

John Piper- Seashell Illustration

Standing on stage in front of the perpetually moving crowd, with a damp wind in his face, Piper prayed.

“Father in heaven, you know how inadequate I feel at this moment,” he said aloud. “And so I ask for a very special anointing and help from you.” Eyes squeezed shut, he took a deep breath and asked for grace.

Another big breath, and he began: “You don’t have to know a lot of things for your life to make a lasting difference in the world.”

You don’t have to be smart, or good-looking, or from a good family, he told them. “You just have to know a few, basic, glorious, majestic, obvious, unchanging, eternal things, and be gripped by them, and be willing to lay down your life for them.”

Five minutes in, he laid out the comparison nobody forgot:

Three weeks ago, we got news at our church that Ruby Eliason and Laura Edwards were killed in Cameroon. Ruby Eliason—over 80, single all her life, a nurse. Poured her life out for one thing: to make Jesus Christ known among the sick and the poor in the hardest and most unreached places.

Laura Edwards, a medical doctor in the Twin Cities, and in her retirement, partnering up with Ruby. [She was] also pushing 80, and going from village to village in Cameroon. The brakes give way, over a cliff they go, and they’re dead instantly. And I asked my people, “Is this a tragedy?”

Two women, in their 80s almost, a whole life devoted to one idea—Jesus Christ magnified among the poor and the sick in the hardest places. And 20 years after most of their American counterparts had begun to throw their lives away on trivialities in Florida and New Mexico, [they] fly into eternity with a death in moment. “Is this a tragedy?” I asked.

The crowd knew the answer, calling out, “No!”

“It is not a tragedy,” Piper affirmed. “I’ll read you what a tragedy is.”

He pulled out a page from Reader’s Digest.

(“I don’t know where I got it, because I didn’t subscribe,” Piper remembers now. “I must have found it in a doctor’s office somewhere.”)

He read it to them:

‘Bob and Penny . . . took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells.’

“That’s a tragedy,” he told the crowd.

And there are people in this country that are spending billions of dollars to get you to buy it. And I get 40 minutes to plead with you—don’t buy it. With all my heart I plead with you—don’t buy that dream. . . . As the last chapter before you stand before the Creator of the universe to give an account with what you did: “Here it is, Lord—my shell collection. And I’ve got a good swing. And look at my boat.”

“Don’t waste your life,” he said, the words quietly tucked in before he barreled into another memorable anecdote, this one about a plaque in his home featuring C. T. Studd’s poem, “Only one life, twill soon be past / Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

The way to not waste your life, Piper said, is to give God glory for every gift, because every one—from a new car to physical safety to your own next heartbeat—is grace bought and paid for through the cross.

Piper liked that point enough to title his message “Boasting Only in the Cross.”