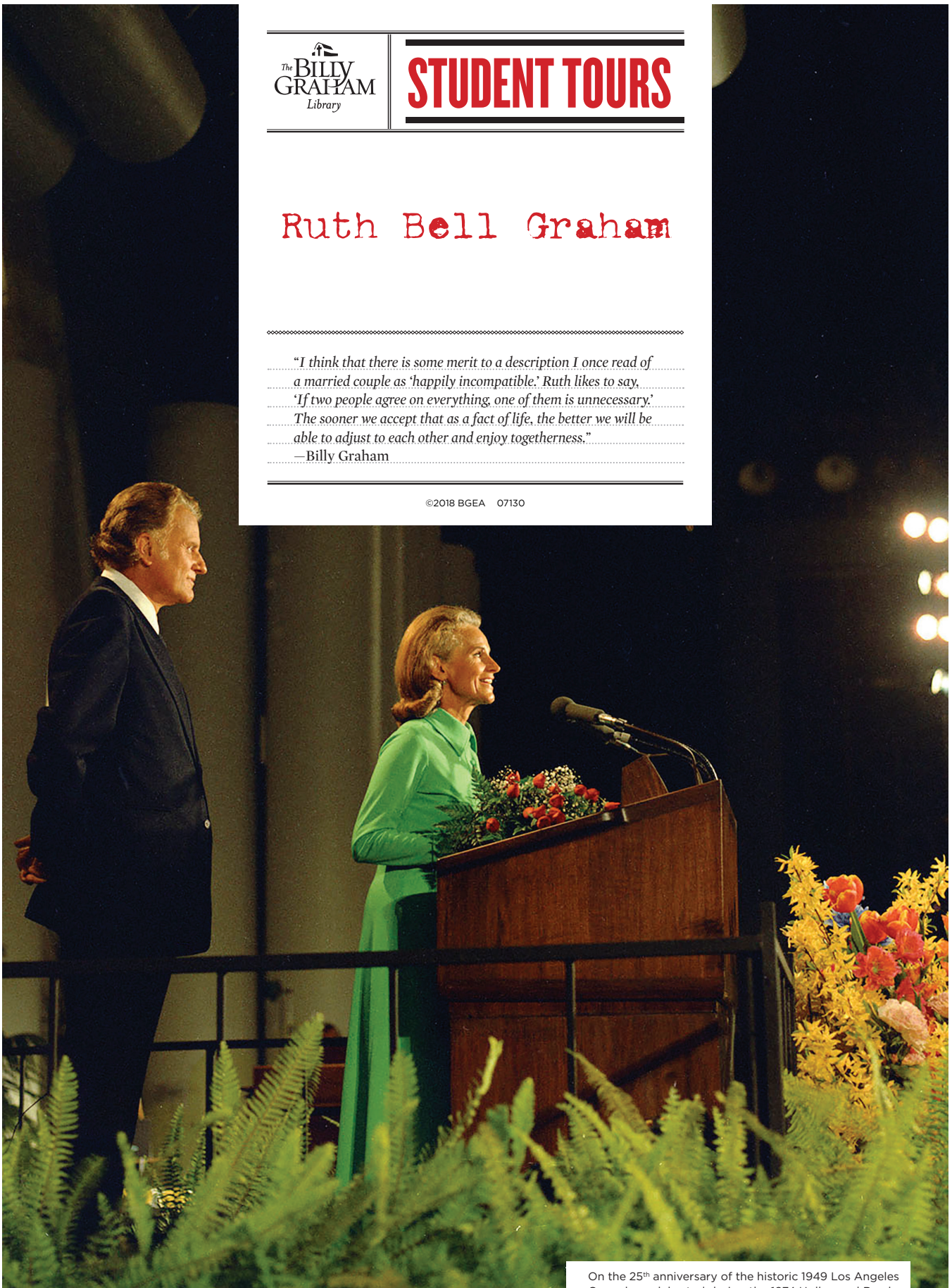


## Ruth Bell Graham

*"I think that there is some merit to a description I once read of a married couple as 'happily incompatible.' Ruth likes to say, 'If two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary.' The sooner we accept that as a fact of life, the better we will be able to adjust to each other and enjoy togetherness."*  
—Billy Graham

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On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic 1949 Los Angeles Crusade—celebrated during the 1974 Hollywood Bowl Crusade—Ruth Bell Graham speaks as Billy Graham looks on.

## Ruth Bell Graham

### GRADE LEVEL

6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup>

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Identify the significant roles and contributions of Ruth Bell Graham as a wife, mother, and author.
- Recognize the opportunities and challenges Ruth faced as the wife of a well-known evangelist.

### NORTH CAROLINA STANDARD COURSE OF STUDY, SOCIAL STUDIES

**6.C.1:** Explain how the behaviors and practices of individuals and groups influenced societies, civilizations and regions.

**8.C.1.3:** Summarize the contributions of particular groups to the development of North Carolina and the United States (e.g. women, religious groups, and ethnic sectors such as American Indians, African Americans, and European immigrants).

### NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

- One
- Two
- Four
- Five

"Mine has been the task of staying home and raising the family. No higher calling could have been given me. At the same time, it has been loads of fun."  
—Ruth Bell Graham

### Pre-Visit Activities:

- Read and review the attached information with students and discuss the following questions:
  - What role did Ruth Graham play in the formation and impact of Billy Graham's ministry?
  - What hardships did she face as the wife of such a well-known evangelist?
- Watch program *Footprints of a Pilgrim* to get a closer look at the life of Ruth Graham: <https://billygraham.org/video/footprints-of-a-pilgrim/>

### Additional Optional Reading:

- Read *Just As I Am*, especially chapters 5, 6, 33, 40
- *God's Ambassador*, chapter 6
- *Rebel With A Cause*, especially chapters 1 and 4
- *Footprints of a Pilgrim*
- *It's My Turn*
- *Through My Father's Eyes*, chapter 2

### Visit to the Library:

- Students will walk through *The Journey of Faith* with an assigned guide. Questions and themes to consider include:
  - What items do you see in *The Journey of Faith* from Ruth's childhood in China?
  - In what way do you think Ruth's childhood in China prepared her to be the wife of Billy Graham?
  - Based on the items you see in the "Footprints of a Pilgrim" gallery, what sort of activities and hobbies do you think Ruth enjoyed?
  - What item in the "Footprints of a Pilgrim" gallery stood out to you the most? Why?

### Post-Visit Activities:

- Ask students to write a poem in the style of Ruth Bell Graham.
- Ask students to imagine they are Ruth Bell Graham writing a letter to Billy Graham while he is away on one of his Crusade tours. What would Ruth include in her letter to Billy?





Ruth Bell Graham reads to four of her children (left to right) Anne, Gigi, Franklin, and Ruth "Bunny" Graham.

## Pre-Visit Reading: Ruth Bell Graham: A Life Well Lived

*This article first appeared in Decision magazine in July 2007.*

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 had overthrown 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 naiveté 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.”

### **Growing Demands**

Billy’s ministry expanded, and in January 1945 he left his pastorate to become the first full-time evangelist of Youth for Christ, a ministry to youth and military service people. It was just the beginning of the couple’s difficult partings. During those early years, before the children were born, Ruth traveled with Billy when their budget would allow.

She often counseled and prayed with those who responded to the invitation to accept Christ. She especially had an eye for the down-and-out who were struggling to survive, and she would write to the inquirers for years. But then the children began to arrive, and the Crusades grew longer and bigger. Ruth took to heart some words of advice that Cliff Barrows’ late wife, Billie, had received from “Ma” Sunday, the wife of evangelist Billy Sunday.

Ma said that she had traveled with her husband to his evangelistic meetings because that is what he wanted. “But all my children are on the road to hell,” she tearfully told Cliff and Billie. She encouraged Billie to stay home and rear their children rather than travel with the Crusades. Billie told Ruth about that conversation.

Ruth took on the responsibilities of managing the Graham household, giving Billy the freedom

to travel and preach wherever God called him.

Just before the birth of their first child, Gigi, in September 1945, Billy and Ruth moved from Illinois to Montreat, N.C., where Ruth's parents had settled after leaving China. The Grahams lived with the Bells until they bought a house across the street just before their daughter Anne was born. Ruth (called "Bunny" as a child), Franklin and Ned were born in the following years. In the late 1940s, Billy's ministry grew to include citywide campaigns and radio, leading to the incorporation of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association in 1950.

Rather than complaining about staying behind, Ruth strived to make their home a shelter for Billy when he wasn't traveling. When their home was overrun with curious tourists, she took matters into her own hands and compiled plans to build "Little Piney Cove," a mountain home constructed of timber from abandoned log cabins. From the very beginning she took control of the project, going as far as getting a loan and buying property when Billy was in California. When the home was finished, she filled it with treasures from the mountains and from her travels.

Jean Wilson, a friend in the United Kingdom, remembers how Ruth searched out the small antiques and old Christian books that filled her home: "That is my biggest memory of her—all the collections she kept. She was a great pack rat, as she called it." The pair often visited secondhand bookshops in England, and if Ruth found a book she wanted, "she'd pounce on it," Wilson said. "She would be on her hands and knees, looking on the lowest bookshelf, or on a ladder trying to get up to the top shelf in these really old, old bookshops. ... I'd end up with a car just packed with books."

While Ruth dealt with architects and builders, furnishing the home, repairs around the house and extensive correspondence, she also raised five spirited children—who were not angels, as some might have thought—and helped her aging parents. Rearing the children when their father was away for months at a time proved challenging. When asked how she managed, she merely replied: "On my knees." Her account of one particularly trying morning is a tale that mothers everywhere will understand.

"It had been one of those hectic nights, and I had overslept," she wrote in her book *It's My Turn*.

"Without fixing my hair or pausing for makeup, I hurriedly pulled on my bathrobe, lifted Franklin out of his bed without bothering to change him, and set him in the high chair. I proceeded to set the table hurriedly for breakfast so the children would not be late for school.

"That morning, every time Gigi opened her mouth to say something, Bunny interrupted. Finally, in exasperation, Gigi slammed down her fork.

"Mother!" she exclaimed. 'Between listening to Bunny and smelling Franklin and looking at you, I'm not hungry!'"

The Graham children grew up mostly unaware of their mother's loneliness and struggles to manage the family when their father was away.

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“I don’t think she ever talked about him leaving,” Franklin wrote in his book *Rebel With A Cause*.

“We knew he was preaching, but we thought that everyone’s father was away a lot. It’s just something we grew up with. She was always positive and would quote the old mountain man: ‘Make the least of all that goes, the most of all that comes.’”

Ruth sprinkled life with humor and observations. “I’ve never considered divorce,” she said once. “Murder, yes, but not divorce.” From childhood on, she was known to be mischievous. Whether chasing her sister Rosa with a dead bug in China or sliding a firecracker under Franklin’s bedroom door to wake him, she seemed to hold her father’s belief that Christians need not be glum and pessimistic. Not even the members of Billy’s Team were exempt from Ruth’s pranks. Once she took Associate Evangelist Grady Wilson’s travel sleeping pills and filled the capsules with mustard powder.

When Billy came home, Ruth tried to keep things peaceful and relaxing. She kept her schedule flexible and made time to help him find sermon illustrations, write books and create scripts for *The Hour of Decision* radio program.

Ruth’s rock-solid support of Billy’s ministry and her ability to manage their household on her own earned the respect of his Team. “There would have been no Billy Graham as we know him today had it not been for Ruth,” said Billy’s longtime assistant, T.W. Wilson.

No one respected Ruth more than Billy did.

“What I missed!” he wrote in *Just As I Am*, his autobiography, “And what Ruth missed by not having me to help her. Whenever I did get home, I got a crash course in the agony and ecstasy of parenting. If Ruth had not been convinced that God had called her to fulfill that side of our partnership and had not resorted constantly to God’s Word for instruction and to His grace for strength, I don’t see how she could have survived.”

### **An Evangelist at Home**

Ruth looked for ministry opportunities of her own in Montreat.

“If she saw anyone in need or anyone who was especially hurting, she would reach out to that person,” said Dorothy Thielman, whose husband, the late Calvin Thielman, pastored the church the Grahams attended.

Tracy Taylor Bailey, conference manager at the Montreat Conference Center, said that in 1993, after her husband was killed in an automobile accident, Ruth invited Bailey and her three small children to the Graham home. “It was like going to Grandma’s house,” Bailey recalled. “She had fixed a dinner of kid-friendly food, and then she made a game, a scavenger hunt. She had taken things and hidden them throughout the house, and she gave us a list of things to look for. ... We found all the things on the list, and she was just delighted, watching that.”



Tong and Sear Mei Chhay, owners of Ruth's favorite restaurant, Tong Sing, also told of Ruth's kindness. When they came to the United States from Cambodia in the late 1970s, they were sponsored by Montreat Presbyterian Church, where the Grahams attended. Sear Mei's brother was sponsored by Black Mountain Presbyterian, and at one point the two churches cooperated to buy a house for the Chhays. Tong recalled with tears how he discovered later that the down payment came from Ruth. "She was like my mother," Sear Mei added.

"She has the heart of an evangelist," said her daughter Anne in a 2002 interview. "Although her gift is often overshadowed by my father's, Mother's gift is exercised effectively on behalf of individuals. At her deepest core is the desire for individuals to know Christ in a personal and intimate way. My father preaches sermons to the masses, reaching thousands; my mother talks to individuals, loving them one by one."

In the early 1970s, when the Graham children were grown, Ruth led a Sunday school class on the campus of Montreat College, where her son Franklin was a student.

Franklin's friend Preston Parrish came to that class, along with some 150 other students. Ruth took an interest in Parrish, a new Christian, occasionally inviting him for dinner and giving him odd jobs working on the house.

"Ruth always had an eye for encouraging and helping somebody to come to the Lord," Parrish said. "She would wait for God to straighten them out and then encourage them and help them grow. I guess she saw that in me—a new, young, zealous Christian who didn't know anything but in whom God might have put a little potential for something."

Ruth asked Parrish to pray with her that Franklin would surrender his life to Christ, and soon after, Franklin did, starting him down the path that led him to become the head of both BGEA and the relief and evangelism agency, Samaritan's Purse. Parrish, a former pastor and now BGEA's chaplain, says Ruth's encouragement in the early years of his faith and marriage has had a profound impact on his ministry.

"She had a son who at that time was making her pull her hair out, so she knew how to keep up with rowdy kids," he said. "Ruth gave you a vision of how you could grow in the Word of God, and you could not be with her without catching that vision. Scripture memory was not just some spiritual discipline. It was like breathing for her, and she thrived on it."

### ***It's My Turn***

With her children grown and married, Ruth was free to pursue her lifelong love of writing.

Although she was the wife of one of the world's most famous evangelists, self-promotion was not her motive. Since her childhood, she had used writing to release emotions that she could not express to other people. In 1975, just before publishing her first book of poetry, *Sitting by My Laughing Fire*, she wrote to *Decision* magazine editor Sherwood Wirt, "I was terribly shy and diffident about these poems at first but have suddenly decided, 'Shucks! If they express what I was going through or how I felt about what someone else was going through, it doesn't really matter whether everybody else likes them.'"

Ruth's longtime secretary Evelyn Freeland said, "Whenever there were requests from anyone to quote her materials, her response was always, 'My writing is to be a ministry.'"

Ruth wrote to encourage the new Christian, the mother of the prodigal, the lost soul who hadn't yet found the Savior—people in all walks of life.

Her poetry was practical, reflecting a life with loneliness and struggles, but overflowing with trust in God. Sometimes whimsical, it often drew from the beauty of the mountains and forests surrounding her home in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Her books *It's My Turn* and *Legacy of a Pack Rat* are filled with short chapters that communicate nuggets of Biblical truth and encouragement gleaned from her years as a wife, mother and Christian. She sprinkled in a variety of ancient and contemporary quotes, as well as bits of humor. "No person is absolutely unnecessary," she said in reference to disagreeable people. "One can always serve as a horrible example."

In writing about her family and her life, Ruth did not hesitate to reveal her weaknesses. Many who read her column in *Decision* wrote to thank her for her down-to-earth advice.

"Every time I read something of hers, I feel like she is speaking directly to me," one woman wrote. "Thank God for her and her willingness to be used for God's work."

### **The Best Years**

In 1974, while making a pipe slide for her grandchildren at Gigi's home in Wisconsin, Ruth fell and sustained serious injuries, triggering back and hip problems that would limit her activity for the rest of her life. Yet, while her body slowed down and was often in pain, her spirit remained vibrant and encouraging.

"I was so impressed," said Dorothy Thielman of a visit to the Grahams' home. "She was almost bedfast, but she maintained her sweet spirit and uncomplaining and utter trust that what the Lord had allowed in her life was for His own glory and her good. This is just the way she thought and the way she was."

Eventually Ruth's eyesight dimmed, but she kept sending letters to friends and continued to work on her writing with the help of her daughter Gigi and friends like Kerri Bruce, her executive assistant. And just as she had encouraged others to do as they faced the inevitable restrictions of aging, she prayed—for Billy and his ministry, for her family and friends, and for a wealth of people she'd known through the years.

Even in their later years, Billy and Ruth's love for each other was obvious—in the way they teased each other and in the way their eyes lit up when they were together, their children have said. On their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Aug. 13, 2003, Ruth alluded to their early years. "There was some adjusting during the first few years, but it has pretty well adjusted now."

Billy called their relationship a romance.

“We have a better relationship now,” he said. “We look into each other’s eyes and touch each other. It gets better as you get older. The secret is the Lord Jesus Christ—to have Him in the center of our lives.”

Updated 9/2018

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**Post-Visit Reading: Selections from Ruth Bell Graham's poetry in  
*Footprints of a Pilgrim*:**

*It isn't your gold or silver,  
your talents great or small,  
your voice, or your gift of drawing,  
or the crowd you go with at all;  
it isn't your friends or pastimes,  
your looks or your clothes so gay;  
it isn't your home or family,  
or even the things you say;  
it isn't your choice of amusements,  
it isn't the life you lead,  
it isn't the thing you prize the most,  
or the books you like to read;  
no, it isn't the things you have, dear,  
or the things you like to do,  
the Master is searching deeper...  
He seeks not yours, but you.*

*It's your heart that Jesus longs for;  
your will to be made His own  
with self on the cross forever,  
and Jesus alone on the throne.*

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*Look o'er the fields about you—  
riveted, hilled with graves;  
no one can count the number  
of those who perished as slaves;  
slaves to the sin they were born in,  
knowing not God or His Light;  
died without God's great salvation,  
died in the darkness of night.*

*Look o'er the people about you—  
faces so furrowed with care,  
lined and hardened by sorrow  
sin has placed on them there;  
think of the evil they live in,  
hopes none and joys so few;  
love them, pray for them, win them,  
lest they should perish, too.*



*Not fears  
I need deliverance from  
today—  
but nothingness;  
inertia,  
skies gray  
and windless;  
no sun,  
no rain  
no stab of joy  
no pain,  
no strong regret,  
no reaching after,  
no tears,  
no laughter,  
no black despair,  
no bliss.  
Deliver me  
today  
...from this.*

---

*Sitting by my laughing fire  
I watch the whitening world without,  
and hear the wind climb higher, higher,  
rising to a savage shout;  
and on my heart the logs smile on,  
warming me  
as they slowly perish;  
they had been felled  
by ax and saw  
while fellow trees  
were left to flourish;  
but what was spared  
by ax and saw,  
by some unspoken  
cruel law,  
was being harvested without  
by ice and wind and savage shout.*

*And on my hearth  
the logs smile on.*