

DON'T JUST PLAN FOR RETIREMENT – PLAN FOR HEAVEN +++

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Whoa, that's not a thank you. Got to roll up the sleeves one last time. Did you know that it was about this Sunday 30 years ago I preached my first message here? Yeah, and now I'm known as the wrinkled pastor on staff. And you're wondering right now, hmm, 30 years. I wonder what he's going to say now. That's fair. Okay, here it is.

Where's sunscreen? Man, that sun can damage your face. There's some vintage people out here that I think appreciate that. Anyone else here ever used baby oil as suntan lotion? Oh, yeah. But that's not the real advice I'm after today. The real advice is this: like sunscreen, apply it now for benefits later, and here it is. Don't just plan for retirement, plan for heaven.

So let's talk about retirement. It takes planning. You want to financially plan, plan your time, you want to vividly see some of the things you're going to do. One thing we're going to do is we're going to travel around and see the kids. One of the early stops we're going to make is in Atlanta — Ben and Lindsay, Lindsay and Ben. Lindsay Friday, two days ago, baby Eliana on World IVF Day. Thank you. Pray, you prayed so much, thank you!

Well, we got new things coming up in retirement. We have hobbies, old hobbies, and I want to try a new one — paramotoring. Okay, what is that you ask? Fair question, take a look. This is from Phoenix a year ago, and that is my friend Brian on my first adventure of trying this. And there you have it, floating out into the sunset.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Today is much more than sailing off into the sunset. It's picturing heaven, something more real than the world in which you're living right now. It's your home, but not your ultimate destination. You see, your ultimate destination is with you right now, the very life that you have in Christ. That's the beginning, and that life continues until after death. It is lived out face to face to the full.

When Jesus came into the world, He said, "I came that you might have life and have it to the full." It's going to be fully realized on that side of heaven, and the more clear a picture we have of that, well, I think the better it is for us to know not just our destination but our journey.

So, how do we get there? I'd like to look at Psalm 90 now. Psalm 90 is that chapter that describes life like a roll of toilet paper — yeah, the closer to the end, the faster it goes. That's not really what it says. It says some live to be 70, some 80 if they have strength, but life goes by quickly. But then it goes on to say this: "Teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom." Lord, today, teach us to number our days. Teach us to number our days that we would gain a heart of wisdom.

And the word in Hebrew for "number our days" is "mana," and it's not counting, it's placing something with purpose. We want to place purpose into our days every day and make them count. Don't let your days shape your life. Let your life shape your days. Let your life in Christ shape your days, and how you do that is by being very intentional about putting your purpose into each and every day.

But you ask, "So what's my purpose?" Good question. God's pretty clear about this. The words we're going to use today to summarize it is to live a life of love. But Jesus also said it in these words when he quoted Moses — when people asked him the purpose question, "What's the greatest commandment?" He says this is it: "Love God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your strength, with all of your mind," and the other thing is, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

And if, Lord, you could give me anything, if you said ask me anything, what would it be? Fill my days with loving you more and more with all that I have because when I do that, I love others.

So here's how we're going to mana our days, find our purpose. This is what we're focused on today. We'll unpack three ways to fill your days with the purpose of living a life of love: Keep your heart on the Savior, your chin on the windowsill of heaven, and your feet planted on solid ground. All of this is going to be based on one verse, Ephesians 5, Verses 1 and 2. We'll take it phrase at a time at different places.

"Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." So ready to go? Buckle up kids, one last trip. Three ways to fill your days with purpose of living that life of love.

The first one is this: Keep your heart on the Savior. And here's why. The answer is not just try harder to love God. That doesn't work. Should we try hard? Of course. But if we think that our own effort is going to perfect our purpose, well, we're missing the whole foundation of it. You see, we don't have a perfect love. You don't have it, and I don't have it. I don't have it, but we have a Savior who does — his perfect love for us.

As we find in this verse, as he loved us so well, we are filled with that love now. Why do we love? John says it this way: We love because he first loved us. And because he first loved us, we know that we are well loved so that we can love well.

We go to the bible verse that we're looking at today and we focus on that phrase: just as Christ loved us. How much is that perfect love? It fills our greatest needs. It fills our bucket. Why? So that we can live a life of love and pour that bucket out.

One thing that's really personal to me about Jesus' love: It's so personal. He knows just what you need when you need it. And sometimes we need to realize that so we're eager to lift our bucket and be filled by that.

But what are you going through now that is a need for His love? Because remember, He loves you so much. He would lay down His life for you. He did lay down His life for you. But He took it up in the resurrection so that He might be with you and meet you at your point of need.

So I asked myself that same question and surveyed over the years how Jesus met me at my point of need. And my greatest point of need is your greatest point of need. It's forgiveness.

For the times when His love is not central in my life, I like success. There's nothing wrong with that, by the way. Success makes me feel, well, successful. And I like goals and working hard to be successful in my job. Hey, that's good.

But what happens when a good thing becomes an ultimate thing? And an ultimate thing is something that pushes aside the centrality of God's love in your life. Because that ultimate thing, you begin to treasure too much, you love it too much, you look to it to give you purpose to your life or give you identity. This is who I am.

And you whisper under your breath, "If only I had that, well, then I'd truly be happy." You know what happens to loving God with all your heart? It's pushed aside for what? For whatever you have made a false god. We call false gods idols.

And the problem with idols is that they make promises they cannot keep. They never love you back. From time to time, they will also induce you to give them more and more and more, but they're never satisfied. Are they? Yeah.

So God met me at my need and gave me failure. I didn't see it that way at first, it took some convincing. Convincing, it wasn't fun, but it's just what I needed.

For there was a time in my ministry here that, well, things did not flourish under my ministry charge. Ouch. And God pointed out that maybe I was serving my ministry more than I was serving Him.

What has pushed Him aside in your life? Oh man. He meets us at our point of need just as Christ loved us and did what? Gave himself up for us as a pleasing offering and sacrifice to God to give us forgiveness that gives us fresh starts and new love for Him.

One other example: Many different ways that God meets us at our point of need.

Five years ago, my son and his wife, Luke and Kate, were expecting a child, and midway through their pregnancy was a traumatic diagnosis that their baby probably would not live, only a five percent chance of survival. Oh gosh.

You've had those times, haven't you? When you have needs that you just pour out to God, and you also don't do that alone. And by the way, church, that's why we need each other. That's why God wants to use us to give His love to fill His bucket.

Oh my. Thank you for your prayer and support. And by the way, today little Shiloh is four years old. And let me have a grandparent moment. Take a look. He is a joy factory, and he's going to be here in the next service. Isn't that sweet?

Keep your heart on the Savior and let Him fill your bucket.

Next, keep your chin on the windowsill of heaven. Close your eyes, picture heaven. What is it like? How clear? How vivid? You can open them.

I remind you that C.S. Lewis said that sometimes our picture of heaven is cloudy, but he said in fact, this is the shadow lands. It's much more real where our final home is.

And to pursue that, I wanted to research and read two books called Imagine God and Imagine the God of No Imagine Heaven, and then Imagine the God of Heaven by John Burke. He was an agnostic. He started studying near-death experiences — that's where people are resuscitated after they clinically die, and they come back and tell about encounters they had in this reality of life after this life.

They had a wide variety, but as he interviewed more and more of them, there were several that were having the same experiences — a thousand people around the world, different countries, cultures, religions — and he found that it all testified to the truth of scripture, and that is where we base our understanding.

But it gives meaning to this, and some of these experiences, by the way, I think are like putting full color to a black and white picture. I encourage you to read those books or take one. Can I tell you a little bit about them?

Let's make more clear your picture of heaven.

What is the dominant thing about heaven? What was it so compelling to those people that were called back but just had a glimpse and they didn't even want to come back?

Because heaven, that life after this life, is in the presence of God, and we experience the presence of God in this world and we receive it by faith, but there, face to face, and in that encounter, they encounter the magnitude of His love.

There's so many different stories of the conversations they have and how people felt so intimately known, so completely loved, more than they've ever even experienced in all their loving relationships here because by the way, that is who He is.

So be imitators of God. It's interesting in our verse, I think, that the more we come to know Him, the closer we're drawn to Him. Guess what? The more we become like Him, people filled with that love.

Another characteristic of heaven was seeing Jesus and describing Him, and this was especially interesting to me reading how Muslims came back and described Him and wanted to go find out who this person of wonderful light dressed in this white robe was, and had these things to say, and was just enthralled with Him.

But the one thing that also was a unique characteristic of Him was that in heaven, people noticed that there are the scars in the palms or in the hands and also on the feet, and even in the feet noted that they were to the side.

And I think that's significant because of this in our verse today. It says that Jesus gave His life, gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. And one of the key features of heaven is seeing the magnitude of God's love because Jesus sacrificed Himself for me and for you.

Revelation describes it as the Lamb who was slain, seeing evidence that this is the one who gave up His life for us.

What about those who have rejected God? Well, that question is that God is a gentleman. He does not force Himself on you or me, and He respects our right to make a decision. And if someone says, "You love God? I'd rather do it my way," and they don't turn their bucket to receive the grace that He's given in Jesus Christ, then on the other side, they get what they asked for.

"No thank you, God, I don't want Your presence in my life." And there it is. That's what hell looks like. Some had glimpses. It was horrific. And many of those came back radically changed.

What about rewards in heaven? Some people think that, well, if I do enough good things here, I'll get the reward of heaven. Bullhockey. That's not true.

No, heaven is a gift purchased by God in His love for us in Christ, and heaven begins everlasting life right now when we receive it. And when we go through the doors of death, it becomes but a gateway to life to the fullest.

And at that time, guess what? Rewards matter. You didn't earn your admission, but you have a bucket. And it's been filled with His love throughout your life, and the way that you show love to God is by pouring your love out to other people, is it not?

And I believe that the more you do that, God by His grace gives you a bigger and bigger bucket. And when in heaven, everyone's bucket is full because they can pour out their love now directly to Him as their life is an offering of sacrifice and service to Him.

But some have bigger buckets. Good. No one's jealous. More gifts poured out.

What about loved ones? Oh my, we're going to have a party. Sure, we'll know each other, except we'll love each other more completely. Sure, we'll have relationships. Sure, we'll have reunions. Sure, we'll have feasts. Sure, we'll have music. Sure, we'll have dancing.

And one of the visions that one person had was that as people, they all different kinds, in the new heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem, there were clusters of people that would be gathering after their different tasks and work and stuff. And as they celebrate the joy that they had together, Jesus Himself would sometimes make appearances.

Can you imagine? Makes sense. In the body, He could be there and elsewhere on the throne at the same time.

Oh, can we talk about the throne? The main feature of heaven is the throne, of course. There is no temple because Jesus is a temple.

But one recounting when they had a view of this was as follows: Everything in heaven flowed from the throne, in the center of the city. The throne structure was massive, hundreds of miles wide, fifty miles tall, a domed roof, thousands of steps led up to it. I saw millions going in and out, all worshipping. Music

filled the space, not just heard but felt deep in the soul. I felt like every fiber of my being was created to resonate with it. I never wanted it to stop.

And one last note from Burke's research: These people who returned, oh my, now that their picture was so much more real, they were so much more really involved with God's love, living as imitators of God, dearly loved children living a life of love, with the heart of the Savior, chin on the windowsill of heaven, and now here it comes:

And your feet planted on solid ground. So what are your feet planted on? Do you know who you are? Do you know whose you are? Do you know where you stand?

Now, if you do, it will help you know where you're going. Get your footing on this fact: You are dearly loved, a dearly loved child of God. And that gives you all the status, all the authority you need to go where He calls you to.

Be imitators of God therefore, say it with me, as dearly loved children, live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

There's another verse that is going to help us understand where we're going. It's from Isaiah. It's about where our feet now will take us.

"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Look, your God reigns.'"

Look at your feet. They've got good news behind them.

How about them dogs? Yeah, they're not as ugly as you thought.

As children's pastor, I was invited one time to teach two weeks in Minsk, Belarus, children's ministry, and one of my favorite students, Sasha Pavlovich, on Monday was not in class. So I asked where, and they said Sasha usually misses on Monday because over the weekend he goes to Chernobyl down in Ukraine.

Yes, that's the site of the nuclear disaster and fallout because people are still suffering from nuclear contamination. But need the church to minister there, and that's the church that he's working with. So when he comes back, he's usually sick for a day.

I said to myself, "I'm going to shine that guy's shoes in heaven, man." So at the end of class, I called him up, and I had some shoe polish, and I asked him to sit there and started to shine his shoes. I said, "I just want to get some practice."

He began to cry. How can you? You know what? I get it. I get it. It's such an honor. It's such an honor to be those who carry the good news of Jesus.

And you know, there are some things here that we can't do in heaven. Well, we can't have faith in heaven. We can have faith here; there, we'll see face to face. We can't forgive in heaven. When forgiveness is completed, we can forgive here.

But we can't go to the poor, the marginalized, the hurting. We can't go to those that are just going through a tough time and console them with the very love of Jesus.

Oh, but we can hear "how blessed are the feet." And we can hear "how blessed are the feet."

Last month, I was in Ethiopia and working with the Lutheran church in South Sudan. We came into their compound, our mission team of four people, and they had four chairs out and bowls in front of each of them. And oh, they were singing and dancing. What a wonderful welcome!

They had to sit down and took our shoes off and washed our feet. I learned my lesson. Okay.

It's a lesson Peter learned when Jesus said, "Let me wash your feet," and he said, "No, no, no."

He goes, "Unless I serve you, you can't have any part of me."

Well, you know what? Jesus has served you, and because you have a part in Him, He honors you with being able to go with His good news to the people, the places, the family, those that need the life of love that He's purposed for you.

So go with that purpose and live that life of love.

And what's the phrase? Keep your heart on the Savior, oh yeah, your chin on the windowsill of heaven, and your feet firmly planted on solid ground, but they're moving.

Lord God, you're so good to us. You're so good to us. Thank you for letting us serve you, and we pray, Lord, that you would fill our buckets in such ways that we pour it out just like Jesus did as a fragrant offering, a sacrifice to You.

But the way You've given us to do that is how we serve one another here.

Thank you for the privilege, in Jesus' name. Amen.