Billy Sunday

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Miracles of Rescue, Dr. William Paul

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I went to the mission that evening and liked what I heard. I went back again and again, and one night I went on my knees and staggered out of sin into the arms of the Savior.

I have followed Jesus from that day to this every second, like the hound on the trail of the fox, and will continue until He leads me through the pearly gate in the presence of God and it closes on its jeweled hinges.

— Billy Sunday

William Ashley Sunday

Leader of a Million Souls Down the “Saw-dust Trail.”

One Sunday afternoon at State and Van Buren streets — the busiest corner in Chicago, where thousands of men gather, a gospel wagon drove up and stopped for a street meeting. In the wagon were young men and women with musical instruments, an organ, trumpet and horn and the inevitable speaker or preacher.

Shortly after the meeting had been organized and attracted by the immense crowd that had gathered that Sunday afternoon, a group of professional ball players sauntered up to the curb, interested in what was to them a most unusual service, a church out-of-doors. These men had seen other street meetings — the patent medicine show, the antics of sleight-of-hand performers and magicians, but there was a new kind of pitch, this was something different. The group conducting the service sang old songs of the church — “At the Cross, at the Cross where I first saw the Light, and the burden of my heart rolled way.”

Out of this revival group stepped a young man who related some of his experiences. He told how Christ had come into his life and driven out old habits. The rest of the Gospel crew called him a witness. Another young man told how temptation had come to him and he had been able to resist it. Then the gospel group sang, “Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose firm, dare to make it known.”

Harry Monroe was leading the service. He told the simple story of his life. He was a witness, he said. He invited his audience to come to the mission and hear other witnesses tell how God could deliver men from sin. The meeting closed with the singing of “Am I a soldier of the Cross?”
The singing of these hymns on this particular Sunday appealed to one of the young ball players seated on the curb. This young man’s name was none other than Billy Sunday, later a world-famous evangelist. He was not drunk, although he had been living a fast life. The majority of ball players drank in those days.

Some became addicted to heavy drinking and, as they started down hill, their professional skill as ball players faded. Some drank at the height of their career and when they had reached the top, went down on a veritable toboggan slide.

Billy Sunday knew this. He was an intelligent young man and his powers of perception were keen. He had gone through high school while doing odd jobs for Col. Scott, Lt. Governor of Iowa. He had studied at Northwestern University during winter months. He had seen many a splendid career ruined by drink. He knew, from observation, that sin had cost many a professional ball player his career and altogether too often, a ball team, its victory in a game.

As he sat on the curb listening to the short talks of witnesses and the singing of hymns, Billy’s memory took him back to the old log cabin at Ames, Iowa, where he was born and to the years of poverty during the Civil War. He thought of his father who had enlisted in the Army of the North and was killed in heroic action. Billy had never seen his father but he knew the toil and suffering his mother had endured and the sickness brought on by malnutrition that almost cost his life.

A young man can do a lot of thinking, stimulated by memory. He thought about the Soldier’s orphanage; his first job as porter in a hotel; the pasture lots where he played ball for fun. Now he, Billy Sunday, was a professor at ball player, cheered by the crowd one day and booed the following day if he made a mistake. Sunday was a fast fielder and a poor batter. In a single game he would be applauded for his fielding and jeered at all the way back to the bench for his batting. He was one of the fastest men on bases for his time—perhaps for all time. He could run one hundred yards in ten seconds and he had a record of circling the bases in fourteen seconds, a record that has never been broken. Because of his great speed on bases, he was the most publicized fielder of his day.

As the gospel wagon drove away, Sunday turned to his fellow players and declared cryptically — “I’m through!” His teammates accepted this brusque assertion because they knew Sunday to be a man of his word.

Sunday was born in a good family. His grandfather was one of the pioneers in Iowa and a founder of the State Agriculture School at Ames, Iowa. Sunday’s father was a hero of the Civil War and his mother was a righteous hardworking woman.
So the popular ball player, Billy Sunday attended the humble mission meeting that night. He followed up this initial visit and was present regularly for several nights. Contrary to popular opinion, Sunday was not intoxicated the night of his conversion. He had thought about redemption carefully and had made his decision. He took ‘his time, and the night he decided it was a clear cut resolution, as was his custom. He arose suddenly, pushed the chair out of his way, walked rapidly to the altar and gave his heart and life to Jesus Christ.

The next day, as Sunday walked on the ball field, he was surprised to find every player extending a hand in congratulation. Some of them declared they wished they had the courage to do the same thing.

Billy Sunday became a better ballplayer. On the first day following his conversion he made one of the greatest ‘catches of all time—away, deep into center field and through a crowd of men on the outer field. He played ball for five years following, three for the White Sox (now the Cubs) and one year for Pittsburgh and one for Philadelphia. When he announced his retirement to go into Christian work, he was offered a salary seven times higher than the wage the Y.M. C.A. could afford to pay him.

The great ballplayer had within his heart a definite call to full-time service for his Lord. Billy never did anything by halves—he worked wholeheartedly or not at all. He started in the Y.M.C.A. in charge of religious services. His reputation, as a ball player, attracted large numbers of men who admired an athlete.

Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman was the leading evangelist of his time. He took young Sunday into his evangelistic party as an assistant. Billy preached in shops, street meetings, and special men’s meetings. He was a fluent speaker, good-natured, and possessed a sense of humor, coupled with a great earnestness.

On the day that Billy Sunday made his sensational catch out in center field, the crowd went wild and at the close of the game they gathered around him with great enthusiasm. Helen Thompson, one of the fans, threw her arms around him and kissed him. Helen, in the years that followed, was to be known, throughout the Christian world, as “Ma” Sunday. She became a part of their evangelistic campaign; looking after Billy’s health, protecting him from curiosity seekers, and assisting in the administration as the meetings increased in size. God provided for Billy Sunday an ideal helpmate.

In 1896 Dr. Chapman felt led back into a pastorate and Billy Sunday was “on his own again.” Mr. and Mrs. Sunday debated whether or not he should return to professional baseball. While this question was under prayerful consideration, Billy received an invitation to Garner, Iowa, a little town near Ames. He was to preside
and speak at a union meeting to be held in the theatre and while it was a new venture in faith, for Sunday had never held a meeting of his own before, he felt it was definitely a calling of the Lord.

The meeting proved to be a big success. Farmers came in from the surrounding countryside. There were delegations which attended from Ames and other points. More than 250 persons professed conversion. It was the beginning of the “Sawdust Trail”—a trail that was to lead from the Garner opera house to the great New York Tabernacle seating 25,000 people.

To the great unchurched masses, Sunday had a message that bewildered theologians and often offended their sense of propriety. But it compelled the attention and convinced the “common man.” They could understand such terminology as “The devil’s called you out! He’s caught you off base!” He used words that the man of the street, the worker in the shop, and the clerk in the store could understand and appreciate.

Sunday never lost his interest in rescue mission work. In every city through which he passed he told the story of his redemption. He urged the founding of a mission. He pleaded with businessmen and ministers to build a mission in their city’s poorest section. He called many men into mission work. In their tabernacle campaign, he invited an outstanding rescue mission superintendent to take part in at least one night’s program. Sam Bradley, John Callahan, Glory Faced Card, Sunshine Ward, C. M. Stocking, J. David Fraser, and many others, all fathers in the rescue mission movement, appeared on the platform in Billy Sunday’s campaigns.

This former ball player did not forget the pit out of which he was dug (Isaiah 51:1) or the Rock upon which the Lord lifted him. All through his marvelous ministry he was deeply impressed by mission work and concerned for the poor and the outcast. He often quoted Psalm 40:2, “He brought me up out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and he set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth ...” Only in this case God gave him Homer Rodeheaver, who became the greatest evangelistic song leader of the day.

William Ashley Sunday now rests from his labours but his works follow after him in rescue missions, in Billy Sunday Clubs and in churches through the land. The “Sawdust Trail” leads on!

“Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.” I Tim. 6:12.

Written by Dr. William Paul in “Miracles of Rescue”, Osterhus Publishers, 1948
BILLY SUNDAY - Rescue Mission’s Most Famous Convert

America’s most famous Rescue Mission convert was William Ashley Sunday, known to millions as Billy Sunday, big league ballplayer turned evangelist.

In 1917, in his New York Crusade, 98,269 made commitments to Jesus Christ. He was America’s most colorful and prominent evangelist in the first half of this century and it all started with his conversion at Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago.

It was on a Sunday afternoon in the early 1890’s. Harry Monroe, Superintendent of Pacific Garden Mission was leading a street meeting from PGM’s “Gospel Wagon.” A band was playing old gospel hymns, and folks were testifying to Jesus’ saving power.

Billy Sunday, a popular professional baseball player with the Chicago White Sox, was downtown with a group of ball players, whom he drank with. Billy heard the singing of a gospel hymn that his mother used to sing. He sat down on the curb and listened to the testimony of Harry Monroe. When he got up from the curb, he turned to the other players and declared cryptically, “I’m through,” and followed the gospel wagon back to the Pacific Garden Mission and attended the service that night. He followed up the initial visit with regular visits in days that followed. He thought about redemption carefully and then made his decision. The night he decided, it was a clear-cut resolution, as was his custom. He arose suddenly, pushed the chair out of his way, walked rapidly to the alter, and gave his heart and life to Jesus Christ.

He returned to the ball field a different man, immediately taking his stand. After his conversion, he was a better ballplayer. He played five more years, three for the White Sox, one year for Pittsburgh and one year for Philadelphia. When he announced his retirement to go into Christian work, he was offered a salary seven times higher than the wages the YMCA could afford to pay him.
Billy never did anything half way, and he worked wholeheartedly at his new calling in charge of religious services of the YMCA. His reputation as a ballplayer attracted large numbers of men who admired him as an athlete.

At that time, Dr. J. Wilber Chapman was America’s leading evangelist. He asked Billy to join his evangelistic party as an assistant. Billy preached in shops, street meetings and men’s meetings. He was a fluent speaker, good natured and possessed a keen sense of humor, coupled with a great earnestness. While still in baseball, Billy met and married Helen Thompson, who became known throughout the Christian world as “Ma” Sunday.

In 1896, Dr. Chapman felt led to go back into the pastorate, and Billy was on his own. He and “Ma” debated on what to do. He thought of returning to professional baseball. While the question was under prayerful consideration, he received an invitation to speak at a meeting in Garner, Iowa, near Ames. He was asked to preside and speak. This was a new venture for Billy, who had never held a meeting on his own, but he felt it was definitely the calling of the Lord.

The meeting was a big success. Farmers came from all around, with 250 persons professing conversion. It was the beginning of what Billy called “the Sawdust Trail,” and that trail led from the small Garner Opera House to the great New York Tabernacle, seating 25,000 people.

To the unchurched masses, Billy Sunday had a simple message that bewildered theologians and often offended their sense of propriety. But it touched the “common folks.” He used words that the man on the street could understand and appreciate. He spoke to their hearts, and they responded by the tens of thousands (in 11 campaigns, from 1904 -1917, over 175,000 professed conversions).

Billy never forgot rescue mission work. In city after city, he told of his conversion and urged the starting of a rescue mission. He pleaded with businessmen and ministries to “build a rescue mission” in the poorest section of town and often left an offering to help. Missions in Buffalo, New York; New Castle, PA; Bellingham, WA; are just a few started after a Sunday crusade. In his crusades, he featured rescue mission superintendents, who shared their work and testimonies.
By the year 1913, Billy Sunday was in America’s “Spotlight.” He led America into Prohibition and organized churches in area wide cooperative campaigns. He brought change to the nation, and, for a generation, he was “evangelism.”

Billy never forgot the “pit out of which he was dug” (Isaiah 51:1), or “the Rock upon which the Lord lifted Him.” All through his ministry, he was deeply concerned about mission work and the poor and the outcast. He often quoted Psalm 40:2: “He brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry day, and he hath put my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.” He never forgot the message he heard that day on a Chicago curb.

Little did Harry Monroe know that day, as he preached to drunks, prostitutes and a troubled young man sitting on a curb, God had plans to use that uneducated, blunt, unsophisticated but enthusiastic young man to change America. But God knew.

Tonight, in a mission chapel there is man or a woman who could be another Billy Sunday who needs to hear God’s unchanging message of Salvation and needs the love and nurture of God’s people. One person can make a difference. Billy Sunday did.

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Quotes from Billy Sunday

“In the sight of God there is no difference between being wrong and doing wrong.”

“God will not send the winds to drive our ship of salvation unless we have faith to lift the sails.”

“Whiskey is all right in its place, but its place is hell.”

Going to church doesn’t make anybody a Christian, any more than taking a wheelbarrow into a garage makes it an automobile.

They tell me a revival is only temporary; so is a bath, but it does you good.

If there is no hell, a good many preachers are obtaining money under false pretenses.

A lot of churches don’t need an evangelist - what they need is an undertaker.

If you are a stranger to prayer, you are a stranger to power.

We put our hands in our pockets, feel for a nickel to put on the collection plate and then wonder why the world isn’t saved.

God pity the country where the devil runs the home.

The Bible will always be full of things you can’t understand, mister, as long as you will not live according to those you can understand.

A man can slip into hell with his hand on the doorknob of heaven.

Christianity is not a religion. It is a supernatural revelation of God and the only true revelation.