

William Gaither Sept 29, 1923-Dec 25, 2009

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The family of Bill Gaither welcomes you to this Celebration of Life in remembering a husband, a father, a grandfather, a brother and a friend. We come together acknowledging our human loss that a loved one has gone home. We give thanks to our God that we have that hope through believing in his son that one day we will meet again in a far better place than this earth, where there will be neither more separations nor death. We'll meet again in a place where we will see each other as God intends us to be, with our new perfect bodies, filled with joy.

That is what this Christmas season has taught us. We are reminded that God sent us a special gift that whosoever embraces that gift would have new hopes, new dreams and new visions with everlasting life thrown in for us to look forward to. Though it was tough I'm sure, to enjoy Christmas in the Gaither household this year, you did it the best you could. We take solace and rejoice he wasn't alone on Christmas for he was with his parents, William and Mary Walker Gaither, his brothers, Francis, Earl and Roy, his sisters Lillian, Wilma, Helen, Evelyn and Jean, and a son, Marty. So while we down here have grieved his passing, this year he is spending his first Christmas with his heavenly family listening to their stories. Maybe they pointed out the angel Gabriel that told Mary about her coming birth. Perhaps he saw the angel that shared with the shepherds the message that on that

night the savior was born who would bring hope, peace and love into the world and one day die on a cross in order to defeat sin and death. For us it is an old, old story we hear year after year. For Bill it was new and fresh as he enjoyed sharing this Christmas with old friends, people like RC Smith, and Paul Lugibil.

So today we celebrate with Bill. We celebrate that his job on this earth is finished. He has fought the good fight; he has kept the faith and now rests from his labors.

We also remember his life on this earth. God knit him together in the womb of his mother 86 years ago to a family that was growing, in a town in southern Illinois by the name of Fairfield where he learned to love God's land and God's creatures. He met and married his wife of 63 years, Jeanne, and they raised 3 children, who produced grandkids. All of these he loved and adored. He went off to war serving in the Army Air Corps where he became a gunner during WW II. I understand they assigned him to be a belly gunner, which was the most vulnerable of positions in the plane, so being creative he decided that during firing practice he would do poorly thus hoping that they would believe he wasn't qualified for the job. I guess they realized he couldn't be that bad, questioned him about it, and, well that's where the story ended. The one thing we know is that God watched over him and brought him home safely where he began to make his mark in history by going off to college and became a teacher. After teaching in a one room

schoolhouse for awhile, he took his bride and moved north... not to Alaska... but to Williamsville where he taught AG, later became principal and then superintendent.

Though teaching was his joy, his greater joy was working in a garden, sharing his beloved turnips, raising cattle, teaching his children about God's creatures, being involved with 4-H and playing with his dog. After being on the road representing the Board of Education in Illinois it was time to rest from those labors and concentrate on his home and enjoy being with his wife, and just enjoy retirement and work on things that had been somewhat neglected. It was a new and different man that many saw. From the strict principal and superintendent came the loving, caring father and grandfather who loved and spoiled his kids in many ways. His granddaughter Chris said that her mom, Lynne told her that she and her brothers never got away with anything, that dad was tough on them, while the grandkids saw him as a pussy cat, a push over that would give them whatever they asked....well sometimes.

The kids were encouraged to be whatever they wanted to be, and do whatever they wanted to do; the only thing that would hold them back was the lack of trying, or their own fear that they could not do it. So dad instilled in them the motto that they needed to keep on trying and to follow their dreams and hopes.

That's the man they remember. That's the dad and grampaw that they knew. Whether it was helping them raise and show sheep, or teaching them about gardening and life, they knew that they could learn from an expert who tilled the land, took care of cattle and did all the stuff that he believed was fun. They say you can take a man out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the man.

Bill was a simple man, very plain. Lynne said that loving and caring were a few words that could describe her dad. God blessed him with that spirit in order to teach his children and grandkids what really matters. I'm sure as a teacher and as a principal he made an impact on many a student. They saw him differently then. Maybe as being strict and all that for that is what his job was all about. Yet it went deeper than that. He wanted all his students to succeed in life so that they could leave a legacy for others to follow.

Oh I know I'm painting him as a saint, and I'm sure he wasn't always perfect, but don't tell that to his family. For they saw the other side of William Lester Gaither. They saw the helpful encouraging father and grandfather. They saw the man who would do anything for them, who went out of his way to make their lives better, to give them that which they needed, which included his love.

Lynne told me that when she was a child she remembered dad allowing her to play beautician with him. Sometimes she would take and curl the hair on his legs. She remembered one time that while dad slept she began to trim some of

those hairs with her scissors, but somehow she pinched him and dad woke up quickly throwing his arms in the air and just about knocked her to the ground. For the rest of the story you need to get it from her.

Lynne said she and her family were lucky for the support they received from dad. And Jeanne said that Bill and she were thankful for their support as well, especially in these trying years.

They told me that Bill out lasted his heart by-pass date. They told him he could have 14 years or so. But he had 24. And each year after the 14 he would tell his family next year he wouldn't be around, but he would make it again and again, enjoying and savoring each moment. Well, it has finally happened, and it wasn't his heart that failed, but that his body was worn out and the old clock just wound down.

And so this Christmas was a little bit different than some of the other ones. One plate was missing from the table, one stocking perhaps left empty. But the memories of the past Christmas' remain as they reminisced about cooking hot dogs and roasting marsh mellows on the fire in the fire place grampaw would make every year. While other families might have gathered to celebrate Christmas with a sit down dinner, the Gaithers enjoyed the simple life of eating hotdogs and marsh mellow roasting on an open fire. Almost could make a wonderful song out of that scene. Oh, they did.

So Christmas' will be remembered differently from now on. The Gaither family will remember with joy that their loved one went home to spend Christmas with his family in heaven, where he joined all the other Gaither family members, especially his son Marty.

There is one more thing I must say about Bill. He loved his family to come and be by his side. Yet he also was happy when they went home. In fact sometimes he would rush them out. It was like, go ahead, roast the hot dog, get that marsh mellow eaten, and by the way, it's just about time for you to go home. I understand the other day in the hospital when the family had gathered a young niece very innocently said she was going to miss getting kicked out of grampaws house this year.

So now you have it. You know some of the stories of a man who will be missed by all. Bill now rests from his labors. He sits with Jesus and his friends. He's received his Christmas gift this year from God when God sent his messenger with an invitation to join him this year around the Christmas tree in heaven, to join his heavenly family and get ready to enjoy a new life. He received his crown and heard God say, "Well done my good and faithful servant."

I am reminded that there is a time for everything under the sun. There is a time to be born and a time to die. There is a time to be sad and a time to be happy. There is a time to grieve and a time to go on with our lives. We now enter that

phase. We thank God for allowing us the privilege to be part of William Lester Gaiter's life as a family member or just a friend, or as in my case, his pastor. We have been blessed over and over again through his generosity, his love and his caring spirit. Mr. Gaither, as some of his students would perhaps address him, Bill to his friends, might be looking down upon us saying thanks for the ride down memory lane. But I have work to do in heaven. Got a garden to till, cows to roundup, sheep to watch. I'll keep the porch light on till you get here. Till we meet again one day, let the light of Jesus shine in your life. Keep the faith, trust in our God, and remember you can do whatever you want to do.

One last thing. When I visited in the Gaither home with Jeanne and Bill it was always a wonderful experience. Bill might be taking a nap because he might not been feeling well, or had a rough time sleeping the night before, but he would get up, welcome me, sit in the living room and smile and talk a spell, like being in a country home down south. And then out of the blue he would say, "Preacher, how about a prayer." That was my cue that our visit was over. So I would say a prayer asking God's blessings on the Gaither family and that he would keep a watchful eye over Bill and Jeanne. I then would hug Jeanne, shake Bill's hand and leave. Like the family on Christmas Eve, I was gently being kicked out of the house, though I didn't know it. I guess I can think it was an honor. Now I feel like one of the family.

So I better quit while I'm ahead, before we hear a thundering voice telling us we're keeping him from his chores.

May the grace of God be with us all. May God continue to hold us in the palm of his hands, and until we meet again on the other side, may the light of Christmas continue to light our paths to our heavenly home, amen.