

**President Jack Graham's Convention Address
2004 Southern Baptist Convention
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LIVING FOR ETERNITY TODAY

Living for eternity today in Ephesians, chapter 3, verses 20 and 21 is a doxology of praise, which includes a promise and a possibility for every Christian and for every congregation. This doxology of praise is on the heels of the great doctrinal section of Ephesians 1, 2, and 3.

Dr. Hawkins mentioned Brother Swank earlier—our pastor. One of the first books I was given as a young preacher was given to me by Dr. Swank and it was called *The Wealth, Walk and Warfare of the Christian* by Ruth Paxson, a great devotional commentary on the book of Ephesians. I have loved the book of Ephesians all these years because it is such a powerful testimony of the work of Christ through His church. It is a veritable manual on the church, who we are, and what we're to do as a people of God.

The apostle Paul, who's writing this inspired word from prison, has reminded us of our position in Christ, our wealth in Christ. He explodes with praise in verses 20 and 21 with these words:

Now unto Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we could ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever...

Kingdom forever! The kingdom is forever, for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, is indeed the same yesterday, today, and...say it...“forever” (Hebrews 13:8). “For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever” (Matthew 6:13).

The Bible tells us that not only is His kingdom forever, but His Word is settled. How long? Forever in heaven. The Bible tells us that “His mercy endures forever” (1 Chronicles 16:34).

The Bible tells us in Isaiah 51:6 that His salvation is forever. And then in the book of Revelation, again and again we're told that His reign and His rule as King of kings and Lord of lords are forever and forever. And thus, forever we love Him and serve Him.

We know that when Jesus saved us, He didn't immediately rapture us to heaven. The King is coming and in spite of the obstacles that we face today as a church and as the people of God, we know that the church of Jesus Christ is not going down. The church is going up, and we're going up with Him when He comes, to reign with Him forever and ever.

But until then we have the wonderful opportunity of expressing, expanding, and extending the kingdom of God. We will be glorified with Him as His church forever and ever and ever, but we must live forever and for forever today. It matters what we do now—forever. What we do for the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ and His kingdom today matters in eternity. So because the kingdom of God is forever and because we know that we will be glorified with Him forever, we can be up in a very down world.

I. Look Up

The book of Ephesians tells us how up we are to be. We are to look up. I remember when Dr. W.A. Criswell challenged us with the words, “Look up brother!” And I challenge you with those words today from the Word of God—look up brothers and sisters!

Why? In Ephesians 1:3 we're told that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Every abundant provision of God and resource for the task at hand is already given to us. We are amazingly and abundantly blessed. That passage is written in the tense of the language of the New Testament which indicates that something has already happened. Because it has already happened, because we have been blessed, we are now blessed forevermore and we live with that focus...that forever focus...that heavenly focus.

Think about it for just a moment. Our blessings are in heaven. Our hope is in heaven. Our eternal home is in heaven. Our reward is in heaven and, yes, our Savior is in heaven. The blessings of heaven are beyond imagination. The things God is doing there for us in preparation of His eternal kingdom are more than we can possibly imagine. "Eye has not seen nor ear heard what God has prepared for those of us who love Him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Think about it! God created the heavens and the earth in six days, but our Lord Jesus has been preparing a place in heaven for us for the past 2,000 years. You do the math. Just imagine the incredible promise fulfilled when we all get to heaven. Imagine the indescribable joy of serving Him forever and this promise of heaven. This hope of eternal life then serves as the catalyst and the motivation for godly living and dynamic ministry today. That's why we live "looking unto Jesus, who is the author and the finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). Look onward and upward to Him; that's why we are encouraged.

Did you see President George H. W. Bush, rather, President 41 Bush, coming down from that parachute on his 80th birthday? He did an interview in the newspaper. He was asked about his military service, and the interviewer looked on the wall of his office and saw four simple letters written there: C-A-V-U.

When the reporter inquired as to the meaning of C-A-V-U, the former president replied, "When I was a little pilot, 18 years old or 19, that was all we prayed for...C-A-V-U. We didn't have G-P-S, we didn't have all this navigation stuff and radar and everything and so we prayed for...at night for the next day...that we would have, 'Ceiling and visibility unlimited.'"

Ceiling and visibility unlimited... The president then said, "That is where my life is today."

Southern Baptists, this is where we are today as a Convention of churches. We have a ceiling and visibility that is unlimited because we have been blessed immeasurably with all of the blessings of heaven. Therefore, we live today with eternity in our hearts. "Don't set your affections on things below, but things above" (Colossians 3:2).

The Message paraphrase puts it this way:

Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going around. Christ—that is where the action is. See things from His perspective.

Let heaven be the habit of our hearts. May we live with a forever focus. Some people live with the idea that here on earth we're in the land of the living, on our way to the land of the dying. That's not true. We are not in the land of the living on our way to the land of the dying...we're in the land of the dying on our way to the land of the living.

Jonathan Edwards, the great Christian preacher, was known from time to time to entertain children by picking up a clear stone and peering through that stone at the sun. When the children asked him what he was doing, he would simply reply, "I'm thinking about heaven."

Someone said of Jonathan Edwards, "That's what's wrong with Edwards. The problem with Edwards is that he has eternity stamped on his eyeballs." If only people could say that we have eternity stamped on our eyeballs, that our focus is with Him forever. This raises an important question. If we have this abundant provision, why are we so often failing? Why do we seem defeated? Why is the job of world evangelism not getting done? Why is the culture collapsing around us? Could it be because we have become disoriented and unfocused? We have become earth-focused and not eternity-focused.

May God help us embrace each day with a heart for Him and a heart for heaven, because nothing will elevate our lives more, including our churches and all the people around us. **Southern Baptists, look up!**

II. Step Up

But there's another challenge, and that is to step up. Southern Baptists, it's time to step up as we live for eternity today. Ephesians 4:1 says we are to "walk worthy." Step worthily of the calling. We're told again in Ephesians 5:1-2 that we are to "walk in love." We're also told in the fifth chapter of Ephesians that we are to "walk circumspectly," that is, carefully (verse 14).

It is clear to me as you read the passages in Ephesians 4 and 5 concerning the walk of the believer, that the distinctive difference Jesus makes in our life, the worthy walk He creates, concerns our witness within the body of Christ and without, into the world. That is, evangelism and missions. We must step up the pace, Southern Baptists, in our engagement of this culture and our evangelization of the world.

When the disciples were standing with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, their mouths gaping open at the prospect of His ascension, they asked Him, "Lord are You going to this time restore Your kingdom to Israel?" They couldn't wait. Their hearts were pounding with anticipation, but they were still unfocused, they didn't yet know exactly what His agenda—His assignment—for them would be. Their vision was of an earthly kingdom. But Jesus calls us to an eternal kingdom and that is why Jesus gave us the Great Commission. In Acts 1:8 He gave them the promise to fulfill that Great Commission when He said, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses."

What a phenomenal task given to those disciples and given to us—world evangelization.

The great evangelist Billy Graham said this:

"The evangelistic harvest is always urgent. The testing of men and women is always being decided. Every generation is strategic. We are not responsible for the past generations. We cannot bear full responsibility for the next one, but we do have our generation. God will hold us responsible as to how we fulfill our responsibility to this age and take advantage of our opportunity."

One thing is certain, if we are to complete our mission we must walk worthily and witness intentionally. Our message must be clear—it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Inherent in the gospel of Jesus Christ is the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. That is the good news. That is the gospel, and inherent within that gospel is the power to change lives. The power is not in our personalities. The power is not centered in our worship styles or centered in our programs or our denominational strategies. The power is in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the promise of the Holy Spirit, to enable us to take that gospel to the world. May God help us to do it now more than ever. May God help us to do it urgently and cooperatively, knowing that we're dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can break down the hardness of the human heart. Only the Holy Spirit can empower our words and our witness and break through into the darkness of a person's life. It is the glorious light of the gospel of Jesus. It is the simple gospel of Christ.

Ronald Reagan used to say that his message, his political philosophy, was "simple but it wasn't simplistic." The gospel of Jesus Christ is simple, but it's not simplistic. It is the life-changing, eternal gospel of Christ.

How we should thank God for His Word—the inerrant, infallible Word of God! But if I study the Bible and know my Bible and believe my Bible and won't walk across the street to share the gospel, what's the point? If evangelism is buried in orthodoxy, it is an unworthy grave. **We must step up.**

Now I know, I sat where you have sat and heard many sermons on evangelism and missions and, Southern Baptists, we've heard it so often that we just let it fly right over the tops of our heads. Even as I'm speaking now, you're saying, "Been there. Done that. Heard this." But we cannot stop saying it. We must keep on preaching personal witness and evangelism and teaching it in our churches. Here's why: In spite of every advantage, we're falling behind in the world and in our nation.

Did you know:

- The United States is the third largest unchurched nation in the world?
- North America is the only continent where Christianity is not growing?
- Seven out of 10 people in America do not know Jesus Christ in a personal way?
- The United States is now the thirteenth largest receptor of Christian missionaries in the world? Missionaries are now coming here from other parts of the world.
- Only 4% of Americans report to have a biblical worldview, and more than 80% of all churches in the United States are plateaued and declining?
- In America we are now losing 72 churches per week, over 10 per day?

Southern Baptists have not been immune to these startling statistics. We are now flatlining in terms of our growth in baptisms. We are not reaching our country, our communities, much less the world, with the gospel.

I'm happy to report that our missionaries are bringing people to Christ at an unprecedented rate. Overseas, the International Mission Board reports over 500,000 baptisms—a half million baptisms the past two years consecutively. We rejoice in that. But in America, in our own neighborhoods, with our own neighbors, we're not getting the job done. May God help us to make our neighborhoods, our communities, a place from which it is hard to go to hell...that we develop disciples committed to **stepping up** to the challenge of evangelism.

The one ministry of the church that we won't do in heaven is evangelism and missions. We will worship in heaven. We will serve Him forever in heaven. We will understand and grow deeper in the riches of His grace and glory in heaven. But in heaven, the destiny of mankind is sealed. So, if we are ever going to advance the kingdom of God, if we're ever going to fulfill the Great Commission in our generation, if we are ever to proclaim the name of Jesus, if we care about the eternal destinies of families, friends, neighbors, and nations, we must be willing to share Jesus now with desperate and dying men and women that they may know Him and go to heaven with us.

Too many of us just don't care. We're calloused. And pastors, it starts with you and me. Every pastor needs to get over the idea of being a CEO in charge of the church and remember that God has called us to be shepherds who love sheep—including lost sheep.

The masses of people in the United States of America live in the great cities of America. That includes the great cities of the West, the Midwest, and the Northeast, as well as the South. Southern Baptists have chosen not to limit our witness to the south. We are now moving, in cooperation with strategic focus, to the cities of the great Northeast and Midwest.

Remember, it was Paul's strategy to go to the great cities of the ancient world. He was the point man spreading the fires of evangelism from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, because the gospel is for everyone... "to the Jew and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). He and a small band of believers turned the world upside-down. It's one of the most powerful evidences of the Christian faith of all—the power of the gospel. So I'm calling you, Southern Baptists, to join us in the efforts to reach the great American cities for Christ—New York and Boston and Chicago and Miami and Los Angeles. Millions and millions in these massive cities are groping in darkness and need the gospel, and yet they're responsive. Ask your church, lead your church, to be cooperative with the North American Mission Board, with your state convention, with local associations, and adopt one of these great cities to share the gospel. Start a church, invest in that church, visit it, send your young people there, ask that God would give you a burden for the great cities of this nation. People need Jesus.

III. Wise Up

Third, we are to **wise up**. Ephesians 5:17-18 tells us this:

Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.

We're to wise up. Why? We're to walk in wisdom. Why? Because we are now in a cultural war like we've never seen and things are not going well for our side. This is a struggle which, depending upon the result, will define America for generations to come. As Jesus taught us, we are to "be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). This means that we are to think biblically and live truthfully—to live distinctively different Christian lives in this culture. I brought my message last year on salt and light; we are salt and light in this culture, but so often the church has been compromised. Now, I assure you, the culture is not compromising in its agenda. The anti-Christian secular culture is not compromising in its efforts.

Have you noticed everyone seems to have an agenda? The feminists have an agenda. The terrorists have an agenda. The homosexuals have an agenda. These agendas, apart from Jesus Christ, are the pathway to hell. But God has given us an agenda which is the pathway to heaven; that agenda is Jesus, who is "the way the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

To wise up is to live in the power of God's Spirit and express the life and the love of Jesus in the culture. If Jesus isn't changing your life, something is drastically, dramatically wrong. We're new creatures and creations in Christ. We don't live like the world—we're different than the world.

So why are we failing in this cultural war? Some say the battle is over; I don't believe it is. Are we failing because we don't have enough money or because we don't have enough preachers or because we don't have enough deacons or because we don't have enough committees? No! It's because we need more of the power of God.

We need preachers who are willing to stand up and tell the truth and preach the truth, who will call sin by its first name and deal with the issues of our times. Why aren't we, as preachers, in our pulpits teaching and preaching what the Bible says about marriage as God has defined it, what the Bible says about homosexuality as God has condemned it? I'm convinced there's not

much wrong with America that couldn't be changed if those of us who preach and teach the Word of God would stand squarely on the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ and declare the truth to this culture, starting with our own congregations who need to **wise up** and think about these issues.

You know, the moment I leave the Bible in my preaching, I'm not a true preacher. I may be a speaker. I may be a motivator. I may be a communicator or an entertainer, but I'm not a preacher until I'm preaching the Word of God prophetically and powerfully. "Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord." I'm not smart enough to tell people how to live apart from the Word of God.

You say, "Well if you preach the truth, people won't like it." That's a swing and a miss. The issue is whether it's true, not whether it's popular. Politicians need to be popular; preachers need to tell the truth, and we need to tell it now. We are called to deliver the presence and the love of Jesus to the culture. If we don't, then the unrighteous will dominate and control our lives and our future and our families. If we abdicate our role and our responsibility socially and culturally to bring Christ to the culture so that truth and righteousness can prevail, then we will lose this battle. Satan is on the prowl; he's devouring everything around us, so we need to **wise up**.

That means helping our people know the issues at stake. This is an election year—2004—a year of decision. Southern Baptists have a plan to register voters all across America and we know that every vote counts. That plan is *iVoteValues.com*. I'm so appreciative of Dr. Land and his organization and this effort to register voters—not only to register voters, but to inform voters. Once again, pastor and teachers of the Word of God, it's our responsibility! We don't tell people who to vote for, but we do teach people the principle and the values of God's Word. We better make sure that our values are the values of Scripture so that when people go in to the voting booth, they will vote their values and their principles.

This election in 2004 matters because there are two different viewpoints in this culture as to where America needs to go; the moral issues of our time are still on the table. Ephesians 5 describes marriage, as God from the beginning of time has defined it, as a husband and a wife, a man and a woman. It must not be redefined. It is the mysterious picture of Christ and the church. Every effort to restructure society and to redefine the family and marriage itself is an attempt to undermine the foundations and the faith of this nation. We believe in the biblical family as God has given us the family. That is why we must press toward the passage of the Federal Marriage Amendment and get this done for the sake of the family and the future of our homes.

President Bush has proposed this. Recently to the religious press, he said, "I am the voice, but I'm one voice and frankly I need the added voices of the religious community."

So I challenge you to let your voice and your views be known to your legislators. There are votes coming up as soon as August. Write, e-mail, but better yet, contact them through their local districts where you can best reach them and where they will understand your viewpoint. I'm proud of our senator from Texas, John Cornyn, who is a strong advocate for the Marriage and Family Amendment. Listen to the words of Senator Cornyn.

"I think the American people have to decide whether they're going to run the government or let judges run it. Of course, Lincoln said, this is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people and not one, obviously, that should be relinquished to just a handful of activists judges. I believe a Federal Marriage Amendment is the next logical step."

The United States Constitution has been amended 27 times in our nation's history for various issues. I can't think of anything more important than preserving the sanctity of the family and making sure that traditional families, the fundamental building block of our society, are preserved in the best interest of families and the best interest of children."

A Baptist preacher anywhere couldn't have said it any better than that. We know that the priority for Southern Baptists is to fulfill the Great Commission. We know that sharing Jesus one-on-one and cooperatively around the world is God's agenda. Some say what we need to do, therefore, is just share the gospel and shut up about the rest of this, cloister into our churches, have church, win people as we can, and go home.

But I simply ask you a question: If we don't, as Southern Baptists and other evangelical Christians, stand up, wise up, and speak out on these issues, who will be left? Who will be left to deal with the issues of our times? If not us, Southern Baptists, then who? If not now, when? May God help us to do it now. May God help us to take the responsibility that God has given us.

M. E. Dodd, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, in his 1919 Convention Address said this...speaking of our responsibility to our culture and to our world...he said:

"That rests largely in the hands of Southern Baptists. If they remain true, the outlook is glorious. If they give up, the fight is practically lost."

Southern Baptists, we will not give up! We will look up. We will step up in our personal witness. We will wise up in our responsibility to this culture and...

IV. Gear Up

Yes, **we will gear up**, for we're in a spiritual battle. The last chapter of Ephesians talks about the spiritual battle: "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers" (verse 12).

We know who the enemy is. We know the battle ultimately is for the souls of men and women. Because Satan is our enemy we must stand firm, geared up, girded with the gospel of truth. We must not relent. We must not retreat. We must not flinch or fail. We must not give up an inch of God's territory. This is God's property. We are to preserve it and protect it. So we don't give up.

I don't know if we are going to prevail in this cultural war or not. I pray for revival in the church. I pray that God will send spiritual revolution to America, but I don't know if we will win this cultural war here on earth. But one thing I do know (is) that His kingdom is forever. One thing I do know is that the kingdoms of this earth will become the kingdom of our God and His Christ. What I do know is that while the battle is on and is heating up, "the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand **forever**" (Isaiah 40:8)!

In 1951, San Francisco, California, Southern Baptist President Robert G. Lee challenged the messengers of the Convention with these words:

"As Southern Baptists we must ever believe the Bible to be the final word of every subject mentioned, the book from which there is no appeal, needing no supplement or addition, needing no other lamp to guide our feet, trusting nothing in antithesis to Bible teaching. We preach the Word, never outworn and never outgrown, supernatural in origin, infallible in authority, eternal in duration, personal in application, regenerative in power, unexhausted in adequacy, inspired in totality, harmonious in infinite complexity, the miracle book of diversity in unity. This Book speaks with directness that leaves no doubt as to either duty or

destiny and makes the libraries of the world comparatively meaningless without its teaching. At the end of the day, at the end of the day, the kingdoms of this world will collapse, the culture will collapse, heaven and earth will be shaken, but God's church will abide forever in glory with Him. God's Word will endure forever, His promises forever."

So, Southern Baptists, we pray: "Lord raise us up. Lord encourage our spirits, increase our faith, instruct our faith, burden our hearts, inflame our lives impassioned by the Holy Spirit because, Lord, we are fascinated with Your glory. We are captivated by Your amazing call. We are liberated by your grace. We are intoxicated by Your Spirit, and we are consecrated to Your purpose. Yes, the church is going up...up...up...up when we look up, when we step up, when we wise up, and gear up as the church of the living God. To Him be glory in the church throughout all ages, forever and ever, world without end."