

Ruth Bell Graham: A Life Well Lived

✘ *Ruth Bell Graham, wife of Billy Graham, was born at Qingjiang, Kiangsu, China, on June 10, 1920. She went to be with the Lord on June 14, 2007, at the age of 87. We look back at her life and legacy on what would have been her 91st birthday.*

Everyone who knew Ruth Bell Graham knew that she loved Jesus and she loved people. In her writing, speaking and simple acts of kindness—to neighbors, friends and anyone who needed a lift—she demonstrated the grace and mercy of the Savior she first met when she was a little girl in China.

At Home in China

Happy Christians, Ruth once said, were a part of her heritage. Her parents, Dr. Nelson and Virginia Bell, were medical missionaries at Love and Mercy Hospital in Tsingkiangpu, China, in the difficult years from 1916 until World War II began.

China had been in upheaval for centuries. A 1911 revolution overthrew a regime that had held power since 1644. Foreign countries had exploited the nation in the 1800s, and as a result, the Chinese people resented all foreigners, calling them “foreign devils.” Warlords, bandits, the Japanese, the Communists and the Nationalists fought one another frequently, and sometimes these conflicts became wars against foreigners—with no distinction made for missionaries. Often, non-Chinese were urged to flee to avoid kidnapping and death, and afterward they returned to looted homes.

In spite of this environment, laughter and songs rang out from the Bell home on the hospital grounds. Ruth, the second-oldest child, was born June 10, 1920. She and her siblings, Rosa,

Virginia and Clayton, learned the basics of Christian faith early through their parents' example of daily prayer and Bible study, in addition to family prayers before breakfast each morning. Ruth could not remember a morning that her father was not reading his Bible or kneeling in prayer when she got up.

The Bells demonstrated to their children a great love for Jesus Christ and a dedication to the medical and evangelistic work of the hospital. Ruth recalled that her mother "built a house, had three children, buried one, had two more, taught her children at home through fifth grade, ran the women's clinic, always had a missionary or two in the home, ... entertained well and often, and wrote home faithfully."

Dr. Bell kept a busy schedule too, as surgical chief and administrative superintendent at the hospital. Although the hospital had a pastor on staff, Bell made the healing of souls a priority in his work, gently explaining the gospel to his patients. This atmosphere of love for Jesus, for family and for the Chinese people, helped shape the woman that Ruth Bell Graham would become.

The Bell children grew up hearing stories of martyrdom and sacrifice among missionaries and Chinese believers. These testimonies affected Ruth deeply, and Rosa often heard her little sister praying that she would die as a martyr for Christ before the year ended. Rosa, the more practical of the two, thought the prayer dreadful and followed with one of her own: "Lord, don't pay any attention to her!"

Despite her tendency to be dramatic, Ruth became best known for her tender heart. She had a menagerie of pets, including baby ducks and chicks, and even took some to bed with her at times. Every dead animal, pet or not, had to be given a funeral. This childhood tenderness toward the defenseless provided a glimpse of how she would later react to the spiritually lost and helpless around her.

Leaving Home

A seeming injustice struck Ruth at 13. So that she would have the education she needed to return to the United States one day, her parents sent her to Pyeng Yang Foreign School in what is now Pyongyang, North Korea. Quietly, so as not to disturb her roommates, Ruth cried with homesickness every night for weeks.

Several days in the infirmary finally brought some comfort when, during a brief illness, she read all 150 psalms. It was the beginning of what she later called her boot camp. God used homesickness to teach her to find solace in His presence during what would be a lifetime of separations from loved ones.

On Aug. 13, 1937, Shanghai, the capital of China, fell to the Japanese. Having finished high school, Ruth was back in Tsingkiangpu to get ready for college. But her September trip to Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill., was delayed when the Japanese mined the Yangtze River and destroyed the Nanking-Shanghai railway.

The missionaries were urged to go north to Haichow, where a United States Navy destroyer would take them to the port city of Tsingtao. Reluctantly, they made the difficult journey by canal and train. Dr. Bell arranged passage for Ruth on a United States troopship that was evacuating military families.

On Oct. 22, Ruth said goodbye to her family and left China. Although her family would remain in China until 1941, it would be decades before Ruth returned to the land of her birth.

First Impressions

Ruth arrived safely at Wheaton and studied Bible and art. After growing up with air raids and bandits, she did not fully appreciate seemingly unnecessary rules such as curfew—until the dorm mother caught her climbing through a window, returning late from a Friday night date. On Monday, the dean

scolded her harshly and confined her to campus. Crushed, Ruth worried that she had disgraced her parents, but the faculty soon realized that the infraction stemmed from naivete and lifted her sentence.

Ruth soon settled in, made friends and became popular with the boys. She did not attach herself to anyone in particular—until her second year, when a new student named Billy Graham flew past her on the stairs of East Blanchard Hall.

“He’s surely in a hurry,” she thought. She’d heard about this new student and his fiery preaching. That Sunday morning, she heard him praying during a prayer meeting.

“*There is a man who knows to Whom he is speaking,*” she thought.

Billy had heard about Ruth too. His friend Johnny Streater had described her as one of the prettiest and most spiritual girls on campus. When Billy finally saw her, it was love at first sight.

After watching her from afar for a few weeks, Billy gathered his courage and asked Ruth to attend a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. She accepted, and after the date she went back to her room and prayed, “Lord, if You’d let me serve You with that man, I’d consider it the greatest privilege of my life.”

Billy and Ruth continued dating and began talking about marriage, but one issue stood in the way: For years, Ruth had felt that God was calling her to be a missionary in Tibet. While Billy wasn’t opposed to becoming a missionary, he felt a strong calling to preach the Gospel as an evangelist. Ruth tried persuading him otherwise, but it caused more tension. Eventually, they took time apart to pray about the matter.

As Ruth told the story in her book *It’s My Turn*, it was obvious that she was the one trying to give Billy a calling to Tibet—not God. Finally Billy turned to her and said, “Do you

believe that God has brought us together?"

She did.

"In that case," he replied, "God will lead me and you will do the following." That pivotal conversation settled the issue, although Ruth believed strongly in the old saying, "When two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary."

The following summer, while Billy was preaching at a church in Florida, he received a thick letter from Ruth, postmarked July 6, 1941. "I'll marry you," the first sentence read. An ecstatic Billy preached that evening, although afterward he didn't know what he'd preached about. The pastor said he wasn't sure anyone else knew, either. Billy and Ruth were married Aug. 13, 1943.

In later years, Ruth had no regrets about letting go of Tibet to marry Billy Graham. She would have been in Tibet no more than four years before the political situation would have forced her to leave. And of that time, Ruth later wrote: "I would have missed the opportunity of a lifetime of serving God with the finest man I knew, having five terrific children, and 15 [now 19] of the most delightful, interesting and lovable grandchildren imaginable. All this plus an unusual, if not easy, life." God used her desire to go to Tibet to test her willingness to obey Him.

Adaptations

In January 1943, Billy accepted a call to pastor Western Springs Baptist Church, about 20 miles outside of Wheaton. He didn't ask his bride-to-be what she thought of the idea, but Ruth didn't let that stop her from telling him. Pastoring a church, she believed, would sidetrack him from his call to evangelism. It was a lesson that Billy would remember for years to come. Later, under pressure to run for political office, he heeded her advice: "When God calls you to be an evangelist, you don't stoop to be president."

Billy was not accustomed to the strong-willed, and often well-informed, opinions of the Bell women. "Bill was brought up in a house where the women did not question the men," Ruth recalled, "while in the Bell house, that's all we did."

Anne Graham Lotz, the Grahams' second daughter, said: "My daddy didn't have to seek my mother's advice to get it. I remember a time she [told] about him fussing at her because he just didn't want her opinion. He does not like opinionated women, and he [had] a house full of them."

"It takes awhile for a man who's been living independently to take on his partner and consult her. I think in some of those stories Daddy was just learning to be a husband. "Today he would not only consult her opinion, he would respect it and honor it and listen to her."

This story was used with permission from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.