
God Always Wanted the Whole World

Global Missions from Genesis to Revelation

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ABSTRACT: The apostle Paul described his life mission, and the mission of the church as a whole, as a calling “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ’s] name among all the nations” (Romans 1:5). From Eden onward, God has been moving history toward the day when Satan and sin are finally conquered, the knowledge of his glory covers the earth, and the redeemed from all peoples praise the Lamb who was slain. That mission, still incomplete, spurs every Christian either to send or go, either to hold the ropes for others or cross boundaries and cultures for the sake of Christ’s name.

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory!* (Psalm 72:18–19)

*All the nations you have made shall come
and worship before you, O Lord,
and shall glorify your name.* (Psalm 86:9)

*Praise the Lord, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!
For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord!* (Psalm 117:1–2)

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With voices of hope, the psalmists looked forward to the day when all peoples of the planet would praise the Lord and relish his favor. Paul, as a servant of Messiah Jesus, identifies that the aim of the gospel is “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ’s] name among all the nations” — a mission that defines the very makeup of the church (Romans 1:5).¹ Three elements are noteworthy with respect to this aim.

First, the phrase “the obedience of faith” probably means “the obedience that always flows from faith.”² Faith is the root and obedience the fruit, yet in a way that the two are never separated; saving faith submits to Christ’s lordship (Romans 6:17–18; 10:13–17).

Next, the target of the gospel mission is to see people saved and satisfied from “among *all* the nations.” All the nations experienced God’s curse, and some from all the nations will experience God’s blessing. The good news that the reigning God eternally saves and satisfies believing sinners through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is for the Libyan and the Bolivian, for the expats in Dubai and the mountain tribes in the Himalayas, for the Latinos in Miami and the poor in rural Minnesota.

Finally, this passage tells us that missions is a means to white-hot worship. As John Piper explains, “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t.”³ One day, the need for missions will pass away, but the redeemed will forever magnify the majesty and glory of God in Christ. Missions exists “for the sake of [Jesus’s] name.” There is no higher goal than seeing and savoring Jesus’s glory among the peoples of the world.

COMMISSION AND CURSE

When God first made the world, he planted a garden-sanctuary like a temple, and in it he placed his image — a man and a woman, whom he commissioned to

¹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

² So, e.g., Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 79–82; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 40; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, NICNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 50–51.

³ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 15.

expand his garden temple by carrying his image to the ends of the earth.⁴ “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:27–28). God commissioned humanity to reflect, resemble, and represent his greatness and glory on a global scale.

Our first parents initially rejected this calling by choosing to imitate the serpent in their rebellion. But God remained committed to magnifying himself in the universe, and he promised to overcome the curse through a male royal deliverer — an offspring of the woman who would one day overpower the serpent and reestablish global blessing (Genesis 3:15). Later prophets identified how this person would fulfill God’s promise and fill the whole earth with God’s glory (Psalm 72:1–2, 17–19; Isaiah 11:1–2, 9–10; cf. Numbers 14:21; Habakkuk 2:14).

Sin escalated after Adam’s fall and moved God to justly punish humanity through the flood. As Noah and his sons repopulated the world, Yahweh punished the proud at the Tower of Babel. Far from seeking to magnify God’s name, people sought to elevate their own names, so the Lord dispersed them — seventy different family groups — and confused their languages throughout the world (Genesis 11:8–9). For God’s blessing to overcome curse, he would now need to address the sins of peoples (plural) and to call for surrender across language groups.

TWO-STAGE ABRAHAMIC PROMISE

Yahweh pledged to overcome the sin and language barriers through one of the seventy families — the family of Abraham:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you so that I may make of you a great nation, and may bless you, and may make your name great. And there, be

⁴ See especially G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); G. K. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48 (2005): 5–31; T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008).

a blessing, so that I may bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I may curse. And the result will be that in you all the families of the ground shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1–3, my translation)

Growing out of the two commands to Abraham to *go* and *be a blessing*, a two-stage process emerges for overcoming the curse. First, Abraham would need to go to the land of Canaan, where God would make him into a great nation. God fulfilled that promise in the Mosaic covenant era. Second, Abraham, or one representing him, would need to be a blessing, so that God could ultimately overcome global curse and bring blessing to all the families who earlier spread around the earth (cf. Genesis 10:32). The Lord ultimately realized that promise in Christ and the new covenant.

God promised Abraham that he would become “the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:4–6), but he also stressed that this move from being the father of one nation (Israel) to a father of many nations would happen only when the single, male deliverer would rise — one who would expand kingdom territory by possessing the gate of enemies, and through whom all the nations would be blessed (Genesis 22:17–18; cf. 26:3–4). Missions as we know it — carrying a message of reconciliation outward to the nations — would become operative only in the day when this king would arise and crush the powers of the serpent. Let’s now consider each of these two stages as they play out in Scripture.

STAGE 1A: ISRAEL’S ‘COME AND SEE’ CALLING

During the Mosaic covenant age, many non-Israelites *became* Israelites — people such as the mixed multitude coming out of Egypt, Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, and Uriah the Hittite. While Israel as a people was, at some level, a multiethnic community, during the entire Old Testament period Abraham remained the father of a single nation. And like Adam in the garden-sanctuary, God called this people his firstborn son (Exodus 4:22; cf. Genesis 5:1–3) and charged them to be priest-kings by representing, resembling, and reflecting him to a needy world. Others would see their good deeds, and those good deeds would direct them to the greatness of God.

Thus, Yahweh told Israel, “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant and be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, then you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6, my translation). Through radically surrendered lives, Israel would mediate God’s presence and display God’s holiness to a needy world. Similarly, Moses wrote, “Keep [the statutes and the rules] and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

Israel had a high calling to reflect God’s worth by surrendering wholly to him. But this calling does not appear to have included the “go and tell” mission that we as Christians now have. Instead, Israel’s limited “mission” to the nations involved only a calling to “come and see.”⁵ As the Israelites obeyed Yahweh, the nations would take notice and draw near to Yahweh’s greatness. But Israel failed in their covenant loyalty, and their rebellion, like Adam’s, ultimately resulted in the Lord’s removing them from paradise, a reality that Moses anticipated (Deuteronomy 31:27, 29) and the prophets affirmed (2 Kings 17:13–15, 23).

STAGE 1B: PROPHETIC VISIONS OF HOPE

Nevertheless, even amid the failures of the Mosaic covenant, God raised up prophets like Isaiah who recalled the promises that God would bring good news and blessing to the whole world through a single royal deliver. This servant-king would represent the people of Israel, even bearing her name, and through him some from Israel and the nations would enjoy lasting salvation: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. . . . It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you

⁵ On this, see especially Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, NSBT 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Israel, the People of God, and the Nations,” *JETS* 45 (2002): 35–57; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); Kevin Paul Oberlin, “The Ministry of Israel to the Nations: A Biblical Theology of Missions in the Era of the Old Testament Canon” (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2006); contrast Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:3, 6).

This royal servant would enjoy God’s presence and would fulfill his mission to bring justice to the nations, engage in a ministry of mercy, and guide the lost (Isaiah 42:1–4; 51:4–5; 61:1–3). He would serve as a covenant mediator and would open the eyes of the blind and deliver the captive (Isaiah 42:6–7; 49:8–9). He would preach the good news of God’s victory over evil and saving grace (Isaiah 52:7–10; 61:1–3), which he would secure through his own substitutionary sacrifice. “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Yahweh would make his royal servant an offering for humanity’s guilt, and by this atoning work he would “sprinkle many nations,” “make many to be accounted righteous,” and “bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 52:15; 53:11). In Paul’s words elsewhere, “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). And again, “By the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

Through the death and resurrection of this royal servant-person, a multitude of offspring-servants would rise who would carry on the missional task of the servant-person, Israel (Isaiah 49:3, 6). “In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory” (Isaiah 45:25). “When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:10–11). These would be “an offspring the Lord has blessed” (Isaiah 61:9), and they would “possess the nations” (Isaiah 54:3), including “servants” who would operate as priests from among the foreigners (Isaiah 56:6–8) and ethnic Israelites alike (Isaiah 56:6–8; 63:17; 66:20–21).

STAGE 2A: JESUS’S MISSION OF GOOD NEWS

Jesus is the very one Moses, Isaiah, and the other prophets anticipated — the one through whom all the world can be blessed. In Jesus, God was remembering “his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72–73).

Christ is the singular royal “offspring of Abraham,” and in him Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, can become Abraham’s true “offspring,” full heirs of all the promises. Paul builds on the promises of Genesis 12:3 and 22:18:

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” . . . In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham [has] come to the Gentiles. . . . Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring . . . who is Christ. . . . And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:8, 14, 16, 29)

Furthermore, Jesus is Yahweh’s royal servant, who proclaims the good news of God’s reign and brings light and salvation to the nations. Thus, he opened his ministry by citing a combination of Isaiah 61:1–2 and 42:7: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). Similarly, citing Isaiah 9:1–2, Matthew stressed that in Jesus’s preaching, the light of God was dawning on Galilee of the Gentiles (Matthew 4:13–17).

Jesus directly fulfilled Isaiah’s promise that the servant-person Israel would save a remnant from both Israel the people and the nations (Isaiah 49:3, 6): “To this day I [Paul] have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22–23). With citations from the Law, Prophets, and Writings, the apostle also noted that Jesus is the one in whom peoples from the nations are now hoping.

I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” And again it is said, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” And again, “Praise the

Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.” And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” (Romans 15:8–12; cf. Psalm 18:49[50]; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10)

STAGE 2B: THE CHURCH’S ‘COME AND SEE’ AND ‘GO AND TELL’ MISSION

The mission of the Messiah also becomes the mission of his church. The very one who now has all authority in heaven and on earth has commissioned us, his servants, to make disciples, and he has given us his Spirit, which allows us to image or bear witness to his greatness and glory throughout the world, thus fulfilling the original commission from the garden of displaying God’s glory to the ends of the earth.

In Isaiah 49:6, God commissions the servant-king to bring light to the nations (cf. Acts 26:22–23), but in Acts 13:47, the Messiah’s mission is *Paul’s* mission: “The Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” Accordingly, in Isaiah 52:7 the messianic servant is the one with beautiful feet bringing the good news of salvation and God’s reign (“how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of *him* who brings good news”), but in Romans 10 Paul makes the subject plural to identify that the church now carries on the Messiah’s good-news proclamation to the nations. “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of *those* who preach the good news!’” (Romans 10:14–15).

Whereas Yahweh called Old Testament Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5–6), he now both calls and empowers the church to live in a way that points to the greatness and glory of God. Hence, Jesus demanded, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Similarly, Peter proclaimed, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Yet for the church of Jesus, a “go and tell” mission now matches the responsibility to obey in order that others may “come and see” God’s worth displayed. Indeed, our Lord has commissioned us to proclaim to all nations the good news that the reigning God eternally saves and satisfies believing sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20)).

Filled with the very Spirit of the resurrected Christ (Acts 16:7), the church as God’s temple-sanctuary has spread from Jerusalem to Judea-Samaria to the ends of the earth, thus fulfilling Christ’s promise: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8; cf. Isaiah 32:14–17; 44:3; 59:21). In Christ, the new creation has dawned. God is now reestablishing right order, and his glory is increasingly filling the earth.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. . . . We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way. (2 Corinthians 5:17–21; 6:3–4)

PRAISE TO THE SAVIOR AND SATISFIER OF THE NATIONS

The ultimate end of missions is white-hot worship — the magnifying of God’s greatness and glory in Christ through a multiethnic bride. Paul’s mission and the church’s mission is “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Jesus’s]

name among all the nations” (Romans 1:5). Even now in the heavens, those gathered around God’s throne are singing praise to the Lion-Lamb King, whose death and resurrection delivered peoples from all nations: “Worthy are you . . . for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:9–10). And in the future, those saved and satisfied “from all tribes and peoples and languages” will together cry out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9–10).

If you have tasted and seen that God in Christ is good, the call of our lives is to know Christ and make him known. As I write this study, there remain 269 unengaged, unreached people groups in this world — those for whom not one person, church, or mission agency has taken responsibility to proclaim the good news through word and deed.⁶ Approximately 5.7 million people remain in darkness — spiritually lost and helpless, not knowing, not acknowledging, not adoring Christ as Savior and Lord. With this, there remain regions wherein Christ remains largely unknown and where the local churches, if they exist at all, are relatively insufficient at making Christ known without outside help.

What is your part in reaching the neighborhoods and nations for Jesus? You have an opportunity and responsibility to participate in a work of cosmic proportions — one that God has been developing since creation and that will climax in the global praise of Christ and the immeasurable joy of the redeemed on the new earth. We can join in God’s passion to see the brokenhearted find healing, the enslaved set free, the grieving find hope, and the hurting find help. We must either go or send; we must either be a rope holder or one who crosses cultures for the sake of the name. Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2). We enjoy the greatest power for the highest task. I am praying that God would let the readers of this meditation become more faithful goers and more faithful senders until missions is unnecessary but worship continues.

⁶ Figures taken from www.finishingthetask.com.