

From George W. Bush when asked about his religious faith:

"Actually, the seeds of my decision had been planted the year before, by the Reverend Billy Graham. He visited my family for a summer weekend in Maine. I saw him preach at the small summer church, St. Ann's by the Sea. We all had lunch on the patio overlooking the ocean. One evening my dad asked Billy to answer questions from a big group of family gathered for the weekend. He sat by the fire and talked. And what he said sparked a change in my heart. I don't remember the exact words. It was more the power of his example. The Lord was so clearly reflected in his gentle and loving demeanor.

The next day we walked and talked at Walker's Point, and I knew I was in the presence of a great man. He was like a magnet; I felt drawn to seek something different. He didn't lecture or admonish; he shared warmth and concern. Billy Graham didn't make you feel guilty; he made you feel loved.

Over the course of that weekend, Reverend Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year. He led me to the path, and I began walking. It was the beginning of a change in my life. I had always been a "religious" person, had regularly attended church, even taught Sunday School and served as an altar boy. But that weekend my faith took on a new meaning. It was the beginning of a new walk where I would commit my heart to Jesus Christ.

I was humbled to learn that God sent His Son to die for a sinner like me. I was comforted to know that through the Son, I could find God's amazing grace, a grace that crosses every border, every barrier and is open to everyone. Through the love of Christ's life, I could understand the life-changing powers of faith.

When I returned to Midland, I began reading the Bible regularly. Don Evans talked me into joining him and another friend, Don Jones, at a men's community Bible study. The group had first assembled the year before, in Spring of 1984, at the beginning of the downturn in the energy industry.

Midland was hurting. A lot of people were looking for comfort and strength and direction. A couple of men started the Bible study as a support group, and it grew. By the time I began attending, in the fall of 1985, almost 120 men would gather. We met in small discussion groups of ten or twelve, then joined the larger group for full meetings. Don Jones picked me up every week for the meetings. I remember looking forward to them. My interest in reading the Bible grew stronger and stronger, and the words became clearer and more meaningful.

We studied Acts, the story of the Apostles building the Christian Church, and next year, the Gospel of Luke. The preparation for each meeting took several hours, reading the Scripture passages and thinking through responses to discussion questions. I took it seriously, with my usual touch of humor...

Laura and I were active members of the First Methodist Church of Midland, and we participated in many family programs, including James Dobson's Focus on the Family series on raising children. As I studied and learned, Scripture took on greater meaning, and gained confidence and understanding in my faith.

I read the Bible regularly. Don Evans gave me the "one-year" Bible, a Bible divided into 365 daily readings, each one including a section from the New Testament, the Old Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs. I read through that Bible every other year. During the years in between, I pick different chapters to study at different times.

I have also learned the power of prayer. I pray for guidance. I do not pray for earthly things, but for heavenly things, for wisdom and patience and understanding. My faith gives me focus and perspective. It teaches humility. But I also recognize that faith can be misinterpreted in the political process. Faith is an important part of my life. I believe it is important to live my faith, not flaunt it. America is a great country because of our religious freedoms. It is important for any leader to respect the faith of others.

That point was driven home when Laura and I visited Israel in 1998. We had traveled to Rome to spend Thanksgiving with our daughter, who was attending a school program there, and spent three days in Israel on the way home. It was an incredible experience. I remember waking up at the Jerusalem Hilton and opening the curtains and seeing the Old City before us, the Jerusalem stone glowing gold. We visited the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. And we went to the Sea of Galilee and stood atop the hill where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

It was an overwhelming feeling to stand in the spot where the most famous speech in the history of the world was delivered, the spot where Jesus outlined the character and conduct of a believer and gave his disciples and the world the beatitudes, the golden rule, and the Lord's Prayer.

Our delegation included four gentile governors - one Methodist, two Catholics, and a Mormon, and several Jewish-American friends. Someone suggested we read Scripture. I chose to read "Amazing Grace," my favorite hymn. Later that night we all gathered at a restaurant in Tel Aviv for dinner before we boarded our middle-of-night flight back to America.

We talked about the wonderful experiences and thanked the guides and government officials who had introduced us to their country. And toward the end of the meal, one of our friends rose to share a story, to tell us how he, a gentile, and his friend, a Jew, had (unbeknownst to the rest of us) walked down to the Sea of Galilee, joined hands underwater, and prayed together, on bended knee. Then out of his mouth came a hymn he had known as a child, a hymn he hadn't thought about in years. He got every word right: Now is the time approaching, by prophets long foretold, when all shall dwell together, One Shepherd and one fold. Now Jew and gentile, meeting, from many a

distant shore, around an altar kneeling, one common Lord adore. Faith changes lives. I know, because faith has changed mine."

"I could not be governor if I did not believe in a divine plan that supersedes all human plans. Politics is a fickle business. Polls change. Today's friend is tomorrow's adversary. People lavish praise and attention.

Many times it is genuine; sometimes it is not. Yet I build my life on a foundation that will not shift. My faith frees me. Frees me to put the problem of the moment in proper perspective. Frees me to make decisions that others might not like. Frees me to try to do the right thing, even though it may not poll well... The death penalty is a difficult issue for supporters as well as its opponents. I have a reverence for life; my faith teaches that life is a gift from our Creator.

In a perfect world, life is given by God and only taken by God. I hope someday our society will respect life, the full spectrum of life, from the unborn to the elderly. I hope someday unborn children will be protected by law and welcomed in life. I support the death penalty because I believe, if administered swiftly and justly, capital punishment is a deterrent against future violence and will save other innocent lives. Some advocates of life will challenge why I oppose abortion yet support the death penalty. To me, it's the difference between innocence and guilt.

Today, two weeks after Jeb's inauguration, in my church in downtown Austin, Pastor Mark Craig, was telling me that my re-election was the first Governor to win back-to-back, four-year terms in the history of the State of Texas. It was a beginning, not an end... People are starved for faithfulness. He talked of the need for honesty in government. He warned that leaders who cheat on their wives will cheat their country, will cheat their colleagues, will cheat themselves.

Pastor Craig said that America is starved for honest leaders. He told the story of Moses, asked by God to lead his people to a land of milk and honey. Moses had a lot of reasons to shirk the task. As the Pastor told it, Moses' basic reaction was, "Sorry, God, I'm busy. I've got a family. I've got sheep to tend. I've got a life.

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt? The people won't believe me, he protested. I'm not a very good speaker. Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person," Moses pleaded. But God did not, and Moses ultimately did His bidding, leading his people through forty years of wilderness and wandering, relying on God for strength and direction and inspiration. "People are starved for leadership," Pastor Craig said, "starved for leaders who have ethical and moral courage." "It is not enough to have an ethical compass to know right from wrong," he argued. "America needs leaders who have the moral courage to do what is right for the right reason. It's not always easy or convenient for leaders to step forward," he acknowledged. "Remember, even Moses had doubts."

"He was talking to you," my mother later said. The pastor was, of course, talking to all of us, challenging each one of us to make the most of our lives, to assume the mantle of leadership and responsibility wherever we find it. He was calling on us to use whatever power we have, in business, in politics, in our communities, and in our families, to do good for the right reason. And his sermon spoke directly to my heart and my life...

There was no magic moment of decision. After talking with my family during the Christmas holidays, then hearing this rousing sermon, to make most of every moment, during my inaugural church service, I gradually felt more comfortable with the prospect of a presidential campaign. My family would love me, my faith would sustain me, no matter what.

"During the more than half century of my life, we have seen an unprecedented decay in our American culture, a decay that has eroded the foundations of our collective values and moral standards of conduct. Our sense of personal responsibility has declined dramatically, just as the role and responsibility of the federal government have increased. The changing culture blurred the sharp contrast between right and wrong and created a new standard of conduct: 'If it feels good, do it.' and 'If you've got a problem, blame somebody else'."

"Individuals are not responsible for their actions," the new culture has said. "We are all victims of forces beyond our control." We have gone from a culture of sacrifice and saving to a culture obsessed with grabbing all the gusto. We went from accepting responsibility to assigning blame.

As government did more and more, individuals were required to do less and less. The new culture said: if people were poor, the government should feed them. If someone had no house, the government should provide one. If criminals are not responsible for their acts, then the answers are not prisons, but social programs...

"For our culture to change, it must change one heart, one soul, and one conscience at a time. Government can spend money, but it cannot put hope in our hearts or a sense of purpose in our lives."...

"But government should welcome the active involvement of people who are following a religious imperative to love their neighbors through after-school programs, child care, drug treatment, maternity group homes, and a range of other services. Supporting these men and women - the soldiers in the armies of compassion - is the next bold step of welfare reform, because I know that changing hearts will change our entire society." "During the opening months of my presidential campaign, I have traveled our country and my heart has been warmed. My experiences have reinvigorated my faith in the greatness of Americans. They have reminded me that societies are renewed from the bottom up, not the top down. Everywhere I go, I see people of love and faith, taking time to help a neighbor in need..."

These people and thousands like them are the heart and soul and greatness of America. And I want to do my part. I am running for President because I believe America must seize this moment, America must lead. We must give our prosperity a greater purpose, a purpose of peace and freedom and hope. We are a great nation of good and loving people. And together, we have a charge to keep."