Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

An Amazing Life
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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Norm Sper (1925--2011)

orm Sper went to heaven Wednesday night.

You may never have heard of Norm before, but you probably owe him more than you realize. I certainly owe him more than I could ever repay.

Norm lived an amazing life. Born in Hollywood, CA in 1925, he was surrounded by sports and show business. Norm's father, Norman L. Sper, Sr., was a celebrated WWI war correspondent and hero who later starred in and produced "Football this Week," one of the earliest successful syndicated sports television programs. Norm's mother, Winona Winter, was a well-known vaudevillian and early film actress. Will Rogers was Norm's godfather.

Norm showed outstanding athletic and academic promise very early, and he left home as a teenagerto attend prep school in Andover, Massachusetts. After high school he received an appointment to the Naval Academy at Annapolisbut chose instead to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he led the UNC swimming and diving team, setting NCAA records with his diving and backstroke performances. Norm was a four-time first-team All-American (1947-1950), the first in UNC history. He was chosen for the United States' Olympic diving team, but because of World War II the 1940 and 1944 Olympics were canceled, so Norm never swam or dived as an Olympian, though he was arguably the best diver in the world through most of the 1940s.

During those years at UNC, Norm repeatedly was elected as head cheerleader. The position perfectly suited his upbeat and always optimistic personality. He is remembered to this day in Chapel Hill as one of UNC's most popular cheerleaders ever.

In fact, Norm's longest-lasting contribution at UNC was the Victory Bell—the famous trophy that goes annually to the victor in the UNC-Duke football rivalry. Norm got the bell from an old steam train. His counterpart at Duke, cheerleader Loring Jones, mounted it on a cart. The bell is one of the oldest, most famous rivalry-trophies in college football.

> UNC blocking back Joe Kosinski gets a pep talk from two of Carolina's top supporters at the 1950 Cotton Bowl: Arden Boisseau (left), Carolina's coed princess in the Cotton Bowl Beauty court, and Head Cheerleader Norm Sper. Taken in late December 1949 in Dallas, TX, leading up to the 1950 Cotton Bowl game between Carolina and Rice on January 2, 1950. *[From the Hugh Morton Collection of Photographs and Films]*

With his Hollywood roots and world-class swimming expertise, Norm naturally made friends of people like Johnny Weissmuller and Esther Williams. He once showed me (reluctantly, and at some else's behest) a photograph of the three of them laughing together at a party. Norm never boasted about his athletic achievements. I never heard him talk about the glory of his college athletic triumphs. If anyone ever brought up the subject, he blushed and downplayed it.

After college, Norm emerged as a gifted entrepreneur, both creative and successful in practically everything he ever did. He became an Amway distributor in the formative years of that company and his Amway business quickly grew sufficiently that he was able to retire early.

Then Norm started a business called "On-the-Spot Duplicators." He would record convention speeches, making cassette copies on the spot and selling them to attendees within minutes after the end of each session. Once that business became prosperous, Norm sold it and entered the second phase of his "retirement."

All those were fine achievements and certainly would have been more than enough for the typical person to feel an inflated sense of accomplishment. But Norm's greatest, most far-reaching contribution came *after* that second retirement.

Norm was the founder of the "Grace to You" radio program.

As one of the elders of Grace Community Church in the mid 1970s (when John MacArthur's teaching ministry was just beginning to attract notice outside southern California), Norm was convinced John's teaching needed to be on the radio, so he approached John with the idea. Here's how John MacArthur remembers it:

Norm Sper came to me one time and said, "We ought to be on the radio."

And I said, "Well, that's great. Why don't you do that? Why don't you pray about that and pursue that ministry if God has brought you to that?"

The truth is, John MacArthur at first had very low expectations and a low level of enthusiasm for the project. Norm had no prior experience in radio. No one who actually worked in Christian radio seemed excited about the idea. Virtually everyone in radio whom Norm had talked to had tried to discourage him. From a rational and business perspective, the whole idea seemed impossibly fraught with negatives. Plus, John MacArthur made it clear from the outset that he had no time to sit in a studio and record a half-hour broadcast each day.

No problem, Norm said. He intended to air the sermons anyway. He would edit them into half-hour segments to make the broadcasts feasible.

That was the chief element of the plan that practically everyone with any expertise in the industry said was unworkable. They *insisted* the only way to be successful with a daily Bible-teaching program was to speak directly to the radio audience from a studio, the way J. Vernon McGee did it. Airing a sermon wouldn't do. *Half* a sermon was an infinitely worse idea, they said.

But Norm persisted. After a couple of short-lived attempts at buying time on secular stations (adjacent to a horse-racing broadcast, in one case) the first regular daily broadcasts of Grace to You in its current format began in 1978—launching simultaneously in Tampa, Tulsa, and Baltimore.

The first paid staff members of Grace to You: (L to R) Norm Sper, Dana Way, Rick Draa

The Grace to You Staff in 1982

By the time I came to work at Grace to You in 1983, the ministry's foundation was already solid and the ministry was growing steadily. Norm retired again sometime around 1989 or '90, finally for the last time. Declining health in the past decade seemed to heap difficulty upon difficulty for Norm and his family, and though we will miss him terribly, we rejoice that he has entered the presence of Christ, whom he loved and served so faithfully.

Norm Sper was one of the gentlest, humblest souls I have ever met. My entire career and life's work were made possible by him. I'm grateful every day for his faithfulness. I can't wait to be reunited with him in heaven.

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord . . . that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!" (Revelation 14:13).

Phil Johnson
Executive Director

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