

Behind Every Great Man Is Someone Like Ruth Bell Graham

On this Father's Day I want to pay tribute to the truly strong motivation behind every man we would deem "great." I know we may throw that word around too often, but I don't believe anyone would argue that in spite of all his human frailties, Dr. Billy Graham has won the title hands down. When I think of Billy Graham I often visualize two pictures: one of him standing like a small stick before a mass meeting of one million two hundred fifty thousand people gathered in Seoul, Korea, preaching to the largest crowd ever assembled to hear the Gospel message, the other is Billy and his wife, Ruth smiling with a radiance that depicts the very light and life of Christ. This past Thursday at 5:05 p.m. Ruth Bell Graham passed into the presence of her Lord and Savior. We rejoice with her, but we are reminded of something that she said in her lifetime which is most timely now: "We look on death as a tragedy, and we grieve with the family and friends, but we don't stop to think that God probably is not grieving," she said. "I wonder if He's excited when one of his children is coming home - it's not a stranger coming home; it's a loved child." As we think of this beloved child of God who has gone home to her reward, we reflect upon her life, her family and the inextricably entwined relationship between her and her evangelist husband.

1. She had good roots.

Ruth McCue Bell began her life in Qingjiang, China, the daughter of medical missionaries. She stayed there until her graduation from high school and moved from there to the United States to attend Wheaton College in Illinois. Her parents made an indelible impression upon her. She was determined in her youth to remain unmarried and become a missionary like her parents. She was burdened for the country of Tibet. God had given her a tender heart. One writer said, "She and her sister, Rosa witnessed war tragedies daily. Ruth developed an acuity for animals and babies and tried to save several young animals and birds from starvation. Once she found a sickly baby abandoned in a ditch, as "imperfect" babies often were in that region. Although her father tried to revive the baby, he did not succeed." The compassion served her well in rearing up children. She was always firm, but never lost her roots of mercy. "Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right" (Proverbs 20:11). "The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice: and he that begetteth a wise child shall have joy of him" (Proverbs 23:24).

2. She had godly rules.

"He that delicately bringeth up his servant from a child shall have him become his son at the length" (Proverbs 29:21). Although our Scripture is talking about a child and it's adoptive parent, there is a phrase that certainly applies to Ruth Graham in this verse: "...He (she) that delicately bringeth up..." The word "delicate" means something that requires sensitive and skillful handling. It carries the connotation of being able finely to judge a matter.

Let me share with you a testimony of her youngest son, Ned, "As I grew older, my parents were pretty good about giving me liberty to come and go as I pleased. But my mother, like most mothers, had her own way of getting her point across. She always sat up and waited until I got home—no matter what time it was. It really bugged me, because it made me feel guilty. I don't know how many times I tried to slip in late. There she would be, dressed in her robe, sitting in her rocker with a book or a Bible on her lap. 'Thank God you're all right,' she'd say. 'You don't need to wait up for me,' I'd say sheepishly. Mama would just smile, say goodnight and go to her room. As intent as I was on showing my independence and partying late if I wanted to, after awhile Mama's night watchman routine got to me, although these confrontations weren't mean or bitter."

I submit to you that this woman was able to have an effective influence over her children because she had rule of her own spirit (Proverbs 16:32). As I have recently read statements from all four of her children (Gigi, Anne, Ruth (Bunny), Franklin and Ned) I noticed they all commented about her devotional life. It was not unusual to discover Mom was up with her cup of coffee and open Bible before they were even up. As the evening came to a close, their last glimpse of the matriarch was her kneeling in prayer by her desk. In researching her life, I noticed in every instance when she mentioned “Jesus,” she also did so by the honorable title of “Lord Jesus.” I notice her children do the same, as a rule. To Mrs. Graham, Jesus was, is, and shall always be—Lord! She was able to transfer that belief effectively to her offspring.

3. She had great romance.

While attending Wheaton, Ruth heard Billy praying one morning and was so impressed that she said to herself, “Now there’s a man that knows to whom he is praying.” Then she prayed, “Lord, if you could let me spend the rest of my life with that man, I would count it the greatest privilege.”

Billy pursued young Ruth with an aggression that was anchored in the perfect will of God. Dr. Graham was gone much of their marriage. Their oldest daughter, Gigi commented about their dad’s frequent evangelistic trips: “Mother stood waiting outside the doorway... We would back away and watch as Daddy took Mother in his arms, kissing her warmly and firmly, knowing it would be some time before he would hold her again. Then Daddy was whisked away in the car, around the curves and down the steep mountain drive. We listened to the retreating sound of the engine and waited for the final “toot” of the horn as he reached the gate. Another plane to catch, another city, another Crusade, another period of weeks before we would be together as a family once more. I turned to look at Mother, sensing her feeling of loss and loneliness.” Someone once asked Ruth Graham, “How can you stand being away from your husband so much all these years?” She replied, “I would rather spend one night of every month of every year with the man that I love, than every day with a man I could never love.” Being reared in the Orient, she commented. “People in the east said that people in the west start out marriage in a boil, then it gradually cools off. Whereas we start marriage in the east rather cool and gradually it heats up into a boil.” Ruth’s goal was exactly that and she with her husband accomplished just that.

Dr. Graham’s first words since his beloved wife’s passing covered by the media is a commentary to their great romance: “I am so grateful to the Lord that He gave me Ruth, and especially for these last few years we’ve had in the mountains together. We’ve rekindled the romance of our youth, and my love for her continued to grow deeper every day. I will miss her terribly, and look forward even more to the day I can join her in Heaven.” Their life together was a beautiful commentary of Song of Solomon 8:7: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it...” (Song of Solomon 8:7).

- Pastor Pope -

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