The rise and fall and rise again of Joel Gregory

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Imagine you're a big-shot Hollywood producer, and you're making a movie about the life of iconic Baptist preacher/pastor/professor Joel Gregory.

Joel Gregory, professor of preaching at Truett Baptist Theological Seminary, marked 50 years in the ministry this summer, and looks back on a life marked by promise, grandeur, loss and redemption. (Baylor University Photo)You bet the film on casting character actor Paul Giamatti, who is 95 percent perfect to play Gregory. Giamatti mirrors Gregory's persona: Everyman, not a leading man. A bit stooped, a tad weary. You don't want to see him shirtless. And

he’s the only actor with range for the part. The slightest gesture—a chuckle, a pause, a shrug—may convey the themes of Gregory’s life: Promise. Grandeur. Loss. Redemption.

But Giamatti’s only 95 percent perfect. So, casting against conventional wisdom, you sign James Earl Jones to overdub Giamatti’s voice. You don’t even think twice. Besides Gregory, Jones is the only person on the planet whose voice echoes what practically everybody who’s heard Gregory preach insists he surely sounds like—God Almighty.

Since you can’t trust anybody else with the screenplay, you write it yourself. To prepare, you study 19th-century oratory and read all the great preachers of that era. No other genre will capture Gregory’s tone in the place he’s most at home—behind a pulpit.

Then you write a life in three acts:

Act 1—Normalcy. The pace zips. The protagonist, a boy of modest means, grows up in Fort Worth. Like millions of Baptist children coming of age in the mid-20th century, his life perches upon three sturdy pillars—home, school and a full-service neighborhood church. Despite the lure of academia, church trumps school, and the boy sets out to become a preacher. He trains at the world’s largest Baptist institutions, studying at Baylor University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Baylor again. Along the way, he learns the ministerial ropes in small churches.

Act 2—Glory and Cataclysm. Gregory accepts the pastorate of the “seminary church” in Fort Worth. Promoted by the school’s connected-and-charismatic president, millions discover The Voice, an inimitably grand oratorical presence. The still-young pastor preaches in magnificent venues. In just 13 years, he assumes Baptistdom’s most prominent pulpit. Only two years later, he resigns abruptly, later endures divorce and supports himself selling “pre-need funeral plans” door-to-door.

Act 3—Redemption. Of all the saints in all creation, a prominent African-American pastor becomes Gregory's best friend. He keeps insisting Gregory can't quit. He places Gregory in front of 900 black Baptist pastors. Before you can say, "Resurrection," Gregory ascends pulpit after pulpit. He's the most popular white preacher in African-American congregations nationwide. Other Baptists eventually catch the spirit, and by the end of the movie, Gregory returns to Baylor. Oxymoronically, the last great exemplar of 19th-century pulpit oratory invests his final years teaching 21st-century ministers to preach.

Science, not sermons, captivated young Joel Gregory, growing up on the bustling west side of Fort Worth in the decades after World War II. He attended Arlington Heights High School, known for its stately campus and strong academics. And he participated in a federally funded program to funnel bright students into biological research. "I lived in the lab," he recalls with obvious fondness.

Then, two events in 1964 changed his life.

A call to preach

First, he attended a youth service at a nearby church, where Bill Glass, a member of the Cleveland Browns who later became an evangelist and prison minister, provided the main attraction.

"I was 16, and Bill was still a pro ball player. I felt a sense of conviction then," Gregory remembers. "A few months later, in June of '64, during the evening service of a youth Vacation Bible School—to this day, it was the most vivid spiritual conviction. I told the youth minister, John Scales, God was calling me to preach."

The leap from lab to pulpit wasn't all that far for the earnest, studious youngster. Edith and Clifford Gregory raised their son in what he describes as a "church-centered family and culture," and Connell Memorial Baptist

Church in their neighborhood naturally extended both family and culture. Even before that evening of commitment, Pastor Ira Bentley and key laypeople helped him begin to hear the “call to special Christian service,” as Baptists spoke of it in those days.

Sixteen-year-old Joel’s embrace of ministry upset his biology teacher, Frederick Arseneau, who saw potential in the boy. And a fellow science student asked point blank: “Why would you throw your life away?” But Joel threw his life into the arms of God and never looked back—or even sideways—for almost three decades.

> *A grand, mesmerizing preaching presence and a pulpit voice that peals like thunder.*

Gregory also threw himself into preparation for ministry. The path led to Baylor and Southwestern Seminary and back to Baylor for a doctorate. It also included lessons learned in a string of small Baptist churches. Along the way, he developed a grand, mesmerizing preaching presence and a pulpit voice that peals like thunder.

At Baylor, “I had the privilege of studying under the late Ray Summers,” a leading 20th-century New Testament scholar, he says. But “a good deal of my style, at the base of it, goes back to an encounter my junior year at Baylor in my first pastorate. It was an Easter service at North Fort Worth Baptist Church. D.L. Lowrie, the pastor, was a young man—an exegetical, expository preacher. I had never heard anything just like it.”

“Up to then, I’d been preaching youth-revival topical sermons,” he said, chuckling at the memory. Dumbfounded by Lowrie’s ability to mine truth from Scripture and apply it to the practical needs of his listeners, Gregory made an appointment. Pastor and aspiring preacher spent half an hour talking about sermons. “That conversation had as much to do with shaping my preaching as anything for a long time,” he says. “It was seminal.

Summers gave me the exegetical and biblical tools for interpretation. That 30-minute conversation with D.L. pushed me to apply it."

So much for sermon preparation. What about delivery?

Influences, Victorian and contemporary

"In my own reading … I feasted at the feet of the great Victorian and Edwardian preachers—Charles Haddon Spurgeon, G. Campbell Morgan and Alexander Maclaren." Early influences hold fast.

But so do contemporary influences. He points to two of the most revered Southern Baptist preachers of the 1960s and '70s, Clyde Fant and the late John Claypool. "I'm thankful to those men. They modified what might have been something else." Their emphasis on tapping the biblical narrative for drama and power, as well as tapping into everyday life for practical application, honed Gregory's sermons.

Indirectly, so did the evangelical preaching prince Chuck Swindoll. "In the late '70s, people would leave church and ask, 'Say, did you hear Swindoll?'" he noted. "My preaching had become heavy and scholastic—point/subpoint. And here was Swindoll, preaching from contemporary, lived experience."

Still later, when Gregory proclaimed in larger churches and became the featured preacher on the Baptist Hour radio and TV program, he learned he "had to lighten up some on pure exegetical content," the heavy-

duty biblical mining and refining. Why? “To communicate; to keep people’s attention.”

“I didn’t abandon biblical preaching,” he explained. “But I had to give them lived experience. The listening situation has changed.”

Ever the student, Gregory still is learning. Turning to his desk, he raises an enormous stack of CDs—“every sermon John (Claypool) preached at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

But still, exegesis and application and oratory can’t encapsulate the essence of Joel Gregory in the pulpit. For that, you need to hear The Voice.

“I never took a lesson,” Gregory says of his peerless vocal instrument. “I think I took one class in public speaking at Baylor. Early on, I had no consciousness of delivery. … In my 20s, people began to remark on my vocal production. By the time I went to Gambrell (Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth) in 1977, I was aware of a gift—I mean a *gift*—of speaking that tended to engage people.”

Gregory admits experience shaped and tempered and rounded out his presentation. He preached in ever-larger venues, which seemed to demand vigor and vocal athleticism to match the grandeur of the gospel. Still, he tries to remember to scale his voice to the room. “I’ve found it takes a certain-size place to speak like that. … Besides, you don’t want to lean on delivery while neglecting content.”

On the other hand, Gregory thinks proclamation of the gospel is an endeavor worthy of grandiloquence.

A place for oratorical style

“As someone who sees the preaching task as exposition of Scripture, I feel there is a place to maintain what you call a more oratorical style of

preaching," he said. "I'm keenly aware that (style of preaching) is fading. But the pathos of Scripture—its emotive impact—can lend itself to oratory if that's natural to you, if it's genuine."

Increasing numbers of Baptists resonated with Gregory's projection of a magnificent gospel. Not yet 30 years old, he accepted the Gambrell Street pastorate in 1977. He stepped into the pulpit directly across the street from Southwestern Seminary, then the largest preacher factory on the planet.

Not long after Gregory arrived at Gambrell Street, Russell Dilday became president of the seminary and joined his church. Pastor and president hit it off.

"That was a great influence—Russell's friendship," Gregory recounts. "He and others became promoters, almost, of my ministry. He opened enormous doors."

Gregory initially appealed to Dilday by delivering three strong sermons in a row, when the new seminary president and his wife, Betty, were seeking a church home.

"We decided maybe our best choice was the church right nearby, in our neighborhood," Dilday recalled. "We visited one Sunday morning, and I was so impressed by that young man. He didn't have the characteristics you would expect in a popular preacher. He wasn't tall. He had glasses. … But that was one of the best biblical sermons I had heard in a long time. People said he has a voice like God's, only deeper. But he was biblically sound and had good illustrations."

> *People said he has a voice like God's, only deeper.*

As veteran church-visitors, the Dildays realized most preachers possess at least one "sugar stick"—a favorite, proven sermon—and they decided to see

if they heard young Gregory on a sugar-stick Sunday. So, they went back to Gambrell Street that Sunday night. And the next Wednesday night.

“I began to realize this was not a single incident,” Dilday says. “He was a solid Baptist, biblical, evangelical.”

The Dildays joined Gambrell Street. Pastor and president visited church prospects together. Their families shared meals. They became friends. And Dilday’s respect for Gregory grew.

“I began to tell people one of the best preachers in the country was my young pastor,” Dilday remembers.

Thanks to Dilday’s influence, Jimmy Draper—then pastor of First Baptist Church in nearby Euless and a Southwestern board member—invited Gregory to preach at the Southern Baptist Convention Pastors’ Conference in 1980 in St. Louis, a then-mammoth meeting on the eve of the SBC annual meeting.

“That was the first very, very large setting where I preached,” Gregory said. “That resulted in a crush of invitations to preach. I really wasn’t ready.”

Gregory preached to a packed house every Sunday at Gambrell Street and often flew off to preach in other churches and ministers’ conferences during the week.

Teaching at Southwestern Seminary

The opportunities multiplied in 1982, when Gregory joined the Southwestern Seminary faculty to teach preaching.

Once again, Dilday advocated for Gregory.

“He’s the only faculty member in my time—16 years there—whom I had to

promote against the wishes of the faculty," Dilday reported. "The preaching faculty were a little worried he would travel to the churches a lot and wouldn't stay home. My answer was we needed a good representative of Southwestern among the churches. They said he'll be too good; the students will be discouraged they can't live up to that high quality. I asked if they wanted mediocre professors. Other said students will imitate him. I said they could do worse."

Under Dilday's direction, the seminary worked out a plan for Gregory to teach one year and review the arrangement if problems developed, which they did not.

"He became very, very faithful as a teacher," Dilday says. "He was popular with the students and popular on the preaching circuit. And he developed good relationships with the faculty."

So with his weekends free, pulpits from around the nation did indeed beckon. The next year at the behest of SBC Music Director Bill Reynolds, a faculty colleague at Southwestern, Gregory preached five 15-minute theme interpretations at the SBC annual meeting in Pittsburgh.

Rising too fast

"Once again, it accelerated things for me in a disorienting way," he acknowledged. T.B. Maston, the legendary Southwestern Seminary ethics professor and Gregory's parishioner at Gambrell Street, agreed. Maston once told fellow ethics professor Bill Tillman: "Joel went up too fast."

Still, the peak of the Baptist mountain loomed far above annual meeting theme interpretations.

Gregory kept climbing.

By 1988, fundamentalists and moderates waged an all-out war for control

of the SBC. Gregory, then pastor of the huge Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth and president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, mounted a podium in the middle of the battlefield.

Asked to preach the annual convention sermon that year in San Antonio, he delivered what many longtime observers call the most memorable sermon in SBC history, "The Castle and the Wall."

At the heart of his sermon, Gregory told about the owner of a magnificent castle who took a long journey. Before he departed, he instructed his chief steward to protect the castle in his absence. Upon returning, the owner rejoiced to find a splendid wall guarding his property. But devastation greeted him when he passed through the gate. He learned the steward used the castle's stones to build the wall.

Gregory's metaphor contained just enough ambiguity to please and anger moderates and fundamentalists alike. "Some on both sides thought I was in their camp," he recalled. "And some on both sides thought I was an appeaser. …"

"I do think the metaphor holds," he insisted: In their struggle for control of the SBC, some Baptists were willing to tear down the castle to build a wall to protect the castle they demolished. For his part, Gregory contends he preached on behalf of peace within the SBC. "My goal was to build a big middle."

Most memorable message was a flop

To that end, his most memorable message constituted a colossal flop. The

SBC went right on fighting. In San Antonio, Gregory preached peace, while W.A. Criswell, legendary pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and white-haired icon of the convention's fundamentalist faction, infamously called moderates "skunks."

If Gregory's SBC sermon hurt him with the fundamentalists, they didn't hold a grudge. Soon, Criswell started talking about retiring from the pulpit of "the world's largest Baptist church" (even then, a suspect claim). The pastor-search committee from First Baptist, Dallas, came a-courtin'. And the highest pastoral summit in the Baptist universe—that pulpit—loomed in Gregory's sight.

In 1964, a young preacher-boy from the west side of Fort Worth never aspired to attain the ultimate pastorate—30 miles down Interstate 30 and a multitude of cultures away in downtown Dallas.

"When I started preaching, if people liked you, the old laity would say, 'You're the next Billy Graham,'" Gregory recalled. "That mantle transferred in the 1960s and '70s to W.A. Criswell. But I never thought about (becoming 'the next W.A. Criswell') until people started saying it. I never paid much attention until a number of people started saying it. But when the search committee showed up, that got my attention."

The committee arrived within a few months of when Gregory preached the SBC sermon in '88. "I was told the late Carlos McLeod (beloved evangelism director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and an FBC Dallas member) floated my name … maybe as a compromise candidate. I talked with them off and on for two years."

Called to First Baptist Church in Dallas

Those discussions bore fruit the Sunday after Thanksgiving 1990, when the church unanimously called Gregory to become only its third pastor in more than nine decades.

“The Spirit was bouncing all over the place. I had never heard or seen anything like that,” recalled Gregory’s longtime friend and eventual business partner, Karl Singer, who recently had joined First Baptist Dallas after about 17 years as executive director of the Willow Creek Association.

Gregory said he had “a hard two years” as pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas (above).Gregory joined the church the following January. If he had carried a flag, he could’ve planted it on the peak of Baptists’ highest mountain.

Gregory, the heir, was to serve as pastor alongside Criswell, the venerated patriarch, who would be called senior pastor. Then Criswell soon would retire, and Gregory would stand alone on the summit.

Like many a failed venture, Gregory descended much more rapidly than he ascended. What happened next would take a book to tell. In fact, his memoir, *Too Great a Temptation*, recounts it nicely. Here’s the world’s shortest *Reader’s Digest* version: Gregory encountered an inordinately complicated situation. Criswell refused to retire. So Gregory quit.

“It was a hard two years,” Gregory said, mastering understatement.

“Looking back, I knew it was risky to go. … I was enthralled with the greatness of the pulpit, a world pulpit. I had no clue about the rest of it.”

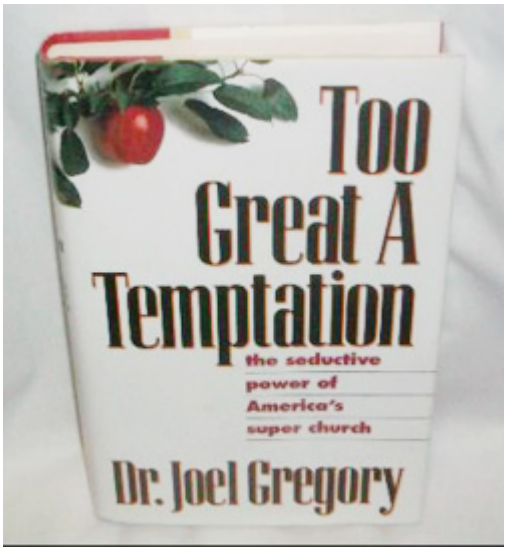
He cites a lesson learned in hindsight: “A strong gift can take you where the absence of other gifts cannot keep you.”

Just an entrance-level requirement

“A preaching gift got me to that place,” he noted. “All the other (skills necessary to succeed) I really didn’t care about. At First Dallas, preaching is just an entrance-level requirement. … That just got you in the door.”

More than 20 years later, Gregory declines to say Criswell misled him as he considered accepting the Dallas pastorate. “I do think when I went, Dr. Criswell was ready to leave. When he actually faced the reality, it was almost impossible (for him to consider leaving).” Then, from Gregory’s perspective, remaining in Dallas soon became impossible, too.

In the summer of 1992, Criswell told Gregory he intended to stay longer. Others have confirmed Criswell wanted to remain as pastor of FBC 50 years—an anniversary then five years in the distance. Without clearly delineated duties, the co-pastors could not co-exist, Gregory decided. Besides, partisan groups were lining up, some for each pastor. Tension mounted.



Gregory wrote *Too Great a Temptation* in 1994 about his two-year struggle at First Baptist Church in Dallas.So, by August of that year, Gregory decided to leave. “About the last month I was there, I just thought about how to do it,” he reported. “I didn’t consult with anyone, and that was a mistake. … Good men in the church were trying to work it out, but I saw, myself, no solution.”

Heeding his own counsel, he rose before a Wednesday-night crowd and quit.

“From a perspective of 22 years later, I feel the Lord led me there, and the Lord led me away,” he said. “I think some of my successors would say it was a shock that helped clarify the situation.”

Nevertheless, Gregory’s resignation delivered personal and family shocks.

“The disruption of the church played into some other disruptions,” he noted, acknowledging he didn’t engage “the clearest thinking of my life” in those days. “I wanted to be alone. I wanted to hide.”

Selling door-to-door

The Gregory family moved out of a half-million dollar home in the tony Lakewood section of Dallas and into a loaned townhome. Soon, he found

himself in a phone booth in the Fort Worth Club, asking for a job selling "pre-need funeral plans" door-to-door for Greenwood Cemetery, where he had performed numerous funerals.

That made for what he wryly calls a "tragicomic situation." Gregory craved privacy, but he couldn't duck notoriety as he knocked on doors selling funerals. "Every block, people would recognize me," he remembers. Not that his fame hurt; he made "Rookie of the Year" in 1993.

Still, a shock is a shock. "I was thrown from a big salary, a big house, and preaching on national TV to disappearing and working with commission-only salespeople," he said. "I had been promoted—over-promoted. And to go from that perch to knocking on doors, it was, to some degree, what the doctor ordered. … By my own approach, I had become increasingly insulated from the realities of the life of the typical person in the pew. … But this is where real people live."

Vocational plummet and financial free-fall didn't define the limits of Gregory's travail. He watched his sons, Grant and Garrett, suffer. He and his wife, Linda, divorced. "Divorce is a tragedy. We paid an enormous price," he said.

But at least he didn't sell pre-need funeral plans the rest of his life. He wrote *Too Great a Temptation* in 1994, and that led to a job with The Summit Group, a book and specialty magazine publisher. He learned about business and excelled at editing. He even became an expert in a distinctly Texan food genre, publishing *Chili Pepper* magazine with his good friend Karl Singer. Gregory got on.

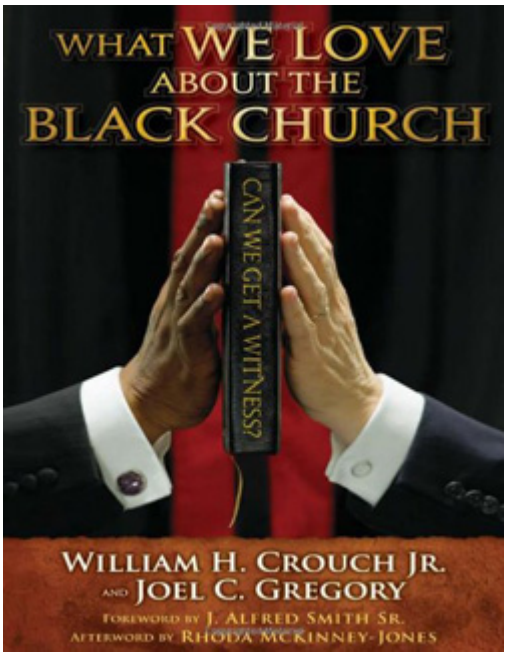
But his pulpit voice—that Voice—fell all but silent.

"From the time I left First Dallas in '92, until '97, I spoke very little," he reports. "Nobody knew what to make of it. They didn't abandon me, but they didn't know what to do with me."

New African-American friends

Actually, one person still had an idea. While Gregory was pastor at First Baptist in glitzy downtown Dallas, he met the late E.K. Bailey, legendary pastor of Concord Missionary Baptist Church in gritty South Dallas. They collaborated to prevent swimming pools from closing in the African-American neighborhoods surrounding Bailey's church. And in Bailey, Gregory found a true friend.

"When I left the church and moved into a tiny apartment in Fort Worth, the one person who kept calling me was E.K.," Gregory recalled, smiling at the poignancy of Bailey's persistence. "'Gregory, you should preach,' he'd say. It was crazy."



In 2010, Joel Gregory co-authored *What We Love About The Black Church*, which celebrates the blessings and wisdom of African-American congregations.Or maybe inspired. In 1997, Bailey invited Gregory to speak at the E.K. Bailey International Preaching Conference. "I didn't know what it was," Gregory recalls. "I thought it was a seminar for preachers."

Instead, he walked into a ballroom at the Fairmont Hotel in downtown Dallas to an audience of 900 ministers, primarily African-American pastors.

“I spoke on 2 Corinthians 4:6—‘We have this treasure in earthen vessels.’ It was a life-defining moment.” The Apostle Paul’s treatise on brokenness and hope tracked Gregory’s sojourn, and his sermon took a biblical-yet-confessional tone.

What happened next mirrored Gregory’s ascension as a bright-light young preacher in the SBC. “The brothers and sisters started asking me to come preach,” he said. “I was clueless this would happen. I started preaching at churches all over the country.”

That happened because African-American churches resonated with the broken-yet-redeemed Gregory, explained Ralph West, pastor of The Church Without Walls in Houston.

“One of the African-American church’s strong points is its ability to give people second chances. Very few pastors who stand up and preach in any African-American church would disagree with that,” said West, who has known Gregory since West entered Southwestern Seminary while Gregory led Gambrell Street.

Indentifying with broken people

“The black church identifies with broken people,” he added. “It is a church of redemption, a place of forgiveness. It gives the marginalized a place to find their opportunity.”

Given that opportunity, Gregory consistently delivers, West said. “Black preaching is not done just by black people,” he noted. “Joel has an uncanny ability to relate to people through other people’s stories and by revealing just enough of his own story to say: ‘I identify with you. I sit in the ashes

with you.’”

> *The black church identifies with broken people.*

African-American churches love Gregory because they still embrace great preaching, West reports. “The preaching moment—it’s not just prophetic; it’s priestly,” he said. “Joel can be prophetic, very challenging. But he can be priestly, very confident yet compassionate.”

West treasured Gregory’s preaching so much, he invited Gregory to be his summer preaching assistant so he could take an extended break. That close relationship has spanned about a decade, and their relationship blossomed.

Their relationship also has provided another reason West admires his friend. “Joel is an incredible pastor,” he says. “We talk almost every day, and … he really is a pastor. He has hundreds of stories where he talks about how he prayed with people, won people to Jesus Christ, visited people in the hospital. His pastoral compassion often is overshadowed by his preaching, (but) he has a shepherd’s heart.”

Compassion, understanding and empathy

Seasoned and softened by his experience in Dallas and the aftermath, Gregory’s sermons today differ from how Gregory preached when his star was rising. Of his rapid fall and subsequent struggle, he said: “It humanized me. It humanized my approach to the (biblical) text. It humanized my preaching. It imbued me with more of a sense of compassion, understanding and empathy with what people face. I had experienced challenge and grace. … Nothing ever helped me more.”

Dilday and West both agree.

“It’s an amazing picture of redemption,” Dilday observed.

“He himself is a wounded healer,” West added. “He can say, ‘I have wept your tears and drank the bitter dregs of your sorrow.’ That makes him unique. Without that, he’s just a well-polished preacher. But this is soul talk. … You know he knows where you’ve been.”

Grace redeemed Gregory. A few years ago, he preached a sermon titled “How Not to Get Shook up When Your World Shakes Down” to an arena full of African-American Christians at the Hampton University Ministers’ Conference in Virginia.

“I went from being on international television to disappearing. I went from living in a mansion to a tiny apartment. I went from being everywhere to being nowhere,” he told the crowd. “I can stand today and tell you that when your life is at the corner of Rock Boulevard and Hard Place Avenue, that’s where God lets you find him.”

For several years, Gregory juggled publishing during the week and flying all over the nation to preach on the weekends. “Everything I was doing was unanticipated,” he said. Because he wrote a book, he landed in a busy and productive publishing business. And because he agreed to speak at a preaching seminar, hundreds of pulpits opened up to him, once again.

An opening to Truett Seminary

But Gregory still hadn’t exhausted all his surprises. About a dozen years ago, Paul Powell, dean of Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary, called to ask Gregory if he would preach at the seminary’s pastors’ conference.

“It stunned me. This wasn’t on my radar,” he recalled. He preached a confessional sermon titled “Blow the Trumpet,” about taking up ministry again. Pastors—most of them Anglo this time— packed the seminary’s chapel to hear him preach. And they did it again the next year.

Later, Powell and the late Frank Pollard, then a Truett preaching professor about to retire, asked Gregory to consider teaching preaching at the seminary.

“There was a long list of unlikelihoods in that,” Gregory mused. He had “wrangled” with Baylor leadership when he was BGCT president. The university changed its charter to strengthen its hand in electing its board and to diminish the convention’s influence over its largest school. Gregory joined others in opposing that action.

But after a couple of years, Gregory received a one-year teaching contract. He engaged in “wonderfully frank” talks with the seminary faculty about his theology and his personal life. He later received tenure. Now, students and faculty revere him. In the Truett Seminary community, he has experienced “a wonderful relationship that is very much like family to me.”

And on that campus, the 19th-century orator has become a mentor and guide to 21st-century aspiring preachers. His classes fill up. Twentysomething students adore their 66-year-old professor.

“He’s a respected figure. … He’s well-liked by the students because he is such an effective communicator himself,” noted Chris McLain, a May 2014 Truett graduate and Gregory’s teaching assistant the past two academic years. “He’s memorable. I can still recall bits and pieces of sermons I heard years ago.”

Gregory epitomizes the “big idea” preaching style, describes McLain, associate pastor of Hilltop Christian Fellowship, a congregation affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas near Crawford, not far from Waco. And in the seminary’s basic preaching class, Gregory drills that style—the “blocking and tackling” of preaching.

Building blocks of preaching

“Those are the building blocks—develop three points, apply deductive reasoning, come up with a big idea, provide solid illustrations. Everyone can use it,” McLain added. “Even if that’s not the students’ style, and they preach narrative or inductive sermons, they can appreciate what he does and what he teaches. And he can teach their style, too.”

Gregory teaches outside the classroom, too, says David McDaniel, who served as the prof’s teaching assistant before he graduated from Truett four years ago and calls Gregory “one of the top five mentors in my life.”

“One of the things I learned from him was listening to each person’s story,” explained McDaniel, pastor to young adults at Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo. “Sometimes life happens, and grace needs to be extended. And he was the first one to extend grace.”

Aurelia Davila Pratt, spiritual formation pastor at Grace Baptist Church in Round Rock, says Gregory was instrumental in her following “an unexpected calling.”Aurelia Davila Pratt experienced that grace directly. She took Truett Seminary’s basic preaching course only because it was required. And she chose Gregory’s class “because he’s an amazing preacher, and … I wanted to listen to him.”

Course requirements included preaching a sermon, and Pratt expected that to be a one-and-done experience. “I told my family to come hear me, because I probably never would preach again,” she said. Based on that

sermon, Gregory nominated her for the seminary's Robinson Outstanding Student Preacher Award, which she won.

"This is impossible. I only preached that one time, and that was it," she remembers thinking. Award winners preach in Truett chapel. From that experience, Pratt received other invitations to preach. And from those experiences, she helped plant Grace Baptist Church in Round Rock, where she is pastor of spiritual formation and teaching pastor—on the preaching rotation once a month.

"That was an unexpected calling in my life," Pratt says. "It was Dr. Gregory who opened that door for me … something so monumental. I don't even know if he knows how profoundly he impacted my life."

Impact on Millenials

Told students are fond of and respect him, Gregory responds: "I hope that's the case. Over nine years, I think I've gotten better at seeking to relate to the Millennial generation. Beyond the basic content of homiletics, I think I do have the students' respect for longevity."

Longevity? Seminary students look up to one of the greatest preachers of his generation because he's been around a long time? Well, maybe they appreciate the fact he's still a student, too.

"Dr. Gregory is always looking for ways to improve," McLain says. "He approaches teaching with the similar tenacity that he approaches preaching. He's continually reading textbooks. Because he cares so much, he's respected by the students. …

"It is remarkable that a great preacher will be known as a teacher of great preachers."

"I have a great admiration for our students," Gregory says. "They have to

go out in a postmodern, post-Baptist culture. What gave me authority as a pastor—education, ordination, denominational ties—doesn't give them authority. … They must speak from the authority of their own integrity and transparency. That's taught me a lot."

So, prof and students teach each other, he added. "I teach them the timeless elements of crafting sermons. They have taught me about living and communicating in this generation."

Unified bond of fellowship

Gregory revels in what he calls "the great unity of Truett."

"In 50 years, I've never seen an institutional fellowship like this school," he explained, talking about the "unified bonds" that tie administrators, faculty and students together in shared purpose.

And Truett Seminary reciprocates Gregory's affection, reported David Garland, interim provost at Baylor, dean of the seminary during most of Gregory's tenure and a faculty colleague.

"Our students are serious about preaching. In him, they see an incredible example," Garland said. "He also engages students particularly well, teaching them to tap their own gifts. And I can't get over how much he speaks, but he never misses a class."

Garland also notes Gregory is a great friend, who has "fit in extremely well" with Truett's highly collegial faculty.

Another stream of grace blessed Gregory about nine years ago, when he became friends with Bill Crouch, then president of Georgetown College in Kentucky. Crouch had reached out to alumni of Bishop College, a historically African-American school formerly located in Marshall and then Dallas, which closed in 1988. Crouch asked Gregory to become a

distinguished fellow of Georgetown and to direct the Proclaimers Place seminars, which provide intense preaching education. About 900 students, most of them African-American, have participated in 70 seminars in 14 states and abroad, including Oxford University in England.

In addition to teaching at Truett Seminary and working with Georgetown College, Gregory leads Gregory Ministries, which enables him to fill pulpits across the nation and abroad. Last year, he taught or preached 200 times in 20 states and at Oxford and in Rome.

Joel Gregory preached August 13 at the California Missionary Baptist State Convention and posed with its officers. (Gregory Ministries Photo)"It's amazing what has happened," Singer, chairman of Gregory Ministries, says of Gregory's work among African-American churches, particularly Proclaimers Place. "There's nothing quite like it. … We're basically asking for a leading from God for how he wants us to broaden the ministry in the African-American church. We're strategizing. …

"There's a peacefulness about him now that had to be rebuilt with God's grace. (But) right now, Joel is in a better place than at any time I've known him—25 years. He's doing great work, … and he can continue to work as

long as he has the health and drive to do it.”

Gregory now is married to Joanne Michele Gregory, who was born in Paris, where her father was the military attaché in charge of security, and grew up in Seattle. She attended Bible college in Tacoma, Wash., and graduated from Baylor. The mother of two adult children, she is a registered nurse and a signer for the hearing impaired.

50th anniversary in the ministry

This summer, his African-American sisters and brothers led in celebrating his 50th anniversary in ministry. A gala worship service at The Church Without Walls in Houston marked the event in mid-June.

After Gregory’s fall from the famous Dallas pulpit, he understandably assumed his ministry had ended. During the long years of absence in the mid-’90s, he logically reckoned his voice had been silenced.

But the grace Gregory preached fell on his own ears and sustained him. First, it sounded like E.K. Bailey’s voice, and then Paul Powell’s, and then Bill Crouch’s, and ultimately a whole chorus of “Amen”s and “Hallelujah”s and “Preach it”s.

“I’m very thankful for the grace that has been extended to me in all that has happened to me,” he says in a voice far softer than the orator’s preaching instrument. “The surprises have been on the up side—and that is how gracious people have been to me.”