



Billy Graham's new book a spiritual look at growing old

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When Billy Graham was a gangly teenage baseball player, he imagined himself swinging for the stadium wall, loping around the bases, nearing the victorious home run of his dreams. Now, he's turning 93 on Nov. 7. He's frail, with Parkinson's-like symptoms that keep his bent frame bound to a walker and wheelchair. His eyes are too blurred by macular degeneration for reading. Yet, even as he approaches the 100-year mark in his life, he's still crusading - as a spiritual leader and as an author. In a new book next month, he writes about being once more at bat, striking the only home run that matters in a metaphorical stadium.

Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well is a swing for salvation from the evangelist who has tried to take the whole world (or at least 185 nations where he's preached) to heaven with him.

Grant Wacker, professor of Christian history at Duke University, has studied Graham's impact on American culture since the telegenic preacher was a young "role model of masculinity and vibrancy." "Now, he's become a model for aging gracefully despite a disability," Wacker says. "Even with the Parkinson's, you see him soldiering on, still preaching in his own way."

Graham's 30th book may not even be his last. Wagering against him dictating another text to his staff, as he did for *Nearing Home*, may be risky. "He's told me and my sisters, 'I think God is going to let me live to be 95,'" says his son, Franklin Graham.

The trigger for this book was a comment he made in a 2006 interview: "I had been taught all of my life how to die, but no one had ever taught me how to grow old."

No one prepares you for loneliness, for pain, for the grief of losing your soul mate, he now writes. When his wife, Ruth, died in June 2007, he was stunned that she died before he did. He had never envisioned his life without her.

Graham says he wanted the book to be the handbook he never had - spiritual, pragmatic and fearless. He writes: "The Bible says that God has a reason for keeping us here; if He didn't, He would take us to Heaven far sooner."

Since everyone, not just the old, is going to die, readers at any age, he writes, should be busy with discerning why they're still alive and find the spiritual strength to face debilitation and loss. Graham admits, "I can't truthfully say that I have liked growing older."

Franklin Graham, who succeeded his father as head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, says, "To be honest, I didn't think he was going to finish it. There would be a month or two when he was too tired or the medication slowed him down."

"In the last few months, he got a spurt of energy. He's earned the right to give this advice and people will take advice from him where they may not take it from someone else," Franklin Graham says.

The chapters are grounded in Scripture where he finds endless examples of seniors still stepping up to the plate, verses of encouragement and Gospel bits of wisdom.

It's like a mash-up of Psalm 23 ("Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...") with a 21st century how-to on growing old.

Eric Rackow, a critical care physician and CEO of the nation's largest geriatric-care management company, SeniorBridge, says that "People need advice like this to navigate their future."

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/story/2011-10-04/billy-graham-book-nearing-home/50593782/1>