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Newsweek

Pilgrim s Progress

In the twilight, Billy Graham shares what he's learned in reflecting on politics and Scripture, old age and death, mysteries and moderation. A NEWSWEEK exclusive.

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Newsweek

Aug. 14, 2006 issue - Earlier this summer, on a warm Carolina evening, Billy Graham awoke in the middle of the night. He had been asleep in his bedroom at the end of a long hall off the main part of the log house he and his wife, Ruth, have lived in for 50 years. The house, which sits atop a small mountain in Montreat, N.C., is sprawling but simple; the only hint a celebrated figure lives here is a mechanical gate, a precaution suggested by J. Edgar Hoover. At 87 Graham uses a hospital bed; Ruth ("that angel in there," he calls her) sleeps next door. Over the stone fireplace in his room—dark this time of year; the air conditioner hums loudly—hangs a homemade family tree decorated with snapshots of his five children and dozens of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. An enormous television sits in the corner. Graham remains a news junkie, following developments in the Mideast, North Korea—and in nearby Durham, where he keeps an eye on coverage of the Duke lacrosse rape case.

On this particular night, Graham lay in the darkness, trying to recite the 23rd Psalm from memory. He begins: *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... "* Then, for a moment, he loses the thread. "I missed a sequence, and that disturbed me," Graham recalls. It was frustrating—the man who has preached the Gospel to more human beings than anyone in history does not like to forget critical verses of the Bible—but in the end the last line comes back to him: *"Surely thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* Relieved, he drifts back to sleep.

To everything there is a season, says the author of Ecclesiastes, and for Billy Graham this is the season of coping with the toll of time. Getting around is harder; so is recalling familiar Scriptures. Yet rather than simply withdrawing into the shadows to enjoy a few richly deserved quiet years with his wife and family, Graham believes he may have been called to a last mission: to soldier on by faith, praying and pondering and sharing what he has come to see and feel and think in the twilight of his life. In the same way he refused to give up searching his memory for the verses to the psalm, he seems congenitally incapable of surrendering completely to the weakness of the body. "All my life I've been taught how to die, but no one ever taught me how to grow old," Graham remarked one day to his daughter Anne Graham Lotz. "And I told him, 'Well, Daddy, you are now teaching all of us'." The lesson of age, Anne says, is this: "When you get older, secondary things, like politics, begin to fall away, and the primary thing becomes primary again—and for Daddy, the primary thing is, as Jesus said, to try to love God totally, and to love our neighbor as ourselves."

And that, in a way, is Billy Graham's last testament. As his days dwindle, the man whose heyday was consumed with preaching and with presidents is increasingly reflective. In interviews with NEWSWEEK in recent months, Graham has made it clear that partisan politics and the culture wars feel far away. He will not offer opinions on stem-cell research, for instance, and he has stopped giving political counsel to the powerful, a habit that began with Eisenhower. He was tempted to call President George W. Bush in the run-up to the Iraq war to advise him on the difference between Sunnis and Shiites, but decided against it.

You can see more from a mountain, and from the perspective of years. Graham believes both the right and the left in America have sometimes gone too far, elevating transitory issues when, in Graham's view, the core message of the Gospel, and the love of God "for all people" should take priority: "The older I get, the more important the eternal becomes to me personally." His mind is on the heavenly more than the temporal, on the central promises of Christianity more than on the passing political parade.

It was not always this way. After the 1963 March on Washington, Graham said: "Only when Christ comes again will the little white children of Alabama walk hand in hand with little black children." In 1965, he dismissed demonstrations for peace in Vietnam, saying, "It seems the only way to gain attention today is to organize a march and protest something." Just 10 years ago, he told the St. Paul Pioneer Press that "I don't think there is a single social issue I haven't spoken on."

But more recent years have given him something he had little of in his decades of global evangelism: time to think both more deeply and more broadly. As he has grown older, Graham has come to an appreciation of complexity and a gentleness of spirit that sets him apart from many other high-profile figures in America's popular religious milieu—including, judging from their public remarks, his own son Franklin Graham, and men such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

Others relish the battlefield; Graham now prizes peace. He is a man of unwavering faith who refuses to be judgmental; a steady social conservative in private who actually does hate the sin but loves the sinner; a resolute Christian who declines to render absolute verdicts about who will get into heaven and who will not; a man concerned about traditional morality—he is still slightly embarrassed that he kissed "two or three girls" before he kissed his wife—who will not be dragged into what he calls the "hot-button issues" of the hour. Graham's tranquil voice, though growing fainter, has rarely been more relevant.

An old man's musings will not bring peace to the Middle East or stop religious conservatives from demonizing homosexuality or religious liberals from demonizing religious conservatives, but they are musings that resonate in a global climate shaken and shaped by the war in Iraq, the threat of terror and the violence between Hizbullah and Israel. "I've been watching the news from the Middle East full time," Graham says. "I think that history began there, and it is going to end there. The whole Bible is centered in the Middle East and so many of the events that are taking place in some ways already have taken place many times, and my heart goes out to all those people who are suffering on all sides ... I pray for those people constantly—they're on my mind, they're on my heart. I pray that somehow they will find a solution. I'm not sure they will ever find a permanent solution. Christ, who I believe is going to come back, will settle all of those things in a great period of righteousness."

The administration cannot count on the Second Coming to resolve the crisis, but Graham's spirit of moderation, of concern for both sides, is welcome not only overseas but at home, for Americans seem hungry for a ceasefire in the culture wars. In a Pew Research Center survey released last week, 66 percent of all Americans want a "middle ground" on abortion. Six out of 10 white evangelicals also support compromise; meanwhile, 44 percent of white evangelicals—the highest figure recorded in five years of polling—back stem-cell research.

Though flocks of the faithful have lionized Graham, turning his crusades into epic events, his books into best sellers and even his house into a shrine, he remains contradictory and controversial. One of the most formidable figures in the 2,000-year story of Christian evangelism, he is the first to tell you he is far from perfect. He was caught on tape exchanging anti-Semitic remarks with Richard Nixon, and he allowed himself to be used as an occasional political prop in the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon years, bestowing benediction on the presidents with whom he golfed, prayed and embraced—often as photographers clicked away. Such images have long led critics to dismiss Graham as a name-dropping, theologically naive showman.

The new interviews with NEWSWEEK, however, reveal a more intriguing figure than either his followers or his critics might assume. He is an evangelist still unequivocally committed to the Gospel, but increasingly thinks God's ways and means are veiled from human eyes and wrapped in mystery. "There are many things that I don't understand," he says. He does not believe that Christians need to take every verse of the Bible literally; "sincere Christians," he says, "can disagree about the details of Scripture and theology—absolutely." And he is an old man who loved the life he led and acknowledges that aging and facing the prospect of death are things he has only recently come to embrace. "I can't say that I like the fact that I can't do

everything I once did," he says, "but more than ever, as I read my Bible and pray and spend time with my wife, I see each day as a gift from God, and we can't take that gift for granted."

Graham has always been torn between absolutism and moderation. Born four days before the Armistice in 1918 and raised by Presbyterian parents on a 300-acre dairy farm near Charlotte, N.C., he left home for Bob Jones's fundamentalist college in the fall of 1936, but soon dropped out, moving on to a Florida Bible college and ultimately to Wheaton in Illinois. Ordained as a Baptist preacher in 1939, he preached a conservative but not fundamentalist brand of Christianity with a style that took him to six different continents and into the company of 10 presidents. He was ubiquitous, opining on issues ranging from civil rights to Vietnam to nuclear arms. Given Graham's Southern roots, the Jim Crow question was especially fraught. Graham made occasional go-slow remarks that undercut the movement, but he also refused to hold segregated crusades and asked Martin Luther King Jr. to appear with him in New York in 1957. The two men once traveled together to Brazil, holding long talks. (Like many intimates, Graham called King "Mike.")

After years of vigor, infirmity came with little warning. Graham was perennially mindful of his health; his biographer William Martin once noted how much Graham amused his staff by "racing off to the Mayo Clinic at the slightest hint of illness." In 1999, when he turned 80, "All of a sudden it all changed, and I became physically very limited," Graham says. There were brain operations, a broken hip and a broken pelvis. He now suffers from prostate cancer and has shunts in his brain to fight hydrocephalus. Meanwhile, Ruth, a funny, devout and feisty woman, is also ailing. In 1979 she was fixing a swing for the grandchildren and fell from a tree—it was 14 feet to the ground, Graham says—breaking bones and inaugurating a long period of pain. (Ruth was, and is, a wonderful ballast to Graham. Barbara Bush, another formidable woman with a peripatetic husband, likes to tell this story: when Ruth was asked by an interviewer whether, as a Christian woman, she had ever considered divorce, Mrs. Graham replied, "Divorce? No. Murder? Yes.")

Graham spends hours now with his Bible, at once savoring and reconsidering old stories and old lessons. While he believes Scripture is the inspired, authoritative word of God, he does not read the Bible as though it were a collection of Associated Press bulletins straightforwardly reporting on events in the ancient Middle East. "I'm not a literalist in the sense that every single jot and tittle is from the Lord," Graham says. "This is a little difference in my thinking through the years." He has, then, moved from seeing every word of Scripture as literally accurate to believing that parts of the Bible are figurative—a journey that began in 1949, when a friend challenged his belief in inerrancy during a conference in southern California's San Bernardino Mountains. Troubled, Graham wandered into the woods one night, put his Bible on a stump and said, "Lord, I don't understand all that is in this book, I can't explain it all, but I accept it by faith as your divine word."

Now, more than half a century later, he is far from questioning the fundamentals of the faith. He is not saying Jesus is just another lifestyle choice, nor is he backtracking on essentials such as the Incarnation or the Atonement. But he is arguing that the Bible is open to interpretation, and fair-minded Christians may disagree or come to different conclusions about specific points. Like Saint Paul, he believes human beings on this side of paradise can grasp only so much. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror," Paul wrote, "then we shall see face to face." *Then* believers shall see*:* not now, but *then*.

Debates over the exact meaning of the word "day" in Genesis (Graham says it is figurative; on the other hand, he thinks Jonah was actually swallowed by a whale) or whether the "Red Sea" is better translated as "sea of reeds"—which takes Moses' miracle out of the realm of Cecil B. DeMille—or the actual size of ancient armies in a given battle may seem picayune to some. For many conservative believers, however, questioning any word of the Bible can cast doubt on all Scripture. Graham's position, then, while hardly liberal, is more moderate than that of his strictest fellow Christians.

Belief in mystery is crucial to the Gospel Graham has preached for so long—a Gospel centered on the story that, for reasons unknown to the human mind, God chose to effect salvation

through the execution and resurrection of his son. "As time went on, I began to realize the love of God for everybody, all over the world," he says. "And in his death on the cross, some mysterious thing happened between God and the Son that we don't understand. But there he was, alone, taking on the sins of the world."

Despite Graham's physical difficulties—walking uneasily, hearing poorly, tiring quickly—he felt called to come to New York to preach one last great crusade in the summer of 2005. In interview after interview, he underscored that he was going to discuss only the Gospel—a public hint that the man who had not shied away from the arena in past years had rethought his role. "I think the Lord led me in that decision, and that's where I am now," he says. "I spend more time on the love of God than I used to." He pauses, and, alluding to more politically active conservative ministers, adds: "But I have tried to maintain friendships with all these people."

One of those people is Jerry Falwell, who called on Graham after New York. They sat together in Graham's kitchen and discussed the distinction between an evangelist, whose job is to spread the Gospel, and a pastor, who, in Falwell's view, has a duty "to confront the culture." "There is no question that your role and mine are opposites," Falwell told Graham. "You are an evangelist; I am a pastor. I have prophetic responsibilities that you do not have." Falwell is unapologetic about his own calling. "I have spent the last 30 years forming the religious right," Falwell told NEWSWEEK. "I write a letter every week and send a newspaper every month to 200,000 pastors who are broadly called evangelicals, bringing them up to date on what is happening in Washington, in the state capitals, in the culture, and what we need to do about it. And of course I'm criticized for it, and of course I have calculated the positives and the negatives, but I have long been at peace with what I do."

For Graham, politics is a secondary to the Gospel, which transcends party lines and, for believers, transcends earthly reality itself. When NEWSWEEK asked Graham whether ministers—whether they think of themselves as evangelists, pastors or a bit of both—should spend time engaged with politics, he replied: "You know, I think in a way that has to be up to the individual as he feels led of the Lord. A lot of things that I commented on years ago would not have been of the Lord, I'm sure, but I think you have some—like communism, or segregation, on which I think you have a responsibility to speak out." Such proclamations, however, should not be "the main thing," and he admits he has no perfect formula: "I don't know the total answer to that."

A partial answer may lie in a distinction Graham draws between lobbying organizations and the spirit of individual Americans. "In the founding era of our country, it was not organized religion but personal faith that brought focus and unified the early leadership—maybe an unspoken faith in God, and certain values that came with that faith," he says. "So in that sense, we cannot discount, in my judgment, religious faith in politics." But he is talking about faith as one factor—perhaps the most important, but still just one—in the life of a people, not about churches or lobbies using the name of God to win votes.

One way for a minister to fulfill his duty to his flock on public-policy questions is to focus on ends while leaving the means to others. An example of this in Graham's own life was his work for nuclear disarmament. When he spoke out on the cold-war arms race, he urged a change of heart—he did not rally support for a particular treaty or a particular agenda.

As Graham draws farther from the arena, his son Franklin, 54, is in the midst of it. "My father certainly has views on politics," says Franklin, the founder of Samaritan's Purse, a global relief organization. "There are moral issues that do find their way into politics—he is very supportive of the right to life, for example. Now he doesn't go out and make a huge issue of it, or of any political question, because my father does not feel God has called him to speak out against any particular sin. He is against all sin, and believes the heart of man has to be changed by Christ. He doesn't get pulled into these political issues, and I think he's right."

Franklin, however, does get pulled in, and sometimes just jumps in. When a NEWSWEEK reporter mentioned the religious right in passing, the younger Graham said: "I don't think the Christian right dominates America in the way some in the media believe they do. I think the last

election was a moral one—people of all faiths, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, felt that the gay agenda that the Democratic Party had essentially adopted and supported was scary. It scared a lot of people of all faiths."

In perhaps his most celebrated remark, Franklin has referred to Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion," and declines to back down. "After 9/11, there were a lot of things being said about how the God of Islam and the God of the Christian faith were one and the same, but that's simply not true ... ," Franklin told NEWSWEEK. "The God that I worship does not require me to kill other people. The God that I worship tells me I am to love my enemy, to give him food when he's hungry and water when he's thirsty." Asked whether he thinks such observations are helpful, the younger Graham said: "It's not the calling of my life to preach against Islam. You're a reporter; you ask me, and I answer the question. I don't go on television or into stadiums and make Islam or gay marriage or the right to life my theme. But in the work that I do I come up against belief systems all over the world. I see much of the damage that is done in the name of religion. In the Balkans, Milosevic would have Orthodox priests bless the troops before they would rape and kill. Man's heart is evil and wicked until it is changed by Christ."

Asked about his son's use of the phrase "evil and wicked" in reference to Islam, Graham says: "I would not say Islam is wicked and evil ... I have a lot of friends who are Islamic. There are many wonderful people among them. I have a great love for them. I have spoken at Islamic meetings, in Nigeria and in different parts of the world." The father's view, then, is different from the son's. "I'm sure there are many things that he and I are not in total agreement about," Graham says. "I'm an old man, he's a young man in the prime of life." Anne Graham Lotz, after expressing her deep respect for her brother's life and work, said: "When Daddy was my brother's age, he was saying some pretty strong things, too, so you have to remember that experience and the living of a life can soften your perspective."

For Graham the softening of perspective began with Watergate. He believed he had a genuine friendship with Nixon, only to find himself horrified by the president's misdeeds and by the ferocious profanity evident on the White House tapes.

Those recordings ultimately brought about Graham's own darkest hour. In a conversation released in 2002, Graham was heard exchanging anti-Semitic remarks about alleged Jewish control of the media. The shock of the revelation was magnified because of Graham's longtime support of Israel and his refusal to join in calls for the conversion of the Jews. "If it wasn't on tape, I would not have believed it," says Graham. "I guess I was trying to please. I felt so badly about myself—I couldn't believe it. I went to a meeting with Jewish leaders and I told them I would crawl to them to ask their forgiveness." In a statement, Graham said: "Much of my life has been a pilgrimage—constantly learning, changing, growing and maturing. I have come to see in deeper ways some of the implications of my faith and message, not the least of which is in the area of human rights and racial and ethnic understanding." The lesson for Graham was that earthly power was alluring but perilous for a man of faith. The bitterness of the Nixon connection was complete, and Graham saw the wisdom of the Psalmist, who wrote: "Put not thy trust in princes."

If he had his life to live over again, Graham says he would spend more time immersed in Scripture and theology. He never went to seminary, and his lack of a graduate education is something that still gives him a twinge. "The greatest regret that I have is that I didn't study more and read more," he says. "I regret it, because now I feel at times I am empty of what I would like to have been. I have friends that have memorized great portions of the Bible. They can quote [so much], and that would mean a lot to me now."

A unifying theme of Graham's new thinking is humility. He is sure and certain of his faith in Jesus as the way to salvation. When asked whether he believes heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, though, Graham says: "Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't ... I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label

they have." Such an ecumenical spirit may upset some Christian hard-liners, but in Graham's view, only God knows who is going to be saved: "As an evangelist for more than six decades, Mr. Graham has faithfully proclaimed the Bible's Gospel message that Jesus is the only way to Heaven," says Graham spokesman A. Larry Ross. "However, salvation is the work of Almighty God, and only he knows what is in each human heart."

The Grahams' days are largely quiet. He rises late in the morning, spends time with Ruth in her room and takes some of his meals in the big kitchen, watching the news on a big-screen television. Graham's retirement is as peculiar in its way as his career was. President George W. Bush telephoned one day to see how he was doing—"out of the blue," Graham says—and a handwritten letter from Queen Elizabeth arrived in the mail, checking in on him.

Ruth dwells at the center of his world. "At night we have time together; we pray together and read the Bible together every night," he says. "It's a wonderful period of life for both of us. We've never had a love like we have now—we feel each other's hearts." She suffers from macular degeneration, and so her secretary types out the psalms on a word processor, printing the words in huge type—there might be six or eight words on a page—and then collects the text in big black binders, from which Ruth reads.

At night, as they read and reminisce and sometimes just gaze at one another, the Grahams' conversation often turns to what they believe awaits them beyond the grave. "I think about heaven a great deal, I think about the failures in my life in the past, but know that they have been covered by the blood of Christ, and that gives me a great sense of confidence," says Graham. "I have a certainty about eternity that is a wonderful thing, and I thank God for giving me that certainty. I do not fear death. I may fear a little bit about the process, but not death itself, because I think the moment that my spirit leaves this body, I will be in the presence of the Lord."

Though Graham returns to the 23rd Psalm when he wakes in the small hours, Ruth has spent time in these summer months memorizing and reciting Psalm 90: "*Lord, thou hast been our refuge, from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, thou art God from everlasting, and world without end*." It is an appropriate text for the end of day, and a fitting benediction for Billy Graham—a man who has, at journey's end, found refuge in hope and humility.

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