

# Graham preaches 'last evangelistic sermon' in New Orleans

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**By Bruce Nolan**

*Religion News Service*

NEW ORLEANS (ABP)—Billy Graham seems to have closed out his 60-year career as the country's most famous evangelist after calling thousands to Christian faith in wounded New Orleans with the acknowledgment, "This is probably the last evangelistic sermon I'll ever preach."

Frail and tentative, the 87-year-old Graham shuffled behind a walker toward the pulpit set at one end of the New Orleans Arena as a crowd his organization estimated at 16,300 stood in a sustained roar of applause March 12.

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Evangelist Billy  
Graham  
preaches to a  
crowd at the  
New Orleans  
Arena during  
the  
“Celebration of  
Hope” hosted  
by the Billy  
Graham  
Evangelistic  
Association  
and  
Samaritan's  
Purse March  
12. (Photo by  
Jennifer  
Zdon/The  
Times-Picayune  
in New  
Orleans/RNS)

His son, evangelist Franklin Graham, gently assisted him into place. Thousands of flash bulbs exploded. An overflow crowd of 1,500 watched outside on jumbo TV screens.

Graham preached on his feet 22 minutes. The arena’s lighting caught his swept-back silvery hair.

His familiar square jaw was taut, but his voice has grown thin with the years.

Graham told a few well-received jokes and spoke admiringly of Mayor Ray Nagin and the Herculean task of recovery facing him.

“How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. It’s the only way,” he advised Nagin.

But the core of his message—much abbreviated from that of 417 earlier crusades—was simple Christian evangelism—a call to repentance, acceptance and the assurance of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Graham preached out of his own infirmity, several times referring to his multiple ailments. He begged his audience’s forgiveness in advance should he lose his way in his notes, which he did briefly, once, to no ill effect.

He referred to a recent period of illness that included four brain operations. He spoke of sensing the nearness of death and the certainty of salvation.

When he finished, Graham sat back in a lift chair that raised him to the appropriate height behind the pulpit. As hundreds filed forward in the traditional altar call, he admonished them to “be careful of those people in wheelchairs. I’m one of them.”

Buses outside the area advertised they came from as far away as Kentucky and Georgia, but the crowd was overwhelmingly local and badly battered by Hurricane Katrina.

Pastor Louis Jones said he came because he needed to be encouraged.

He lost his church in the 7th Ward, as well as his cars and his home in eastern New Orleans.

His wife, children and grandchildren live near Dallas while he remains in the city, trying to assist his scattered congregation and working his job in the U.S. Postal Service.

To top it off, he said, a brown recluse spider bit him while he was gutting his house, hospitalizing him for two days.

“I’m learning patience,” he said. “But I hope to hear some words of encouragement tonight. I always find the word (of God) encouraging. It strengthens me. Sometimes a preacher needs to be preached to.”

Many in the crowd said they came for similar reasons—to hear a bit of encouragement in familiar words from an iconic figure in American religious life.

Some added more. Lesha and Michael Freeland brought their two sons She said she wanted 9-year-old Christopher to see Graham in the flesh.

Although Christopher probably is too young to appreciate Graham’s appearance, she said, she “wanted him to be able to say one day that he had seen him.”

What they saw before Graham’s appearance was 90 precisely choreographed minutes of Christian rock mixed with videotaped testimonies, bluegrass music and exuberant traditional hymn singing.

In a highlight before Graham’s appearance, 97-year-old George Beverly Shea, a longtime, faithful Graham musical sidekick, sang How Great Thou Art to affectionate applause that nearly rivaled Graham’s.

But many said they felt the night was Graham’s—and another moment of history wrought by Hurricane Katrina, one in which timeless Scripture was intersecting with the end of a mortal life span.

Graham seemed draped with the same sense of closure.

“I’m looking forward to that big reunion up there,” he said at his sermon’s end. “God bless you all.”

*Bruce Nolan writes for The Times-Picayune in New Orleans.*

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