

August Van Ryn

by John Bjorlie

The sermon recounts the life and ministry of August Van Ryn, highlighting his faith journey, evangelistic efforts, and enduring legacy despite significant challenges.

Scripture: Psalm 34:17, Proverbs 3:5, John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Hebrews 6:19

Topics: "Gods Grace", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

August Van Ryn's life journey from his birth in the Netherlands to his impactful ministry in the Bahamas and North America is a testament to God's grace and transformative power. Despite initial disinterest in spiritual matters, a powerful encounter with a friend led him to accept Jesus and dedicate his life to preaching the Gospel. His commitment to memorizing Scripture, even in the face of potential blindness, accelerated his spiritual growth and ministry. Through trials like a devastating hurricane that swept away all they owned, August and his family clung to their faith, renewing their focus on eternity and trusting in God's provision and protection.

Transcript

August Van Ryn (1890-1982) wrote of his birth, "My arrival in Haarlem (Netherlands) on May 15, 1890, created no particular sensation (unless it was one of dismay, for already there were seven Van Ryns ahead of me--with five more to come after). So my birth was nothing special to others, though it was to me."

His mother was from Switzerland. On several occasions when J. N. Darby passed through Switzerland, he visited her parents' home. She recalled being held on his lap while he told her stories. August's mother was deeply spiritual. "I can still see her on her knees as I passed her bedroom, and hearing her pray. She brought us daily before the throne of grace on her knees; at other times, she brought us to terms across her knees."

One of the thirteen children died at birth, but the remaining twelve (nine sons and three daughters) were saved by God's grace. The family would walk four-and-a-half miles to meetings on the Lord's day. Going to an evening meeting meant 18 miles.

When still a teenager, August determined to go to America. Settling in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where his sister and two brothers preceded him, he attended a Christian assembly there, though he was still in his sins. "I was just interested in my job, in social doings, but certainly not in eternal verities," he said.

One Sunday night, after a stirring gospel message, a friend named George Vandermeulen "buttonholed" him. George was about six feet, seven inches tall. His big hands held August's coat lapel as he urged him to receive the Lord Jesus. "I didn't hear a word he said. I wanted to get away, but I couldn't get away without being rude. Finally he did let me go and I made my way home. But all of a sudden I stopped. It seemed to me as if a thunderclap rooted me to the spot. A voice seemed to say, 'Did you notice that all the time that young man was speaking to you, the tears were rolling down his cheeks? He is no relation to you; he has no special interest in you, yet he is weeping over you because you are on the road to hell and you yourself don't care. It's time for you to wake up!'" That night August's brother, Louis, spoke to him from John 3:16 . He believed. It was May 1, 1910. He was baptized May 8 and was received into the assembly May 15.

With young believers, August began by evangelizing in Grand Rapids. People crowded to hear the street corner orators. On Saturdays, they went to surrounding towns to preach (often to hundreds) and give out tracts. In a few years, the brethren told him they felt the Lord was calling him to full-time preaching.

When August said, "I couldn't even talk," he was being honest. His thick accent was strange, even to his fellow Dutch immigrants. He looked awkward. Those ears, balancing themselves on the sides of his head, seemed to wag at his audience. Besides this, from infancy he had poor eyesight. He had almost no light in the right eye; the left eye was "nothing to boast about."

When 24 years of age, he was informed that he might soon lose his sight altogether. He decided to memorize Scripture so he could continue in the ministry of God's Word. He used otherwise wasted moments for eleven years and memorized the New Testament, large portions of the Old Testament from Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah, the whole book of Psalms, as well as the Little Flock Hymnbook. Needless to say, memorization accelerated his spiritual progress.

With the invitation of Robert Stratton, August saw an open door in the Bahamas. He sailed from Miami to the Islands in 1916. Brother Stratton and his wife, Lilah, received August with joy. There he met Miss Persis Roberts, sister to Lilah. He intended to visit for a couple of months; instead he married, and stayed for thirteen years. Together brother Stratton and August carried on itinerant gospel work, using Evangel, a 52-foot yacht which they built.

The year 1926 had two outstanding events: one a mountaintop; but the other a dark valley. In March and April, the Lord poured out streams of blessing. At Cherokee Sound on the island of Abaco--near the Van Ryn home in Marsh Harbor, the Lord worked.

"We would talk to anxious souls till late at night and again early in the morning, besides the regular meetings. A number confessed the Lord. And then, toward the end of two weeks, the fishing fleet came in. Long before the boats reached shore, the men aboard were waving their hats and shouting. When we finally heard what they were saying, it was, 'There's been a wonderful revival on our ships; lots of men have been saved.'" While the Lord moved hearts on their boats, unknown to them, He had saved children, wives, sweethearts, or parents back home. What rejoicing! About one hundred were saved in that little town.

Soon they left for Spanish Wells. When those there heard about the awakening in Abaco, they said, "We hope we'll see something like that here."

The meetings all that week were full, but there was no remarkable response. Then on Wednesday night, the other preacher and August were walking home when they passed a little group. An old Christian lady was sitting in her wheelchair, while her son was on the curb, with three young girls. August asked the young man, "What are you sitting here for--tired of pushing?" Immediately he sobbed, "I just can't walk any further. I am so troubled about my soul, I have to be saved right now." All four trusted Christ.

Five o'clock the next morning, someone banged on their bedroom window, shouting, "You better get up; there are anxious souls all over town." When they reached the gate, an older sister in Christ walked up and said, "I couldn't sleep all night. I am so troubled about my youngest son. I prayed for him all night that the Lord will save him." While she poured out her predicament, the woman's son came from the other direction and threw his arms around his mother, crying, "Oh, mother, the Lord saved me last night!"

By eight o'clock that morning, 35 souls had been saved while alone in their own homes! The meetings continued and about one hundred were saved. From Spanish Wells, the work spread, "God working without any human preparation, or methods or machinery."

This took place, in March and April of 1926. That same year violent storms struck, two did a lot of damage. It was the third one that hit the island of Abaco, where the Van Ryns lived. One balmy evening in October, a report had come that a hurricane was on its way. Awakened at midnight by a roaring wind, the force increased beyond anything they had ever felt.

At 7 am, an eerie calm fell. They were in the eye of the hurricane. The storm was moving ahead at 15 miles per hour. August's father-in-law informed him that the winds would come again, but from the opposite way.

"Well, if the gale comes from the ocean this time, won't it bring the sea with it?"

"No," he replied, "we've never seen any amount of water." But he had never seen a tidal wave.

In half an hour, the wind drove in a six-foot wall of water. It smashed against their house, breaking the front door and windows. The water on the main level was too deep for the children, so they gathered on the stairs to the second floor. Their children ranged from seven years to the five-month-old baby. August held the baby. The three others stood between Persis and August. In minutes, the real tidal wave rolled in. They heard its deafening roar before they saw it; it was twenty feet high! Seeing it bear down on their home, they kissed each other and August said, "Good-bye darling; we'll see each other in the glory."

The wave exploded the house. Evidently thrown through the glass window on the stairway (for his left leg was badly cut), the next thing he knew, he was lying on a piece of wreckage. Having been knocked unconscious, the infant had been swept from his arms. Persis was in the raging waters further inland, with the three small children clinging to her. Grasping bits of wreckage, they were unhurt.

When the undertow from the tidal wave came, it carried every bit of their property back into the Atlantic Ocean. August built the house himself--and it disappeared in fifteen seconds. This deeply impressed the Van Ryns. All they had on earth--gone. As if they had not already made this determination, they renewed their commitment to live with eternity in view. What a night of weeping that was, having suddenly lost their dear Pearl Eleanor, but God was with them to comfort. The town had been decimated, but amazingly few lives were lost. Their boat--Evangel--was the only vessel which came through without any damage. Its anchor had held it secure, and so did theirs (Heb. 6:19).

In 1929, they moved to Michigan, but went south again, to the Miami area in 1933. From that base of operations he ministered the Word in the U.S. and Canada. When Emmaus Bible School was in Toronto, August taught there each spring for three years. While teaching those classes, he began publishing his comments on Ephesians, then the Gospel and Epistles of John, Proverbs, and the life of Elijah. August also sent out a monthly letter, Words of Encouragement. Some of these were put into book form, entitled Words of Encouragement, and Bread Enough and to Spare.

After 56 happy years serving together, the Lord took Persis home in July of 1974. August was called home eight years later.

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