands," the man slumped in his seat, probably thinking of his little one, who was ill at home. During Mr. Graham's invitation, the man stood, came forward and gave his heart to the Lord Jesus.

As someone who has walked with the Lord for quite some time, what advice do you have for other Christians?

Keep your devotions, study the Word, enjoy His presence, and learn from Him daily!

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