



P.O. Box 66540
Albuquerque, NM 87193
505.890.6806
E-mail: irm@liferesource.org
Website: www.liferesource.org

Presentation Transcript
God's Plan For Us
By Bill Jacobs
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The title of this presentation is *God's Plan For Us*.

When I was a boy in high school I used to be on the track team. And our coach had the sadistic practice of allowing anybody to challenge anybody else for their position on the team. Every Wednesday was *Challenge Day*. So all you had to do was tell the coach that you wanted to challenge somebody for their place in their event and he'd set up a race for you.

I believe I was a junior and there was this boy, who was a senior, who challenged me for my position running the 880 – the 800 meter. So there we were at the starting line and I remember that I was running barefooted. A lot of us did back then – not in events, but just for practice. He blew his whistle and we took off. I remember feeling excruciating pain in the ball of my right foot on the first step off the line. And then I didn't feel anything. My strategy in this race was to kind of get in behind him.... He was bigger than I was. He was more mature than I was. He had a better stride than I had. I was just going to try to ride in behind him. You know how Dale does in the Nascar races? He just gets in right behind them? That's what my plan was – although we didn't know about Dale back then.... But I was just going to ride him all the way around and then coming off the last curve, I was just going to sling-shot by him and just bust it for the finish line. And that's pretty much what I did. I was just riding right in behind him. When we came along the last curve I swung out and it was just tightly focused on the finish line. You're not thinking about anything else. You're just trying to hold form and get there quicker than the other guy. The first step over the finish line I felt excruciating pain in my right foot again. And I hobbled to a stop, looked at my foot and I had a blood blister about the size of a fifty-cent piece right on the ball of my foot. I think I must have stepped on a rock the first step out off the line.

It's amazing how our mind can block out everything else around us when we're focused on something. I feel kind of like that again today – kind of like we were rushing up to the Feast, you know, and everybody is just all out. Tongues are hanging out and we're just racing as hard as we can to get there. That's why God gave us the Feast of Trumpets

before the Feast, because the festivals are a time to refocus and center ourselves, and kind of step back from everyday life and think about what really matters the most. What an important task that is. We can even get so involved in doing the work of God that we forget why we do it! That's true, isn't it? That's just how people are. It's so important to have these festivals.

Well this festival in the plan of God represents a *great* day. It is a time of resurrection to life for those who have loved God – who have surrendered their lives to Him. I want you to notice something with me about Christ's return in Revelation 22:12. Jesus said – at the end of the Bible – after everything's been explained – you know, the whole plan – His last comments to us are:

Rev. 22:12 – *And behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to give every man, according as his works shall be.*

So Jesus is coming with a reward for all who have surrendered to Him. And this day pictures that. But I want to ask you this question today. Reward for what? Reward for *what*? Salvation is a gift, isn't it? A reward usually implies something that you get for doing something good, right? So, reward for *what*? What are we doing for which God will reward us?

Since this is the day that pictures the reward, let's take a look at that a bit. I want you to turn with me now to 1 Corinthians 15:50. Do we know what chapter that is? It's the resurrection chapter, right? Here the apostle Paul says:

1 Cor. 15:50 – *I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen! I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound. The dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed.*

So the reward is life forever in the kingdom and the family of God. Let's read a bit more about that in verse 53.

V-53 – *For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*

So we see a theme of a sudden miraculous change to immortality by the power of God. And we see a theme of victory over death, don't we? So Paul is exalting over the victory that God is going to give him over mortality.

It helps me to understand how Paul felt about that when I think about Paul's life. Here is a man of extremely keen intelligence and very special abilities. In the beginning he was turned the wrong way. He was using all his special abilities and his keen intelligence to

hinder the work of God. Well, God blinded him for three days, didn't He? Of course, when he went blind, he didn't know it was only going to last for three days. Right? I mean, I don't see anything in there where it explains that this is a three-day deal for you, Paul.

So what would that be like for him? I don't know from experience, but I have a friend who was blinded in a work-related accident when he was twenty-five. He was spraying pressurized fertilizer with a tractor on his father's farm on the field. He went back to get another load of fertilizer and something happened to the coupling on the tank and it blew off, blowing these pressurized chemicals into his eyes. After that he had a number of corneal transplants – for years he kept flying back and forth from Roswell to Pittsburgh, at this eye hospital – and they would try over and over again to put these new corneas on his damaged eyeballs. Eventually they all failed and he had to have his eyes surgically removed. Today he has prosthetic eyes. I was with him for three days in class before I realized he was blind, because he's so good at looking right at you. And he can move them back and forth and all that.

After we got to be friends, one day he was telling me about that experience. Even though the dozens of failed corneal transplants were excruciatingly painful, he was willing to suffer the pain with the hope of being able to see. When it became clear that he was going to have to have his eyes removed, all hope of ever seeing the light of day again was gone for him. He told me about sinking into a deep depression. He thought he was never going to see again and the thought of that was almost unbearable to him.

Paul went through a form of that, I think. To lose your eyesight is a *very, very* serious thing to contemplate. So he had that. And after that he immediately faced the rejection of the people that he was supposed to be a part of at Antioch. They were all afraid of him – and with good reason. Then after that – with that ignominious beginning – he started his work and they had to let him down in a basket over the city wall to get away. Many of the members of the church, over time, resented him and they wouldn't support him financially. So he got a job as a tentmaker and supported himself. He did it without any resentment, as far as we can tell. We know the story of his life. He was mobbed and beaten nearly to death – or maybe even killed. He went back just a few days later to the very same place. He was hated by the Jews when he used to be highly respected by the them. So he lost all of his status with them. When he got attention it was usually the negative type, wasn't it? Some men, once, actually publicly vowed not to eat until they'd killed him. That's even worse than having your picture in the post office, because you know these guys are not just going to sit around. They're going to come after you. He had no family that we know of. He had no home. We know that he was shipwrecked and floated in the Mediterranean Sea. We know that he was arrested by the Romans and incarcerated a number of times. We know that he was thrown among wild beasts at Ephesus. He tells us that. While all that's going on, he's being backstabbed and ridiculed by self-serving members of his own church. And then, on top of all that, when he asked God to heal his eyes completely, God told him to stop asking – not interested in Paul's comfort, his frustration level, his appearance, first impressions he made, or even his ability to work effectively. No. Not going to happen. Stop asking.

Now, there's one passage that really helps me understand how Paul felt and what he went through. It's in 2 Corinthians 1, beginning in verse 3, where he says:

2 Cor. 1:3 – *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. See, it's not that we comfort people. It's that God comforts them through us, because He's comforted us.*

V-5 – *For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. We do not want you to be uninformed brothers about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.*

I talked to a man this week. He was a minister. I saw him in my private counseling practice. And he was *so* discouraged that he told me that, if he were to give up the faith and just live as a normal worldly person – you know, good person – and give up everything he believed, that he would die eternal death, and that was okay with him. When you hear somebody say that, it really *rocks* you. I don't think Paul got to that place, but it says here that he “despaired even of life.” We don't think of Paul being like that, do we? Getting so discouraged he didn't care if he lived or died. He said:

V-9 – *Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us.*

So he *was* stressed to the breaking point – to the point that he thought there was no hope. You know, Ephesus is in Asia Minor and that's where he was thrown in with wild beasts. I don't know if that's what he was talking about, but this man's life was so *hard*. And it didn't get hard until he became a Christian. He had it easy up until then.

Finally, Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote in the fourth century, tells us that Paul was beheaded in the reign of the Roman emperor, Nero. So, in the end, he was not even protected. Just before he died, Paul tells us what was on his mind. We can read in 2 Timothy 4:6. He said:

2 Tim. 4:6 – *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure.*

So he was *poured out*. What does that mean? That means that he was *used up* – that God had used him up completely – and even to death, just as He did His own Son, Jesus Christ. And Paul said, in verse 7:

V-7 – I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.

Let's turn to 2 Corinthians 5. We're going to read some more about what he said about what he was thinking about as he was nearing the end. You know, he knew that it was coming. He said:

2 Cor. 5:1 – *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we know we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile, we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed, but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose, and has given us the Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come.*

Did you know that that Holy Spirit that is in you is like the down payment of eternal life for you? It's proof that it's going to happen. It's proof of God's intent. And he says in verse 6:

V-6 – *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord. While we're living in this flesh, we can't be with God. And yet we want to live. God put it in us to want to live. That's why death is an enemy. He says:*

V-7 – *(We live by faith and not by sight.) And we are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. He's saying, "I'm used up. I've had the course. I've done everything that I was supposed to do. I can't do anymore. I'm just completely spent and I would just rather die and be with God."*

Now, the thing that I want to point out next is that Paul was *not* alone. In Hebrews 11, and verse 35, we can read – this is the faith chapter:

Heb. 11:35 – *Women received their dead raised back to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released so they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawn into. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves, and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith. Yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

So there is coming a resurrection, when all those people who were *used up* by God – who suffered great privation, and great persecution, and great violence – are all waiting in the grave when they're going to be given eternal life with God. They're going to be given salvation and a reward. That's interesting to think about, isn't it? You mean those people are not in heaven right now enjoying life with God? Well, what do you think the resurrection is for? See, this day is about that *better* thing that God has planned for *all* of us – all of us who live now and all who have lived in the past – who have surrendered their lives to God – that reward. The reward for what?

Do you get the idea from listening to these passages that the idea of being rewarded according to works is not just talking about obeying God's laws? But it's also about something else *way* beyond that – about being willing to be used up and poured out, to be completely *expended*.

Let's go to Luke 17, and verse 7. This is Jesus talking:

Lk. 17:7 – *Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, "Come along now and sit down and eat." Would he not rather say, "Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink, and after that you can eat and drink." Would he thank the servant because he had done what he was told to do? Would he appreciate it? Would he reward it? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty."*

Think about some of the people that God worked with in the Bible. Think about Moses. Not exactly a cushy life. He *left* a cushy life. But at eighty he had to start wandering the desert for forty years with a bunch of people that were just a big pain in the posterior – attitude adjustment time for him and the children of Israel.

Think about Abraham – uprooted in his old age and sent to a new land. Think about Zechariah. He was the one that was sawn in two – or slain between the temple and the altar – pardon me. And think about Jonah. Now we wouldn't want to be like him, would we? He wasn't willing to go above and beyond, so he had to do an attitude adjustment inside a fish. And then there are all those people we've just talked about, who aren't even named, who suffered all these things for God's name sake.

So what does this mean for us? We're not prophets. We're not apostles. What does this pouring out business mean for us in our time here in 2007 in the United States of America, where there's the highest standard of living that's ever existed on the face of the earth that exists for our pleasure? Well, I think it means that it's not sufficient to be a good church goer, a good person, a good law keeper, because when we've done all that, we're still not in the reward zone. We've just done what we're supposed to do.

So, as we're preparing to leave for the Feast. I'm keenly aware of all the people who have gone *way* out of the comfort zone to help prepare for the Feast at Park City – already had full schedules, but they have stepped forward anyway. They have assumed

responsibilities that have consumed their time and their resources until many of them are bone weary – all of this to help other people. Without those people, this festival couldn't happen. There's lots of people that are happy to go to this Feast. So it's going to be a great service. It wouldn't have happened without *any* of them. So I think that's a modern day example of people going way above and way beyond.

But I was thinking even more about this whole subject of being poured out and used up in a different way than that even. One TV last night, I saw that Tony Snow resigned as the White House press secretary. Now he's, I think, fifty-one and he came on board in 2006. So he was fifty years old when he took that job. You know who he is? He's the one that talks to the press core. So he's the guy that has to be good with words. You know, we see these people on television and we have no idea about their personal lives, do we? We just don't. But we learned something about Tony Snow that rocked us from an article that he wrote last month. The article was titled, *Cancer's Unexpected Blessings – When You Enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Things Change*. It says here:

Commentator and broadcaster, Tony Snow, announced that he had colon cancer in 2005. Following surgery and chemotherapy, Snow joined the Bush administration in April of 2006 as press secretary. So he was already sick when he took the job. Unfortunately on March 23, Snow, a husband and father of three, announced that the cancer had returned with tumors found in his abdomen, leading to surgery in April, followed by more chemotherapy. Snow went back to work in the White House briefing room on May 30. CT.... (I've lost where this came from, so I don't remember what CT stands for.) CT asked Snow what spiritual lessons he had learned through this ordeal.

So here's what he said:

Blessings arrive in unexpected packages – in my case, cancer. Those of us with potentially fatal diseases – and there are millions in America today – find ourselves in the odd position of coping with our mortality while trying to fathom God's will. Although it would be the height of presumption to declare with confidence what it all means, scripture provides powerful hints and consolations.

First is that we shouldn't spend too much time trying to answer the why questions. Why me? Why must people suffer? Why can't somebody else be sick? We can't answer such things and the questions themselves are often designed more to express our anguish than to solicit an answer. I don't know why I have cancer and I don't much care. It is what it is – a plain and indisputable fact. Yet even while staring into a mirror darkly, great and stunning truths begin to take shape. Our maladies define a central feature of our existence. We are imperfect. Our bodies give out. But despite this – because of it – God offers the possibility of salvation and grace. We don't know how the narrative of our lives will end, but we get to choose how to use the interval between now and the moment we meet our Creator face to face.

You know how he is doing it? He said that he quit his job because he said he needed to make a lot of money in a hurry. So he wasn't doing the job for the money. Most of us, if

we had the salary that came with that job, we would think we were in hog heaven. But he made a *lot* of money before and he was *sacrificing* to take that job to serve the country. And now that he's sick, he's going to have to quit that to make some more money, he said. So that's how he's choosing to spend his life – at least part of it.

Second, we need to get past the anxiety. It wasn't that he is this brave person. We have to get past the anxiety. The mere thought of dying can send adrenalin flooding through your system. A dizzy, unfocused panic seizes you. Your heart thumps. Your head swims. You think of nothingness and swoon. You fear partings. You worry about the impact on family and friends. You fidget and get nowhere. To regain footing, remember that we were born not into death, but into life, and that the journey continues after we have finished our days on this earth. We accept this on faith, but that faith is nourished by a conviction that stirs even within many nonbelieving hearts – an intuition that the gift of life once given cannot be taken away. (Of course, we would differ with him on that, but most of what he says is perfectly agreeable to all of us.). Those that have been stricken enjoy the special privilege of being able to fight with their might and faith to live fully, richly, exuberantly, no matter how their days may be numbered.

Third, we can open our eyes and hearts. God relishes surprise. We want lives of simple, predictable ease – smooth, even trails as far as the eye can see. But God likes to go off-road (a statement close to my heart). He provokes us with twists and turns. He places us in predicaments that seem to defy our endurance and comprehension, and yet don't. By His love and grace, we persevere. The challenges that make our lives leap and stomachs churn invariably strengthen our faith and grant measures of wisdom and joy we would not experience otherwise.

So there's a theme building here of God using us up to get us ready for the Kingdom of God. The next section to his article – and we're about halfway through – is *You Have Been Called*.

Picture yourself in a hospital bed. The fog of anesthesia has begun to wear away. A doctor stands at your feet. A loved one holds your hand at the side. "It's cancer," the healer announces. The natural reaction is to turn to God and ask Him to serve as a cosmic Santa. "Dear God, make it all go away. Make everything simpler." But another voice whispers, "You have been called." Your quandry has drawn you closer to God, closer to those you love, closer to the issues that matter, and has dragged into insignificance the banal concerns that occupy our normal time. There's another kind of response, although usually shortlived – an inexplicable shutter of excitement, as if a clarifying moment of calamity has swept away everything trivial and tinny, and placed before us the challenge of important questions.

The moment you enter the valley of the shadow of death, things change. You discover that Christianity is not something doughy, passive, pious and soft. Faith may be the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, but it also draws you into a world shorn of fearful caution. The life of belief teems with boldness, thrills, danger, shocks, reversals, triumphs, and epiphanies. Think of Paul tramping through the known world and

contemplating trips to what must have seemed like Antipides (He has in parentheses Spain, because that was the farthest place in the world you could get to when he lived in Antioch. At least, that is what is believed by the modern religious world.), shaking the dust from his sandals, worrying not about the morrow, but only about the moment. There's nothing wilder than a life of humble virtue. For it is through selflessness and service that God wrings from our bodies and spirits the most we could ever give, the most we could ever offer, and the most we could ever do.

Finally, we can let love change everything. When Jesus was faced with the prospect of crucifixion, He grieved not for Himself, but for us. He cried for Jerusalem before entering the holy city. From the cross He took on the cumulative burden of human sin and weakness, and begged for forgiveness on our behalf. We get repeated chances to learn that life is not about us – that we acquire purpose and satisfaction by sharing in God's love for others. Sickness gets us part way there. It reminds us of our limitations and dependence, but it also gives us a chance to serve the healthy. A minister friend of mine observes that people suffering grave afflictions often acquire the faith of two people, while loved ones accept the burden of two people's worries and fears.

The next section – the last one – is *Learning How to Live*.

Most of us have watched friends as they drifted towards God's arms, not with resignation, but with peace and hope. In so doing, they have taught us not how to die, but how to live. They have emulated Christ by transmitting the power and authority of love. I sat by my best friend's bedside a few years ago as a wasting cancer took him away. (So as he writes all of this and he goes through this experience, he just sat with a friend of his that died of cancer.) He kept at his table a worn Bible and a 1928 edition of the Book of Common Prayer. A shattering grief disabled his family, many of his old friends and at least one priest. Here was a humble and very good guy – someone who apologized when he winced with pain, because he thought it might make his guests uncomfortable. He retained his equanimity and good humor literally until his last conscious moment. "I'm going to try to beat this cancer," he told me several months before he died, "but if I don't, I'll see you on the other side."

His gift was to remind everyone around him that even though God doesn't promise us tomorrow, He does promise us eternity, filled with life and love we can't comprehend, and that one in the throes of sickness can point the rest of us toward timely truths that will help us weather future storms. Through such trials, God bids us to choose. Do we believe or do we not? Will we be bold enough to love? Daring enough to serve? Humble enough to submit? Strong enough to acknowledge our limitations? Can we surrender our concern in things that don't matter, so that we might devote our remaining days to things that do? When our faith flags, He throws reminders in our way.

Think of the prayer warriors in our midst. They change things. And those of us who have been on the receiving end of their petitions and intercessions know it. It's hard to describe, but there are times when suddenly the hairs on the back of your neck stand up and you feel the surge of the Spirit. Somehow you just know others have chosen when

talking to the Author of creation to lift us up – to speak of us. This is love of a very special order. But so is the ability to sit back and appreciate the wonder of every created thing.

The mere thought of death somehow makes every blessing vivid, every happiness more luminous and intense. We may not know how our contest with sickness will end, but we have felt the ineluctable touch of God. “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” We don’t know much, but we know this. No matter where we are, no matter what we do, no matter how bleak or frightening our prospects, each and every of us, each and every day, lies in the same safe and impregnable place – in the hollow of God’s hand.

I read that – Skip Martin sent that to me – and I said, “It’s nice to know that there are people in government that have that kind of faith – that have that kind of relationship with God.”

So, even the way life is – the way we’re made, the way we’re human – teaches us that we are for using up. That’s why we’re here – to be used up. Even in sickness we can learn that lesson. I just wonder how many people will be encouraged by what Tony Snow wrote.

So, Christianity is not a promise of ease. “Just obey God and everything’s going to be okay.” It’s supposed to be hard. And it *will* be hard. And I think that there are two ways that it can be hard. It can be hard in the way of the unprofitable servant. Proverbs 13:15 says:

Prov. 13:15 – *Good understanding gives favor, but the way of transgressors is hard. Because life is hard.*

We can sit back and do the minimum or less, but what happens to us. Well, when we do that, we consume ourselves with our own problems. We become self-absorbed trying to maintain what we have. We can sink into self-pity. We bury our talent in the ground or we “get swallowed by a fish.” Something like that happens when we don’t do what God wants us to do.

Let’s look in Romans 12, and verse 1. This is what God wants us to do.

Rom. 12:1 – *I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good, acceptable and perfect will of God.*

Those of you who are younger, who are pondering the meaning of baptism, this is what it means to be a Christian. It doesn’t just mean that you have to come to church on the Sabbath, and that you have to not work on the Sabbath. It means that you have to sacrifice your entire life the way Christ sacrificed His life for you. And it doesn’t matter if nobody around you is doing that. That’s still the deal that you’re making with Jesus

Christ. And He promises to awaken us in the resurrection on the seventh trump with an eternal body. And you promised to sacrifice your life for Him, just like He sacrificed His life for you.

Women received their dead raised to life again and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance that they might obtain a better resurrection. So that's why we're here today. We're here to celebrate that and to remember that, even if we've been running with our tongues hanging out. We've been told to stop and back it down for twenty-four hours and refocus, and rethink, and realize what we are doing – come back to what's really important.

I want to finish where we started – in the resurrection chapter – verse 57.

I Cor. 15:57 – *But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*