



## Feature

# Preaching in Unsettled Times: An Interview with Jack Graham

*Since 1989, Jack Graham has been pastor of the 20,000-member Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, where he preaches to 12-13,000 people each weekend. In June he was also elected President of the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination.*

**Preaching:** We seem to be living in unsettled times. Economically, the threat of war, cultural upheaval — as you gauge the times in which we live, how does that impact the way you preach?

**Graham:** The scriptures always speak to crisis, and certainly our nation is in crisis. The world faces uncertain days. So it is a relatively easy thing to take scripture — so much of which was written in a time of crisis. Certainly when you read the New Testament — the New Testament church was facing an adversarial culture, and a world that was very bloody and dangerous.

We just dedicated a new wing in our facilities in Texas, and we lifted up a cross connected to the rubble at the World Trade Center. I actually held up in my hands two crosses that were forged out of the rubble and the metal from the collapse. The message of Christ and the cross rises out of the rubble of human depravity and gives us the opportunity to bring a message of hope and life to the world.

Those of us who proclaim and share the Christian faith have the most incredible opportunity and the most open door in my lifetime. 9/11 marked our generation forever, just as Pearl Harbor marked a previous generation, the "greatest generation." My prayer is that Christians in our time and our nation will rise to the occasion. We have the privilege — those of us who preach and teach — to undergird and strengthen believers in this time in order to take on the issues of life.

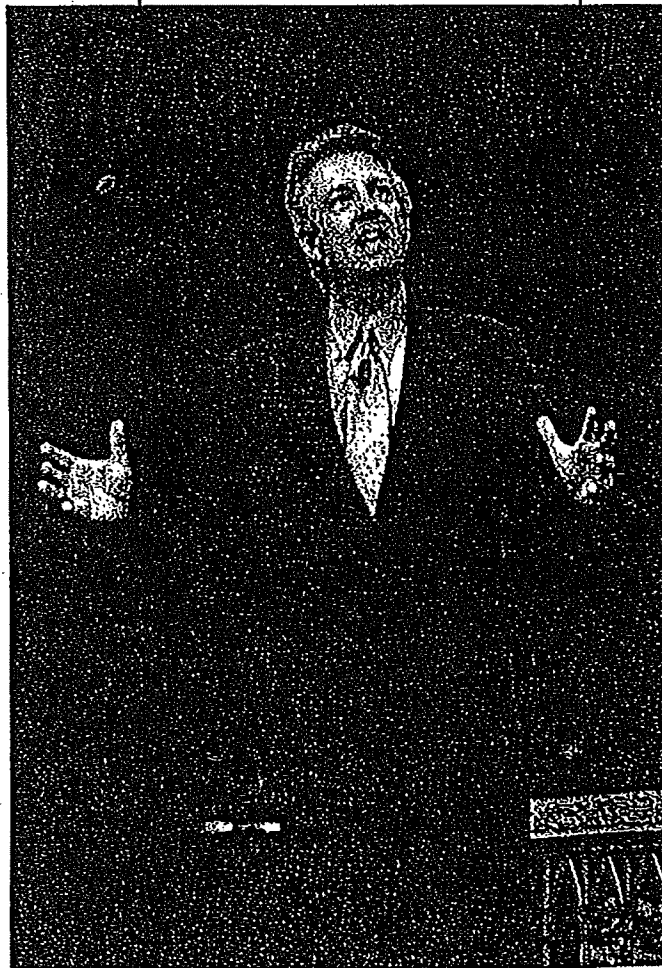
We have a new generation coming along. I look out at our young adults, our teenagers and even younger, and I really feel the weight of that. I feel the responsibility of preparing our families for hard times, and I don't expect it to get any easier.

So we have a message, and certainly when it's biblical it's concurrent with the times, but it also speaks to the future, and the promise and the hope of tomorrow that we have in Christ.

**Preaching:** We recently marked the first anniversary of the 9/11 events. How did you try to approach that issue in your own preaching?

**Graham:** It is so important for those of us who preach Sunday after Sunday to connect to the issues of the day. I remember last year right after the actual events of 9/11, I put aside what I was doing at the time — preaching through Ephesians. I laid aside the series to deal with the particular issues we were facing.

Then again this fall, in the remembrance of 9/11, I was actually able to take what I was doing. I've been preaching through Genesis this year, and the Sunday after 9/11 I preached a message on "The Genesis of Jihad." I went back into the life of Abraham and even before, to Cain and Abel, to show the hatred and hostility in the human heart, and even to Adam and Eve and the hatred that exists in the human heart, the depravity as a result of sin. Particularly I did a message on Abraham and his two sons,



Ishmael and Isaac, and related that to the current problem.

One of the greatest testimonies to the authenticity, authority and accuracy of scripture is the plan of history and the destiny of men and nations that we see there, rooted in Genesis.

Napoleon asked one of his generals if he could provide any evidence that the Bible was God's Word. The general said, "The Jew." Certainly if you look at God's dealings with the Jewish nation and the Arab world and preach to these issues, there is a tremendous response. When we actually did a service for 9/11 on the anniversary, it was an amazing service. As we lifted up that cross it gave me the opportunity to speak of our hope. While evil is very real, we also recognize that God has conquered sin and death and hell.

*Preaching:* Do you find that the events of 9/11 and since have created a new openness to the Gospel? Are you still seeing that?

**Graham:** Definitely. Some are suggesting that after the initial rush to church last year, that people have gone back to business as usual — that in most of the churches people are back to "normal." We prayed for a new "normal" to get back to — the way of life that we enjoy as Americans will never be the same.

I can tell you from our experience and that of other pastors I know that when the church is marked by the work of the Spirit and the Word of God is taught, there has been — I don't know if you'd call it "revival" but I know that in our own church, we're at a new level in terms of volunteerism, people stepping forward to serve, certainly in decisions for Christ. Everything in our church is growing and alive, and I think there is a new sense of urgency in the lives of our people.

I also think there's an openness in our community — people are asking

questions, and it gives Christians an opportunity to step in. We have this wonderful message of Jesus, that compared to all world religions is incomparable. We have a reason for the hope that is in us and we can proclaim that.

I have a suspicion that where church life and Christian faith went back to business-as-usual — people went back to church and found the same-old, same-old — the church needs to change. Where there is life and the breath of the Spirit, the proclamation of Christ and His cross and the resurrection, I think in those churches

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you're finding a great sense of blessing, of the refreshing spirit of God. It's very exciting where we are.

*Preaching:* Do you find yourself adapting your preaching ministry to capitalize on that new openness?

**Graham:** I do. I also think that perhaps in the last year in my own preaching ministry there's a new directness. I personally feel that the times are more urgent, and that it's not "sky-is-falling" rhetoric to preach the seriousness and soberness of our times. While obviously we have great joy in the way we live, there is for me a desire to get the message out even more quickly and straightforwardly.

In my mind, in the last year my preaching has taken on a new heat, if you will. I just want to make sure that every time I preach people are hearing answers to their questions, and that

they are receiving not only comfort for the times but a challenge for the times, to live full-out for God.

*Preaching:* In addition to anxiety about terrorism and war, there's also an economic unsettledness in the U.S. right now. In your church you have a broad range of economic conditions — from people of modest means to people of great means. How do you speak to that issue? Does that make a difference in your preaching?

**Graham:** In our church, regardless of economic status, everyone faces the fragility of the times economically. There are very few people who have not been touched by this, no matter where they are on their pay grade — especially in our area where there were a lot of dot-com businesses that opened and closed. At the upper end of things you've got people who are losing in the stock market daily. Regardless of a person's economic status, everyone is facing more difficult times.

Interestingly, we are in the middle of a capital campaign. We started a capital campaign for the second phase of our building program literally two weeks after 9/11 — we relocated the church and are now completing that relocation. Yet — and I would attribute this to the fresh wind blowing through our church — people have responded with sacrifice.

We have spoken of giving out of affluence and abundance, but also out of sacrifice in times of economic stress, and our people have responded to that. Also, the preaching and teaching of the Word of God just leads naturally to the building of the body in people's lives who do realize that their hope is beyond the material and their strength is in Christ. So you really couldn't have a better time to be preaching the great truths of scripture than right now.

Although you don't wish for such things, to me personally it's easier to

preach in hard times because people are more open and honest and more needy of the message rather than in times of affluence and pride. We've been humbled by this, and when we are humbled under the hand of God, then He moves.

*Preaching:* Tell me about your own preaching style?

**Graham:** Over the years my preaching style has not changed, from rural churches in Oklahoma to West Palm Beach to the Dallas area. It hasn't changed because I believe the most effective way if preaching is to simply take the scripture, explain it, illustrate it and apply it, which is biblical, expository preaching. That kind of preaching covers every conceivable subject and matter.

At Prestonwood, I am consistently teaching a passage of scripture — for the most part preaching through books. I'm preaching through Genesis right now. Last year I was preaching through Ephesians. Coming up next year I'll do the Sermon on the Mount, so it will be a smaller series.

My preaching is somewhat typical of expository preaching. I don't do verse-by-verse homilies. I try to take a passage and outline it, structure the sermon and deliver it. My preaching is very Christocentric. My goal is to introduce people to faith in Jesus Christ, so there's always an evangelistic appeal in my preaching. Each time I preach I make every effort to share the Gospel — the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. My preaching is very invitational. I would say it is somewhat confrontational — with truth — and I would say it is expository.

*Preaching:* How long would a typical series run for you?

**Graham:** The Genesis series I started in January and it is going to run the entire year until December, when I'll

do a Christmas series. I'm actually speeding up a bit through the Patriarchs; I've done the life of Joseph before, so when I come to that in a few weeks I'll speed up and just do a few messages on Joseph. I took some time in Abraham; I'll spend about four or five messages on Jacob, then Joseph about the same. The Ephesians series was about nine months.

*Preaching:* Do you have any problem sustaining interest in an extended series?

**Graham:** I believe people respond if it's interesting. I try to outline these longer series in subparts. For example, Genesis is a long series, but you have sub-plots. Once we finished the first eleven chapters — creation, the fall,

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Noah, the Tower of Babel and all the rest — then Abraham breaks out and is a great series on faith.

I'm calling the series on Genesis "The Legacy of Faith." This happens to be the 25<sup>th</sup> year of our church's existence, and the theme of our entire year is "The Legacy of Faith." So it works beautifully not only in church life to speak of legacy, but it also gives us the opportunity to address many of the pertinent, big issues people are addressing: who am I? where did I come from? the rage of nations and the hostility of men. All of these are in Genesis.

So the important things is not how long a series is. Expository preaching should never be boring. It should be interesting, it should be inviting, and it should be dealing with subject

matter that is appropriate for today. It's that old thing of the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I try to approach introductions to messages with contemporary connections.

*Preaching:* When you do an extended series, do you break it at certain points through the year?

**Graham:** Yes. When I was a younger preacher I thought I had to just stay with it. As I've gotten older and a little more mature in my preaching — just like with 9/11 last year, to be preaching on some unrelated subject at the time would have been a waste of a huge opportunity. We listen to the Holy Spirit and we look to the issues of the times and address them. The same goes for church life if there's something going on in the life of the church that needs to be addressed. For example, when we came to the literal anniversary of the church, I broke out of Genesis and did a message to the church on the call of the church in our times, the ministry of the church, and how God has used Prestonwood. So we definitely need to be flexible to change as times call for it.

*Preaching:* How far in advance do you begin planning a sermon series?

**Graham:** I start with God's work in my own heart. I believe preaching should be out of the overflow of God's work in the heart and life of the preacher. It begins in my own life, my own devotions, what is God saying to me? That may be a subject, or an issue of importance; it may be a passage that is driving me.

For example, I'm going to be doing a series on the Sermon on the Mount. As Southern Baptists our theme for the future is "Empowering Kingdom Growth," and I've just been living, thinking and breathing Christ's words about the Kingdom, and of course the Sermon on the Mount is the constitu-

tion of the Kingdom. So I've just been living lately in the Sermon on the Mount, and I can't wait to get there. I'm going to start in January. It's still in its formative stages, but I've begun reading. That's pretty typical; I don't plan much more than three or four months out.

I sit down and outline the book in big-picture style, break out the passages and typically come up with the various sermon title sand themes, and lay it out. That's all flexible and changeable. My sermon preparation for the week is typically that week; I don't work very far ahead. With the demands of the church I can't stay more than a day or two ahead!

*Preaching:* What does your week look like in terms of sermon preparation?

**Graham:** I give my mornings to study. By Sunday night on many weeks I'm already doing some light reading and preparation. Monday is light reading; I may get to the sermon and I may not. By Tuesday morning I want to be into sermon preparation. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings are given to sermon preparation; if I'm not finished I'll go in Saturday morning.

The actual sermon preparation is to do my general reading on the text. The method many of us were taught is to bring your own ideas to the text first; then supplement it with commentaries and homiletic material, but for me it's always been best to read my way into the text. Typically I have a stack of books I'm working on on that particular passage, and I just read myself full — I'm underlining and making notes. Then I sit down with a blank legal pad, and hopefully by that time I'm coming out with an outline.

My preaching style has been pretty much the same through the years — I look first to explain the text, then to apply the text, then to illustrate the text. I try to get my explanation and exegesis down where I understand the passage. The most challenging part is

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to apply and illustrate it; I spend a lot of time working on that.

*Preaching:* How much of your sermon is composed of each of those three parts?

**Graham:** I don't think I've ever analyzed it, but my goal would be to be about a third each. I typically preach about 35 to 40 minutes, and I would say that a good 10-15 minutes of that would be dealing with the text itself, then the rest of it would be wrapped up in application and illustration, plus introduction and conclusion.

*Preaching:* What do you carry into the pulpit with you?

**Graham:** I carry hand-written sermon notes into the pulpit. The reason first is habit, but it also cuts down the time of sermon preparation for me. If I'm working on a manuscript or even typewritten notes, that's another step I have a set of hieroglyphics in my own writing and notations with words and key thoughts. I take a sentence outline into the pulpit with key thoughts and passages, and illustrations. I rarely write out the illustrations.

One of my strengths in the pulpit is spontaneity, and I've felt through the years when I'm working with a manuscript or overly-prepared notes I get too wooden in the pulpit. I do much better when I'm free-flowing, flexible with words. I rarely preach without notes, but typically my notes are pretty simple in terms of their structure.

Once the sermon is preached, I have a wonderful secretary who can type my hand-written notes, and we file it. For the sake of radio and television ministry we do transcripts now.

*Preaching:* How much time do you normally spend in preparing a message?

**Graham:** That's always a hard

question to answer because in sermon preparation there are times of gestation then times of birth. I'd say anywhere from 8-10 hours, maybe 8-12 hours. I preach three services each weekend, Saturday night and twice on Sunday, and that's the same message. Then there's typically one other preparation per week: either the mid-week service or a business luncheon that we do.

There was a time when I was doing three or four preparations a week.

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That was a very heavy schedule. Now it's primarily one major preparation, then another preparation of some kind.

I live with the sermon. Any preacher knows that Sunday's coming. That's the challenge of being a pastor-preacher. It's not the delivery of the sermon that's the challenge or pressure for me. The challenge is the preparation. There's never a sense of completion because you're always preaching next week. So maintaining freshness and the fullness of the Spirit and your own devotional life are essential. So all week long you're living with this sermon you're prepar-

ing; you're never far away from what you're going to do.

It's like a great pitcher in baseball. A class-A minor leaguer throws the ball in much the same way as a Cy-young winner like Randy Johnson. What separates one from the other is in the delivery. Same baseball, primarily the same motion. What separates one pitcher from another is the delivery. I believe what often makes the difference in the sermon is in the delivery.

*Preaching:* As a preacher, what do you wish you'd known twenty years ago that you know now?

**Graham:** I've always believed in the impact of preaching — that it truly does make a difference. It really is an audacious thing. I wish I had known even 20, 30 years ago what a huge difference preaching can make in people's lives. I believed it then, but I believe it even more now. Preaching truly is God's way of fleshing out the message in the lives and personalities of His people. I've never been more eager to preach.

I think all young preachers battle the issue of being yourself. We all have models, mentors when we're young. I wish I'd known in my 20's and 30's that God wants to use my personality, the way I say things, even my style — that God uses each of us. I wish I'd had that confidence of knowing that God really does want to use Jack Graham, and my experience, my gifts, and abilities. I always challenge young preachers with the idea to be your best self. Learn from others but don't be a cheap imitation of somebody else.

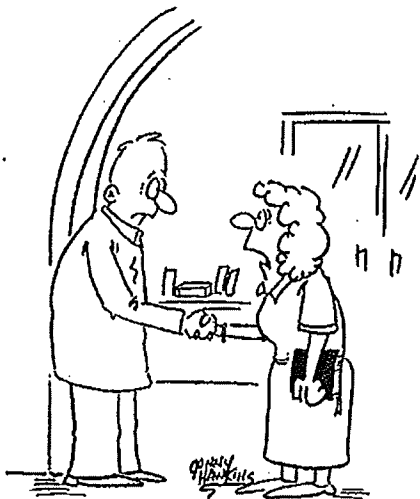
*Preaching:* What final counsel would you share with fellow preachers?

**Graham:** Preaching must come out of the life of the preacher, the authenticity of the preacher's life and the character we build. There is no effective

preaching without credibility in the pulpit — we've seen that many times. What I have tried to do is to build within my life the consistency of character that produces a consistency of message. The standard of biblical preaching and the call is a high call. We all fall short, yet we should aspire to preach a message that is consistent with our character and that our character will be consistent with our message. The integrity of the pulpit.

Another issue that has been important for me is the environment in which our message is preached. The worship style is different and dynamic within the context of every church. I do believe that the best preaching occurs in a context of heart-felt and warm-hearted worship — where the congregation is prepared to receive the message.

When I step to the pulpit people are ready to respond, and that's due in large part to the wonderful ministers of music and worship leaders that we've had in our churches. Preaching takes place best in that context where lives are being changed — where there's an expectation that when the Word of God is opened a powerful result is going to take place. ☺



"I knew last Sunday's sermon was going to be controversial, so I stayed away. I guess you could call me a 'heat-seeking misser'."

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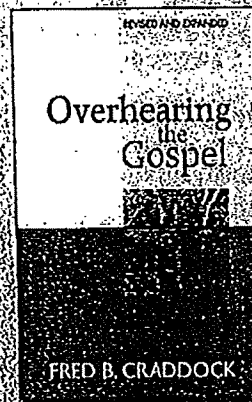
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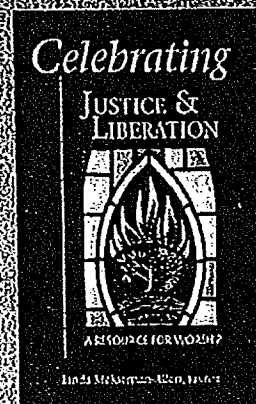
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