CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

The Farm, Family, and Faith

So who is Billy Graham?" I asked my older sister Esther. She had just come up the stairs in the farmhouse to tell me that we'd be driving to a Youth for Christ rally held in a town about twenty miles from our farm in Saskatchewan, Canada. The attraction was a new feature film being shown in a town hall, and the man she mentioned in connection with it was someone I'd never heard of before: Billy Graham.

"He's an evangelist in the United States," she said, "and thousands of people get saved when he preaches." I knew that the United States was south of Canada, but for all I cared, it could be on some distant planet. The idea of a famous evangelist interested me, but I gave it no further thought. Little did I realize that someday his life would have a great impact on my own.

That night I joined my brothers and sisters to see the film *Mr. Texas*, produced back in the year 1951. I've never forgotten the last scenes of the film when Redd Harper (Mr. Texas) was lying in a hospital bed listening to Billy Graham speaking on *The Hour of Decision*. But even

more vivid was the vignette of a youthful Billy Graham preaching to thousands at a stadium crusade. His captivating voice, rapid movements, and sincerity were electrifying. From that day on, I had one earthly hero: Billy Graham.

Perhaps it seems unlikely that a boy of eleven or twelve, born five miles from a town of seventy-five people, would choose Billy Graham as his hero. And it is unlikely, except that this is a story of divine providence, a story of undeserved grace. For as long as I can remember, I had only one serious desire and that was to be a preacher.

Even before I saw the Billy Graham film, I would come home from church, stand in my bedroom, and pretend that I was a pastor preaching a sermon; and for good measure, I led the singing too. So it was quite natural that as a child I would be attracted to the most famous of all preachers—the young evangelist from North Carolina. When I was a teenager, my peers were fans of Elvis; but I chose Billy, listening regularly to *The Hour of Decision* and reading all I could about him. I didn't have the courage to dream that someday I'd meet him, spend twenty minutes with him in my study at The Moody Church, and years later, visit him in his rustic home in North Carolina. But I'm ahead of the story.

Though one of my earliest recollections is preaching in my bedroom, an even earlier memory is playing in the sandbox just outside of the farmhouse. One day I occupied myself with a tin can my mother gave me, using it to try and catch rays of light. I would hold the empty can up to the sun and close the lid as fast as I could; then I took the can to a dark place and opened it, hoping to see a glimmer of light, but alas, no matter how many times I tried, there was only darkness. Later I learned that light, whether physical or spiritual, needs a source—it can't exist on its own.

We had an old Whippet car that had a crank to start the motor.

When it ran, it took us the twenty miles to church during the summer, but snow kept it in the garage all winter. As for the church service, perhaps fifty people attended on a good Sunday, and my most vivid memory was standing on the bench beside my mother during the service. There was singing, a sermon, and friends chatted when it was over. For some reason I disliked going to church, and my father would have to sometimes bribe me with peppermint candies so I'd quit making a fuss and get into the car with everyone else without creating a scene.

One of my Sunday school teachers (who is still living today) told me recently that I was so shy she couldn't get me to speak no matter how hard she tried. When she told us that "Jesus died at Calvary," I assumed she meant "Calgary," a city in the province of Alberta. I remember thinking that we could quite easily drive there and see where Jesus was crucified. My sister Esther later clarified the difference between the two words and assured me that Jesus was not crucified in the neighboring province. At an early age, I wondered why the pastor's sermon wasn't just sent to us in the mail, which would have made going to church unnecessary. Quite obviously I needed some instruction on the larger purpose for attending church and Sunday school.

My father purchased a tractor the year I was born, but we still didn't have a truck. I can remember when all the grain was hauled by horses and a wagon. He had to shovel thousands of bushels of grain, first into a bin during harvest, then at a later date, he shoveled it all back onto a wagon and took it to the grain elevator in a town five miles away. In retrospect, I simply don't know how he did it; the workload was unimaginable.

When a used Ford truck was finally purchased in 1951, the owner brought it to the farm, and my father went into our dingy basement and brought up a wad of money. We watched as he counted out the bills until he reached the agreed-upon price of $1,950. The man said

he'd be glad to give Dad a receipt, but Dad said it was unnecessary; they just shook hands and the deal was done. Clearly, those were different days.

Growing up, our collie, Skipper, and I were the best of friends, and he knew when it was time to play "the game." He'd run away and I'd hide among the rows of trees. When Skipper found me, he'd bless me with slobbering licks and kisses. And the moment I said, "Go hide!" there'd be a repeat performance. I always tried to choose a place where I thought he'd never find me, but he always did.

During the Christmas season, our family usually had a Christmas tree and our parents made sure that we always had at least one gift, sometimes two. One year when it was too cold and stormy to go to town, my mother took a barren tree branch and used it as a Christmas tree. I remember getting a toy truck that looked rather familiar: it was the truck my brother was given when he was younger, but it had been given a fresh coat of green paint. Another year our mother—God bless her—wrapped a twenty-five-cent piece for each of us as an extra gift.

As the last-born of five children, I had definite advantages. For one thing, I had extra time on my hands since the chores were usually done by my two older brothers. For another, my parents had relaxed some of their discipline, so my sister Esther complained that I got away with things she'd been disciplined for—and I'm sure she was right. Our parents were still very strict: no sports on Sunday, no television (even if it had been available, which it wasn't), and, for the most part, no social events at school. Movies were deemed to be sub-moral, and such things as attending a school dance were clearly off-limits.

But boys will be boys.

THE FOOLISHNESS OF A FARM BOY

It's a miracle that most boys actually survive life on the farm, given the opportunities to do foolish and often risky things, such as driving a tractor recklessly into a ditch, or crawling through a culvert installed under a road to drain water from one side to the other where I'd inch my way through this narrow, corrugated steel tunnel, just barely wide enough for my shoulders. If I'd have gotten stuck halfway through, or had become claustrophobic, or panicked, no help would have been available since the culvert was about a half mile from the farmyard. Only Skipper knew where I was.

One day my sister Esther and I were chasing a stray cat in the hayloft of the barn when I fell through a hole used for a pulley. I landed on a six-inch-square beam and was knocked unconscious. My father and brother carried me into the house where I woke up about an hour later not knowing what had happened and seeing my mother across the room busy at her sewing machine. They told me that I mumbled incoherently after the fall, and that I couldn't walk, so they carried me and laid me on the couch with the hope that I'd recover. For weeks after this concussion, I could only walk slowly; to run would cause my head to explode with pain. In retrospect, I think of the permanent damage that could have been done and how, in today's world, we'd rush a child in that condition to a doctor. Back then, however, doctors were thought of as a last resort; if injured you were expected to recover on your own.

When I broke my arm falling off a neighbor's horse, I tried to hide it from my parents by enduring the pain and just using my right hand, not my left. As expected, my mother noticed it within a matter of minutes. This time I was taken to the doctor and had my arm strapped to my chest for several weeks. Perhaps that is why, to this day, my left arm is shorter than my right.

Of course, while living on a farm, temptation, as we generally think of it, was minimal. There was quite literally no convenient way to get into trouble. Yes, we were disciplined for failure to follow orders: feeding the chickens, milking the cows, or bringing wood to the house were duties that were to be gladly performed. Some boys would sneak a smoke at school, but for the Lutzer children, such temptations were easily resisted. We had been taught that God hated sin and that if we participated in it, the consequences would come back to haunt us.

SCHOOL DAZE

During my grades one to three, we went to a one-room schoolhouse three miles away, traveling with the horse and buggy during the summer and the sleigh during the winter. We had a predictable pattern: when we got out of bed, our breakfast was waiting; following that, a passage was read from the German Bible and we prayed as a family. Then our dad would ready the horse, and off we would go to school. My older brothers and sisters took the responsibility for the details of getting to and from school, so I had few worries.

I learned early on that children could indeed be cruel, hurting others with angry words and callous behavior. One of my greatest heartaches to this day is the hostility the children of one family showed toward us and a third family (yes, there were only three families of children that attended this school). One family had three hate-filled children who made school life difficult for us all. Filled with resentment and jealousy, these three children—I would call them *evil*—would taunt us and especially the other family, whom they clearly hated. We Lutzer children were caught in the middle, often watching and listening in silence as these abusive children berated the others by calling them names and ridiculing everything they did and said.

Even as I write these words, I wish we could relive those days and side with the children of the third family who were so cruelly treated. We Lutzer children should have had the courage to let those hostile kids know that we wouldn't tolerate their abuse of us or others.

I recall one of those boys speaking kindly to a stray dog, and when the dog came close, tempted by something to eat, the boy kicked the animal as hard as he could, sending the dog yelping into the distance. A few days later, the same dog trusted this boy again, and the same thing happened. I realize that all of us have a sin nature, and that children struggle with anger, resentment, and jealousy. But there are some children who seem to be born with a special bent toward cruelty and evil.

Although most of the Lutzer children were compliant toward our parents, our brother Albert was a typical strong-willed firstborn. But he turned out to be a hero one winter day when coats that were hung too close to the hot furnace started a fire in the basement of the schoolhouse. Since the school didn't have a phone, Albert put some of the schoolgirls on a sleigh, threw a blanket over them (it was midwinter), and made the horse run as fast as possible to the closest neighbor. Since most of the farmers had phones, word spread quickly, and many of them came and shoveled snow into the building to keep it from burning to the ground.

The other fire I clearly remember began when Albert stepped on a chair and poked his head through the open space of an enclosed closet whose walls didn't reach all the way up to the ceiling. He suspected that there were cleaning supplies in the closet, which he thought he needed to sweep the floor, a chore the teacher had assigned to him. In order to see behind the boards, he stood on a chair, then cocked his head and peered through the eighteen-inch opening above the boards while holding a burning roll of paper to light the darkness. When cinders fell onto a mop, it started to burn, so he had to rip several of the boards off to get

inside the enclosure; thankfully, the flames were quickly extinguished.

The explanation he gave to the teacher was that he had pushed another student against the closet, breaking the boards; then he repaired the damage as best he could. Surely, the teacher knew better, but she said little.

Thankfully, at the end of my third grade, the school was closed for lack of students. For my fourth grade, we switched to another school in the area with an entirely different leadership and atmosphere. This school was about four miles in the opposite direction from our farm.

The change was well worth it; here there were no hateful families bent on deriding others (the teacher, Mrs. Watson, would never have tolerated such behavior). By then, Albert and my sister Ruth had finished grade school, but Harold and Esther still attended, so the three of us continued our education together. Horse and sleigh in winter; horse and buggy in spring and fall.

THE ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE

If the one-room schoolhouse had drawbacks educationally, it made up for it in the richness of relationships. The teacher would begin with the row of first-graders (perhaps five or six students), explain the subject matter, and then give them an assignment. Then she would go to the next row with the second-graders and repeat the process, helping them to get started on their work for the day. Our one-room schoolhouse had all eight grades, though sometimes one grade had only two or three pupils (one or two grades might not have any students at all). Only years later did I realize that students in city schools had a separate room for each grade! "What a breeze for the teacher!" I thought.

Of course, the older students constantly challenged the teacher, testing them to see where the limits actually were. Could we write notes to

one another in class? Yes, as long as we weren't caught. Could someone go to the restroom without permission? Yes, but if you stayed too long someone might be sent to get you. Could you talk sassy to the teacher? No, not unless you wanted to stay after school or be spanked (or your parents would be talked to).

In the fifth grade, we had a new teacher, Mrs. Barmby, who was newly widowed and living in a house adjacent to the schoolhouse. She was tenderhearted, cried easily, and we often took advantage of her sensitivity and kindness.

Embedded in my memory is this incident:

"Who took the dustpan and left it outside, behind the school?"

Mrs. Barmby was livid. When she became angry, her face not only turned red, but her lips quivered. Now, standing in front of the class with a ruler in her hand, she waited patiently for an answer to her question.

Dead silence.

"Since the person who did it refuses to admit it, I want all of you to line up here for a spanking!" By now she was hollering.

I spoke up. "I'll say I did it, but I didn't!"

It's not that I was particularly brave. But I reasoned that it was foolish for the whole class to get a spanking, if one person could "take the hit" for the other dozen or so students.

Mrs. Barmby rejected my suggestion. "I don't want to spank you; I want to spank the one who did it!" The pitch of her voice was up another decibel.

Just then, her own son George, who lived with her next to the school, sauntered into the room, ten minutes late, as was his habit.

"George, did *you* carry the dustpan to the back of the school?" Her voice was more subdued.

"Yes."

George held out his hand and was slapped with the ruler by his own

mother in the presence of us all. We had just averted a minor disaster.

Mrs. Barmby, bless her, did not lose her temper often and became teary-eyed when she talked to us about her experiences of pain and sorrow as a widow. As teachers go, she was reasonable and kind. Because her angry outbursts were few, we often became rowdy and lax, and she was far too tolerant of us.

Many years later, long after we moved to Chicago, my wife, Rebecca, and I stopped by her home on one of our visits to Canada, and I was able to share the gospel with her. She said that what she remembered about me was that when she began teaching evolution, I raised my hand and objected, saying that I believed God created everything. Apparently my interest in apologetics (defending the faith) began early in life. She died several years ago, and I truly hope that her faith was in Christ.

In this school, whether it was Mrs. Watson or Mrs. Barmby, we knew that we were expected to be kind, play fair, and use our recess for better things than berating one another. And yet, I felt a great deal of pain in those early years. Because I was not athletic, I often felt as though I were a second-class student who stayed out of trouble but was not fully accepted by the other students. When the students divided into teams to play softball, I was usually among the last chosen. I was glad when I passed into the ninth grade, for then life in the old country schoolhouse was over.

"HE WILL BE THE PREACHER"

All five of us were born in the house our parents were living in at the time of our births. I have often been deeply moved by an account given by the midwife who was on hand for our births. She was one of Mother's friends and though she had no training, she played the role of

a midwife. She remembered specifically that almost immediately after I was born, she and my father (and possibly my mother got out of bed to join them), held me and knelt to dedicate me to God (perhaps they did the same when my brothers and sisters were born, but if so, the midwife never mentioned it). Mother also told me that when the pastor of the church who married them visited, the pastor's wife bent over and gave me a kiss while I was sleeping in the crib and said in German, *"Er wird der Prediger sein"* (he will be the preacher).

As I recall these incidents, they reinforce my belief that God called me even back then to be a preacher and to have the opportunity to share God's Word with many people. The God who so graciously guided my parents, even when they were unaware of it, has guided the footsteps of their five children. We were all profoundly shaped by their prayers and the example they set for us.

But parents cannot convert a child. It is not enough for a child to be encouraged to pray a prayer that might or might not result in salvation. Parents should not try to "get the chicken out of the egg," so to speak. They can explain the gospel, they can and should pray for their child, but ultimately, conversion is God's business.

AM I SAVED?

Obviously, growing up in a home where the gospel was front and center, I learned early on that I had to accept Christ as my personal Savior or be lost forever. As a child, I would often pray that Jesus would come into my heart, but I felt no different after the prayer. So I assumed that I wasn't saved, and even went so far as to think that I couldn't be saved. Bizarre as this now seems, I remember thinking to myself that I should read the book of Revelation to see if I was mentioned there as someone who was an apostate, unable to be converted.

We also attended evangelistic services where the gospel was preached and a long "altar call" followed. At the end of the service, the congregation would sing an invitation song (almost always "Just As I Am"), and then those who wanted to be saved were to come to the front to receive Christ as Savior. But I was so shy, I remember thinking to myself, "If I have to go forward in the presence of all these people to be saved, I guess I will just have to go to hell."

In retrospect, I'm surprised by how aware I was that I was a sinner who needed to be forgiven. At about the age of fourteen, while I was standing in our small farmhouse kitchen drinking water from a common family dipper, my mother said, "Dad and I think it's time for you to get saved." I remember my exact words: "I've tried to get saved, but it doesn't work for me." They explained that Christ had to be received by faith, whether I felt changed or not afterwards. The three of us knelt together in the living room of the old farmhouse, and there I brought my doubting heart to the Lord and prayed to accept Him as mine.

The next day I knew I had been converted. I remember walking into the garage on the farm and thinking to myself, "I know that I know God . . ." In fact, His presence was so real I thought I should be capable of anything. The doubts were gone; I knew that from now on I would never have to pray to receive Christ again—this time "it worked," and my life would be different because of it.

Today, I marvel at my parents' perception. What made them think it was time for me to accept Christ as my Savior? Did they notice that I was under conviction of sin? Did they see that my casual and perhaps hostile attitude toward family devotions demonstrated that I wasn't saved? I never did ask them these questions, but I thank God they initiated the discussion.

As I grew and studied theology, I've often reflected back to this time and wondered when I really was converted. Was it during those early

days when I prayed on my own that Jesus would come into my heart but I had no assurance that He accepted me, or was I converted at the time I remember the clearest—when I prayed with my parents to accept Christ by faith? Although many people have been converted by "accepting Jesus into their hearts," I have concluded that this is not the best way to communicate the gospel.

Since that time I've helped many people understand that if we believe that when Jesus died on the cross and rose again—if we believe that He did all that ever will be necessary for us to come into God's presence—and if we embrace that for ourselves, we will not only be saved but know it. In other words, salvation involves accepting the finished work of Christ on our behalf.

Regardless of whether or not I had previously been saved, by the age of fourteen I now had the assurance that I was converted—and I've never doubted it since. There's always been this deep settled peace that God was my Father and that I was one of His children. One thing is certain, each child must have their own faith; the faith of their parents cannot save them. And unless their parents' faith is claimed for themselves, it will wash away when the temptations of life lure them in the direction of the world.

There were times—and I don't remember how old I was—when I would run out in the fields at night and look up at the stars and pray. I was literally mesmerized by the immensity of God. Once, during such a time of worship, God gave me a revelation of the sinfulness of my heart. I realized then, that if He were to send me to hell, He would be righteous in doing so, but I begged for His mercy that I wouldn't be condemned.

The God who saved me would now lead me in ways that no one could have predicted. The trek from a small Canadian farm to being the pastor of one of America's best-known churches is one that is

marked by divine providence.

Fifty years later, I visited the old farmhouse and knelt in the same living room where I had been converted to give thanks to God for all that He had done in my life since those childhood days.

"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service…To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:12, 17).

And Amen.