

The Night the Ropes Came Down

Imagine, if you will, it's the middle of a miserably hot Mississippi summer in 1952. Adding to the scorching heat is the equally as flammable and constant tension between a racially divided Deep South.

Countless stories and sometimes first-hand experience bring back memories of living during the era of segregation. One of these events in the battle for civil equality took place more than five decades ago... 'the night the ropes came down.'

Many are not aware of the action taken by a young evangelist that would forever mark him as a leader in the fight for racial harmony. This spirited North Carolinian would step out in faith and boldly proclaim there to be "no scriptural basis for segregation." The location of choice to make this stand was near the heart of the segregated South... Jackson, Mississippi.

Over a three-week period in June and July of 1952 the Reverend Billy Graham conducted his first evangelistic crusade in Jackson. More than 362,000 people would attend the nightly meetings during that time, with nearly 6,000 making decisions for Christ. Significant changes in the spiritual make-up and growth of Mississippi can be traced to these meetings.

Just as with his previous evangelical meetings, Dr. Graham's Jackson crusade was intended to share the truths of the Gospel and love of Christ with ALL who had ears to hear. However, no one imagined the crusade would become a monumental event in the history of the Civil Rights movement.

Dr. Graham had grown accustomed to conducting segregated services in the South, and initially agreed to segregate the audience in Jackson. Later, he would reject segregationist governor Hugh White's suggestion to conduct separate meetings for the African American population during his visit. Holding segregated events had always struck him as being wrong, but he had never chosen to take decisive action until now.

Prior to the beginning of the first night's service, Graham made his way to the ropes that separated the audience and tore them down. It is noted that when the ushers tried to re-position the ropes Graham physically stopped them from doing so, adding that he would leave the crusade if the ropes were put back in place.

He addressed those in attendance by saying, "There is no scriptural basis for segregation. It may be there are places where such is desirable to both races, but certainly not in the church." He would later expound, "The ground at the foot of the Cross is level, and it touches my heart when I see whites standing shoulder to shoulder with blacks at the Cross."



2005 SENIORS: Roy Thompson, Dewayne Hodge, Jerrid Harris, and Josh Crouch.



1952: Opening night in Jackson, Mississippi at the Billy Graham Jackson Crusade.

This symbolically powerful gesture marked a major ministry watershed for Graham. He would never again lead a segregated evangelistic meeting.

During Belhaven College's annual address by the president many heard this story for the first time. Most in attendance were likely thinking to themselves during Dr. Parrott's comments, "This is a great piece of history for Jackson, but what does it have to do with Belhaven?" As if he had heard the collective thoughts, Dr. Parrott concluded the story by tying together the history of this event with a piece of the present day history for Belhaven College.

The nightly meetings of the 1952 Billy Graham crusade were held in

what is now called H.T. Newell Field, the newly renovated home of Belhaven Football and Soccer.

On any given day, young men and women of different economic, racial, social, and spiritual backgrounds, take to the field at Newell, standing side-by-side as ambassadors for Belhaven College, in battle against competitors from other institutions. And, while there is little to no thought given towards the history of Newell Field, in particular the Graham crusade, there is a definite form of irony present.

Decades later the battle remains, but with a progressive difference. No longer is it a "flesh and blood" fight pitting blacks and whites against one another. Rather, it is those of different

races joining hands, proclaiming unity of spirit and like-mindedness in battle on the playing field.

There is nothing supernatural about H.T. Newell Field or the surface at the facility, but there is something extremely special about where the Lord chooses to make the power of His presence known. And when the hearts of His servants are willingly surrendered, whether at an evangelistic meeting or on the playing field, God has a unique and wonderful way of taking the ordinary and making them extraordinary. — MD

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1957: (Above) Billy Graham and Martin Luther King, Jr. during Graham's 68 Night Crusade in Madison Square Garden (Below) Newly renovated H. T. Newell Field.