THE FINISHERS
COMPLETING THE MISSION OF CHRIST IN YOUR GENERATION

“ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME. THEREFORE GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS, BAPTIZING THEM IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND TEACHING THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU. AND SURELY I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE VERY END OF THE AGE.”

—The Great Commission, Jesus Christ

My friend Roger Hershey has known decades of fruitful ministry as a life-changing counselor to many thousands of college students, and this book captures his life’s vision. It is a fascinating overview of the history of the world from God’s perspective and a strong challenge to become a part of the great work that God is doing right now in countries around the world. But don’t read this book unless you are willing to have God change your life!

Wayne Grudem, Ph.D.
Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

Rejecting the self-centered mindset of our culture, Roger and Jason call us to take seriously the Great Commission, become world Christians, and live for the surpassing glory of eternity. Powerful reading! This is a genuinely inspiring and challenging book.

Dr. Robert Coleman
Author of The Master Plan of Evangelism

Roger Hershey’s book cuts through the clutter of cultural Christianity to call us all back to the Great Commission and what it will take to finish this sacred assignment.

Doug Pollock
Author of God Space, Speaker, Reflective Practitioner

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THE
FINISHERS
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BY
ROGER HERSHEY
AND
JASON WEIMER
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SECTION ONE

A VISION OF THE END

“IT ONLY ENDS ONCE,
THE REST IS JUST PROGRESS”

—Jacob to the Man in Black, LOST
The End and Purpose of the Church’s Mission

We were demolishing them. I don’t remember who the opponent was, but it was late in the game and we led 49-0, ready to chalk up another victory against an inferior opponent. As I took in the final minutes from the sidelines of Beaver Stadium, Penn State football’s cavernous home, my mind raced toward what might be—an undefeated season, a prestigious bowl game, a national championship. What greater glory could a student-athlete achieve?

At this point I should mention that I was not a jacked 240-pound linebacker; I was a cheerleader. But I did have the important job of inciting the masses into hysteria over the exploits of their team. You might laugh, but I did get plenty of hugs and kisses after every touchdown!

Later, as people joyously streamed out of the stadium, a thought occurred to me: no matter how great the victory—even one as great as a national championship—the glory attached to it would be fleeting. There would be a tickertape parade down College Avenue, a Sports Illustrated cover story, and a few days of wild parties in the fraternities. The so-called glory would last
three days, a week at most. Then we’d be back to the normal routine, beginning the pursuit of something else we perceived to be glorious—a good career, wealth, a repeat or even three-peat of our football glory. It’s a cycle that never stops.

This pattern of chasing after glory was the story of my (Roger’s) life. As an overachiever, the motivation behind my many activities was a deep longing for significance. I wanted to be someone, to make a difference, to be known. So I played sports, joined the band, got involved in as many extracurricular activities as I could. I even became a cheerleader.

All of us, in the recesses of our souls, desire glory. We want to be recognized. We strive for influence. We pursue the accomplishment of something truly significant. And we’ll do whatever we can to get this glory, to satisfy this longing. For some, this means gaining the notoriety of being the class clown or the valedictorian. Others might pursue the glory that accompanies athletic stardom or musical achievement. Still others might travel down the path of the bizarre or unique. The Guinness Book of World Records includes such ridiculous records as Most Live Rattlesnakes Held in the Mouth (10) and Longest Ear Hair (5.19 inches), and one can enter competitions for anything from air guitar to extreme ironing. And if these aren’t satisfying enough there’s always reality TV. We all want our fifteen minutes of fame (preferably more, thank you).

None of this is new. Way back in Genesis 11 the people of the day sought to make a name for themselves by building the Tower of Babel—staking their significance on human achievements. Yet this vanity ended in destruction and pain, as it always does. God will not be mocked, and zealously pursuing our own fame, our own worship if you will, is a mockery of His supreme glory.

This same drive led to mankind’s first sin—taking the forbidden fruit in a desire to “be like God” (Genesis 3:5). The
pride that envelops us is the same pride that smothered Adam and Eve. Yet this, as is true with any sin, is just a horribly warped and disfigured version of something good.

Ultimately the glory we long for, the pure desire standing behind our pride, is the glory of God. The philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” It’s an enormous black hole—the unquenchable longing for significance and human glory swallows all our activities, our gifts, our energy, and leaves nothing but emptiness behind.

No, human triumphs and adulation will never satisfy. Neither will the man-sized purposes we often get caught up in. Soldiers line battlefields, their hearts captured by the nobility and honor of standing in the gap for their country. Athletes risk severe injury, even death, to attain a legendary victory. These pursuits are captivating because they tap into the deep longing we all feel to be part of something greater than ourselves. There is indeed something magnificent about good triumphing over evil and emerging victorious against all odds. But even the most esteemed venues of glory that humanity has will eventually prove empty.

I’m sure you’ve experienced this to some degree. What have you pursued wholeheartedly, with the aim of making your life matter? Has it been the pursuit of a position or career? a lifelong goal or achievement? athletic, academic, or musical success? These may provide momentary glory and seem worthy of our lives, but as they get swallowed up by our inner black hole, they often just produce a longing for more. Have you experienced the disillusionment of repeated attempts at glory that only come up empty?

After I started to walk with Christ, my temporal quests for significance began to fade in light of God’s overarching purposes. The emptiness that came from pursuing glory for myself
through cheerleading, or the pursuit of a financially rewarding career, was replaced with a rich satisfaction in God. I began to experience the deep pleasure of knowing Him, as well as the deep fulfillment that comes from ministering to others. I finally realized that I was trying to fill the longing of my soul with things that couldn’t fill it. Experiencing the magnificence, splendor, wonder, and beauty of God—knowing Him and His attributes and character—would. As would investing myself in His glorious and global purposes.

As I recognized this, I knew that the many small, American-ized versions of the Christian life wouldn’t do. My Christian life slowly became centered around much more than being “good” and abstaining from sin, more than having a good job and a nice family, and more than attending the trendy church in the suburbs. These things aren’t wrong, just incomplete—settling for a less-than-biblical end goal of life. Life in the Christian sub-culture of America tends to have a dulling effect. The point of life gets lost and we forget that we’ve been created for so much more than what we live for, that we’re part of a story that’s been playing out for millennia.

Our little quests for glory are pathetic facsimiles of the ultimate longing of our hearts—the zealous pursuit of God’s glory. And the longing to be part of something greater than ourselves is ultimately only satisfied by entering into His redemptive purposes for the world, by embracing the scope of His glory. The stakes of this pursuit are far higher, the risks greater, the promised victory more triumphant.

God’s Grand Plan

In the penultimate episode of LOST, arguably television’s most expansive and interconnected series, Jacob, a sort of spiri-
tual leader on the mysterious island, tells another character that “we are very close to the end,” indicating the culmination of a storyline that’s been unfolding for six years on the screen and many centuries in the show’s mythology. These same words could easily be spoken to us, in our present setting. A far more expansive and interconnected story has been unfolding for thousands of years, beginning in the third chapter of the Bible; continuing throughout the long history of the nation of Israel; propelled forward in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; and racing toward conclusion through the Church. It’s God’s grand plan to redeem a people for Himself made up of individuals of every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Not long before ascending into Heaven, Jesus said these words to His disciples: “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). This statement, along with a few that are similar to it, has become known as the “Great Commission.” It very clearly indicates the role we—Jesus’ followers in our modern age—are to play. We’ll soon see that the Great Commission is more of a midpoint in the story, but as it directly pertains to us, it’s the place we need to start. Beginning in the first chapter of Acts, the Church has had this mission as its north star. It’s a clear-cut, finishable task; yet it remains incomplete.

Silent Night

My (Jason’s) favorite traditional church rite is the Christmas Eve service. I love singing songs that resonate with the richness of the gospel, voiced by believers for generations. I love the intimate
glow of thousands of tiny bulbs glistening on evergreens, accompanied by flickering candles that cast a playful light upon the walls and ceiling. The whole service is beautiful and full of meaning.

Traditionally, the Christmas Eve service ends with the singing of “Silent Night,” either a cappella or accompanied by a soft piano or guitar. As the song begins, the room is darkened and a single candle is lit, often held by the pastor. It’s then passed into the crowd, each one’s candle being lit by another. Row by row, candle by candle, this flickering light fills the church. From a wider angle it must be a beautiful sight. Slowly but surely a dim light grows, rippling across the room in a wave, overtaking the entire space, illuminating everything.

This picture is not unlike the gospel, which, of course, is the symbolism intended in the ceremony. Like the faint light of a single candle, God entered the world as a frail child, born in a stable. The brightest light in the universe condescended to a flicker, noticed only by a few dusty shepherds and three wise men. Then, starting with the earthly ministry of Jesus, the light is passed from one to another—His illuminating grace melting away darkness. After Jesus’ departure, the Holy Spirit came upon believers and abides as a permanent light within all true followers of Christ. As the gospel is shared and belief awakens in the heart of the hearer, another candle is lit.

By the time the last verse of “Silent Night” ends, everyone in the church is holding a burning candle. This is the ultimate picture of the work of the church—the light of the gospel spread to all the people of the world. Everyone will have the opportunity to hold a lit candle, because a believer in Jesus has offered the light from his own.

It seems like a straightforward mission: If every believer would just share the gospel with every person they’re in contact with the mission would be finished, right?
Not quite.

Even if we all faithfully shared the gospel within earshot, well over two billion people on earth would never glimpse the light of our outstretched candles.¹ It would be like an entire church building full of light, while next door another building is full of people standing in the darkness, each holding a candle they are powerless to light. If these people are to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, someone will have to leave their seat, walk out the door, and enter the adjacent building.

The Great Commission

It wasn’t until the early 1970s that the worldwide church began to get an accurate idea of just how far the gospel had gone and how much farther it still needed to go. It was obvious that the Church was close to finishing the Great Commission, but tracking missions progress was rather unscientific and few, if any, knew just how close it was. A conference in 1974, and one address in particular, changed all that.

The gathering was the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. The speaker was Ralph Winter. Many evangelicals had begun to assume that because the gospel had gone to nearly all political nations, the Great Commission was all but finished. Winter, however, pointed out that within each political nation there were often hundreds of distinct groups of people, isolated from one another by sizable barriers such as language, religion, tradition, prejudice, and culture. For example, the Church of South India at that time was comprised almost entirely of people from five social castes, but over one hundred separate castes existed within the region. The believers within the Church of South India could easily spread the gospel within their own castes through simple evangelism, but they were virtually inca-
pable of reaching other castes. The cultural barriers were far too
great. In order to reach the people of these castes, believers—
missionaries—would need to cross this cultural barrier. People
of a well-lit church would have to leave, candles in tow, and
walk across the street to one of the many darkened buildings
around them.²

This new understanding exploded into a wave of conversa-
tion, definition, and effort surrounding the world missions task
that lay before the worldwide Church. Winter, in the same ad-
dress, stated that the Church had “people blindness.” The word
translated “nation” in Matthew 28:19 is the Greek word \textit{ethnos},
meaning a race or tribe. It’s the word from which our term
ethnic is derived. There are some political nations, such as India
and China, that contain literally hundreds of ethnos.

The Great Commission, then, clearly refers to the making of
disciples within specific “people groups,” a term introduced in
1982 that identifies nations of the ethnos sort. This definition of
the term \textit{people group} was given at a world-missions conference
in Chicago:

\begin{quote}
A significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive
themselves to have a common affinity for one another be-
cause of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence,
occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of
these. For evangelistic purposes it is \textit{“the largest group within
which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without
encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.”}³
\end{quote}

Acts 1:8, one of several “Great Commission” verses (we’ll
look at all of them later), hints at this concept: “But 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.” Jesus’ disciples at the time were almost all Jewish. To them, Samaria (not to mention “the end of the earth”) was a vastly different culture. Barriers of understanding and acceptance certainly stood between Jews and Samaritans. Missions, not just evangelism, was needed to reach them.⁴

As we begin to understand this reality—the world contains literally thousands of people groups (by some accounts over 24,000)—we begin to recognize why we call Jesus’ command the Great Commission. The scale and scope is enormous.

And while incredible progress has been made, especially in the years since the Lausanne Congress, the Great Commission has not yet been fulfilled. Thousands of people groups remain outside the reach of the gospel. According to the website www.joshuaproject.org, 1,151 people groups are completely unengaged with church-planting activities, and nearly 7,000 are classified as “unreached” or “least-reached”.⁵ Some of these unreached people groups have a population of more than ten million, and many contain no known believers. So the Great Commission resoundingly applies to us today, and continues to give the Body of Christ a crystal-clear purpose.

This purpose is made even clearer by the fact that the mission will end. It’s a done deal. Revelation 5:9 says, “By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” These words are worship lyrics sung to Jesus, part of the glimpse of Heaven received by the Apostle John. And later, Revelation 7:9 gives the following picture: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.” Disciples of all nations will be made; these images of Heaven guarantee it. We’re combatants in a contest that ends in certain victory.
First Things First

Fulfilling the Great Commission is an intensely compelling vision. Many martyrs have given their lives to take the wondrous message of Jesus’ atoning death and victorious resurrection to thousands of unreached people groups, resulting in the salvation of millions. You and I are the fruit of believers who crossed a cultural barrier for the sake of the gospel. But as important and compelling as this vision is, the Great Commission is the means to a far more significant end.

The end, or purpose, is God’s glory. Every effort to take the gospel into another people group, every world congress to define the remaining task, every fervent prayer for salvation to come to the lost, every martyr’s heroic death—all of it is aimed squarely at bringing glory to our supremely great God. He is the eternally existing, perfectly good and righteous Creator who made the ultimate sacrifice to rescue His wayward creation, motivated by His un tarnished mercy and love. He is infinitely worthy. And He rightly desires His own glory above all things. John Piper says:

God is righteous. This means that he recognizes, welcomes, loves and upholds with infinite jealousy and energy what is infinitely valuable, namely, the worth of God. God’s righteous passion and delight is to display and uphold his infinitely valuable glory. This is not a vague theological conjecture. It flows inevitably from dozens of biblical texts that show God in the relentless pursuit of praise and honor from creation to consummation.⁶ (emphasis mine)

The word ‘dozens’ may actually sell short just how often the Bible references God’s desire for His own glory. Once we begin to look for it, it’s everywhere. Statements like “to the praise of
his glory” (Ephesians 1:14), “for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3, 106:8; Romans 1:5), “to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31, Philippians 2:11), and many, many others abound in Scripture. It’s an inescapable truth that God desires His glory above everything, and the purpose of all created things is to bring Him glory.

Not only is it our purpose, it’s also our greatest benefit and joy. God created each of us with a gaping hole, only to be filled with worship. Our hearts long for it, as seen in our innate desire to talk about how great something is. A great meal, movie, sporting event, or friend—we naturally want to share our delight in these things with others. We don’t truly enjoy something until we pour forth praise about it. Worship is a natural response.

As God pursues worship for Himself from all nations, He’s also seeking to save us from the emptiness of false worship. He loves us and desires to bring us to the only thing that can truly satisfy—Himself. His glory is the delight of nations, the source of our deepest satisfaction.

You can see this revealed in Psalm 96:

Declare his glory among the nations,
  his marvelous works among all the peoples!
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
  he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
  but the LORD made the heavens.

Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
  he will judge the peoples with equity.”
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice.…(Psalm 96:3–5, 10–11)
And with this we’re back to the Great Commission. The earth rejoices and is eternally satisfied by knowing and glorifying God, and submitting to His reign. The unreached peoples of the world live outside this joy, and our God zealously desires to receive their rightful worship and give them His all-satisfying joy.

John Piper puts it this way: “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.” The Great Commission is the means given by Jesus to bring God the greatest glory and the greatest worship from the most people, as He has purposed from the beginning of creation.

It is important for this to be our primary goal as we discuss seeing this mission finished. We must live for what’s truly worth living for—Jesus Himself, not the simple vision of finishing a task, no matter how godly and biblical it is. We must allow God to fill us with a vision of Himself. As He does, we’ll naturally be launched outward, our evangelism an overflow of our joy in Christ.

“Where Were You” Moments

In November 1989 the world watched as the Berlin Wall fell, symbolically ending the long Communist rule in Eastern Europe. For decades, the people of East and West Berlin had been physically separated by a long concrete wall, complete with guard towers and armed men instructed to shoot anyone attempting to cross it. What had been the most poignant reminder of the Cold War was being demolished, and images of Berliners chiseling off chunks of the wall and climbing atop it in celebration flooded the TV screens of the world. It was a momentous occasion, marking the end of an era. Eastern Europe had been locked in the cruel and repressive Soviet regime, and light was beginning to pierce holes in this blanket of darkness. Though the fall of Communism had already begun, and though it would still be years until its downfall in Europe would be complete,
the fall of the Berlin Wall is the image burned into the world’s collective conscience, representative of the end of the Cold War. It was a “where were you” moment—one of those events that caused everything else in the world to fade, and for people to remember by saying, “I remember exactly where I was when...”

Once or twice in a generation this type of event occurs. The assassination of John F. Kennedy was the “where were you” event for the Baby Boomers. The 9/11 attacks are seared into the memories of those of us old enough to remember them and understand their significance. The election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president of the United States is perhaps the most recent of these events. These moments define generations.

We believe we’re on the verge of a far more significant “where were you” event—one that all of history has been building toward. It’s one that’s been anticipated for generations and outweighs all others in true historic significance. It goes far beyond the breaking down of a physical wall, and instead destroys the towering spiritual walls separating God and men, not to mention men and men. By now it should be abundantly clear that we’re talking about the finishing of the Great Commission.

Like a relay race with thousands of legs, the baton of world evangelism and discipleship has been passed from generation to generation, each one carrying forward the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ in every nation. Some generations have taken the baton a great distance, others only inches, based on their obedience to Christ’s command and reliance upon His Spirit. Yet there will be one generation who will serve as the anchor leg, the one who will carry the baton across the finish line. We don’t know which generation will have that privilege, but we know it’s a certainty.

Every generation has reason to hope that theirs may be that
anchor leg, but each successive generation has greater reason for that hope than the last. And the hope that the current generation could be the very one who finishes the race is more than a pie-in-the-sky dream or a wishful longing; there is significant reason to believe that this generation, your generation—the teens, college students, and young adults of today—could be the ones who run the baton across the line.

We stand at a unique time in history. Never before has the worldwide Church had the combination of vision, technology, size, and momentum that it has now. How you and your generation choose to live will directly influence whether it is indeed your generation who is the anchor leg, or if it will pass to another. Will you succumb to a worldly and cultural vision and the trappings and comforts of prosperity? Or will you fully embrace the call to be ambassadors for Christ, to be His sent ones released to make disciples of all nations? Will you make the necessary sacrifices and choices? Will you live with your eyes and hearts focused on Jesus and on His eternal purposes?
In the 2008 film *Taken*, Liam Neeson plays retired spy and doting father Bryan Mills. His naive and rather impulsive daughter, Kim, had just moved to Paris for the summer and foolishly disclosed to a complete stranger that she and another teenage girl were living in an apartment by themselves. After some nefarious men take advantage of the situation, Kim frantically calls her Dad, spending most of the phone call hiding under the bed in terror. The men have captured her friend, and it’s not long before they find Kim as well. Bryan, not oblivious to the dangers of the world, knows exactly what is happening—these thugs are abducting his beloved daughter into the ruthless world of Europe’s underground sex-slave trade. Using the skills gained in his past occupation, Bryan stops at nothing to rescue his daughter, confronting both the vicious characters who control the sex-slave market and the corrupt cops who turn a blind eye to the injustice. He wields an iron fist of justice, destroying the wicked men who buy and sell people and singlehandedly bringing his daughter safely home. Kim is redeemed from her slavery by a just and loving father who
is determined to stop at nothing to save her.

Redemption. In a word, it describes the outcome of every story that grips our hearts. Whether it’s the redemption of a daughter from slavery, the redemption and salvation of an entire world (*Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*), the redemption of a particular character from personal brokenness (*Good Will Hunting* or *Slumdog Millionaire*), or a myriad of other takes on the theme, we’re irresistibly drawn to it. Hollywood keeps churning it out because it’s a can’t miss—we’ll always come back for more. The reason we do is because the story of redemption and the ultimate triumph of good over evil is the meta-narrative of life. It’s written on our hearts—somewhere deep inside we know we’re broken, and powerless against the consuming evil of the world. We know that things aren’t as they should be, and that someone—a Hero—needs to fix this, save us from our peril, and bring us a “happily ever after” resolution. The narratives we love connect to this longing and make our hearts leap. We can’t help but be enthralled.

The people of the world are hopelessly ensnared in slavery to sin, a bondage of our own making. We’re mortally wounded and in danger of eternal peril, rendered incapable of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever. In His great love and mercy, God has been on a rescue mission since the beginning of time to save us. Jesus is the centerpiece of the story, the Hero every heart longs for, but it began long before His act in the drama took center stage. Ralph Winter says that “The Kingdom Strikes Back” could easily be a good title for the Bible, with Genesis 1–11 as the story’s introduction and the remainder the unfolding plot line, the one we find ourselves living in.

So before looking forward, it will serve us well to take a brief look back through redemption history. Doing so will allow us to gain a greater perspective for the enormous scope of God’s redemptive plan and discover just how significant our moment in time might be.
Setting the Stage

The first hint that God would provide redemption from humanity’s bondage to sin and death comes in Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” This statement is part of God’s curse on the serpent in the immediate aftermath of Adam and Eve’s disobedience. Through this one act of rebellion all of humanity was stained with sin and completely separated from God. The “offspring” in Genesis 3:15 refers to Jesus Himself, pointing to His humanity, and the promise that He would crush the serpent’s head signifies the destruction of Satan’s evil reign over the world. The reference to the serpent striking the heel of this offspring clearly points to Jesus’ death—He would be struck down by the enemy, but through His sacrifice He’d pay the penalty for sin and make reconciliation with God available to all.

You see, from the very beginning the promise of redemption was present. After this devastating entrance of sin and the accompanying glimpse of deliverance, we get the rest of the introduction—and it ain’t pretty. Wickedness rapidly increases and becomes so pervasive that in Genesis 6:5 we read, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Judgment follows, in the form of a catastrophic worldwide flood. But rather than eradicating humanity completely, God mercifully spares one family. He is committed to His plan of establishing a kingdom of people devoted to Him in eternal love and worship, and rather than let Satan win, He remains loyal to His creation, even if it means the inevitability of corruption persists. And persist it does, as the smothering vines of wickedness continue to grow, leading to the infamous
episode of the Tower of Babel.

The reasoning behind God’s judgment at Babel has nothing to do with the tower itself, but with what it represents. We read that the people joined together to build a city with “a tower with its top in the heavens,” a monument to human ingenuity. Their heart is expressed in Genesis 11:4: “Let us make a name for ourselves.” It’s pride, pure and simple—the most undistilled form of wickedness. God responds by saying, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Genesis 11:6). So He confuses their language and scatters them across the earth, thwarting their organization and the exponentially increasing sin that accompanied it. It’s a merciful judgment, God protecting humanity from the destructive effects of wickedness by slowing its progress.

As we turn the page from Genesis 11 to Genesis 12, the stage is now set for the drama of redemption to fully unfold. A world that is stained with sin, occupied by wicked and rebellious men who dot the earth in small, scattered tribes—the beginnings of the nations and the diverse cultures soon to follow. The players in the drama are also in place: God, the good Creator of all things; the masses of humanity, separated from God and wrongly centered on themselves; the Evil One, given temporary dominion on earth, his every intention to stir up hatred toward God and pull men into even greater separation from Him; and the Promised Deliverer, who will eventually prove to be the only hope for mankind. A catalyzing action is not far behind.

The Rise and Fall of Israel

God, the obvious protagonist in the story, chose to begin
His rescue by raising up a nation distinctly His, set apart from the other nations of the world. His first step was to reach out to one man, Abram:

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. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1–3).

Abram would become Abraham, meaning “father of a multitude” (Genesis 17:5), a name that didn’t describe his current state, but his future legacy. His wife, Sarah, who was barren, and old enough to be your great-grandmother, miraculously conceived and gave birth to Isaac. He would become the father of Jacob, who would later be renamed Israel. Jacob had twelve male children—the beginnings of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, in the incubator of Egypt, Israel was birthed into a great multitude, a full-fledged nation. Five hundred years after God’s promise to Abram, a great nation had been made.

It’s clear even in Genesis 12 that God’s heart is for all people, and the explicit intention is for Israel to bless the nations around them through their relationship with God. He chose Abram—and by extension Israel—by grace, to be the people who were to display His glory to all the earth.

How were they to do this? Interestingly, geography has a lot to do with it.

After a dramatic deliverance from Egyptian slavery and forty years of wandering the Sinai peninsula, God led the nation of Israel into the land promised to them long before—Canaan. This
is no ordinary land, in spite of its small size. Only slightly larger than New Jersey, it’s bordered on the west by the Mediterranean and the east by the Jordan River, beyond which is the vast Arabian Desert. It’s the western end of the “Fertile Crescent,” a particularly fruitful curve of land that stretches to the Tigris and Euphrates Valleys in modern-day Iraq. Like a giant oasis in the inhospitable desert, the Fertile Crescent was the cradle that sustained life in that part of the ancient world.

But the land’s fertility isn’t the only thing that makes it significant. It also happens to be at the crossroads of three continents. Canaan is the only place in the world where this is true. Seeing as air travel was a far off fantasy, any overland passage between Africa and Europe or Asia was forced, like water through a funnel, through this thin strip of land. And for centuries the superpowers of the region were Egypt to the south, and the many nations (Assyria, Babylon, Persia) who controlled the Tigris-Euphrates basin to the northeast. Going through the desert was all but impossible, and going by sea was treacherous, so Canaan was home to several ancient trade routes. The nations had to pass through. It was not coincidence that God chose this land for His people. Ezekiel 5:5 says, “Thus says the Lord GOD: This is Jerusalem. I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her.” As Rick James puts it:

Consider the genius of the plan. After the tower of Babel, the world had been tribalized: hundreds of little nation-states comprised of clans and families, each in a state of rebellion, autonomous of God. No longer would a single man, woman, or family provide a sufficient witness. What was needed was a lighthouse, not a light: a beacon with sufficient wattage to illuminate the distant, ever-sprawling nations. What was needed was a nation, a godly
super-power to draw all nations back to God.\textsuperscript{10}

And so Israel was given the land of Canaan, not so that they could bunker down and isolate themselves from the world, but so that they could illuminate the glory of God to its many wayward nations.

As we stated previously, once you see how much the Bible reveals God’s desire for His glory, it’s everywhere. It’s also true that once you become aware of God’s intention to bless all nations through Israel, the verses highlighting this in the Old Testament start jumping off the pages. Consider a few (emphasis mine):

For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, \textit{so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty}, that you may fear the LORD your God forever (Joshua 4:23–24).

\textit{All the ends of the earth} shall remember and turn to the LORD, and \textit{all the families of the nations} shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and \textit{he rules over the nations} (Psalm 22:27–28).

\textit{And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD}, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; \textit{for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples} (Isaiah 56:6–7).
Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, “Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going.” Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you” (Zechariah 8:20–23).

While Israel was not without some success in this calling, it was for the most part an epic failure. The story of Jonah is the clearest example of this. It’s a fairly familiar one. Jonah is called by God to go to Nineveh (a “wretched hive of scum and villainy,” to put it in Star Wars parlance) and warn them of God’s impending judgment should they not repent. Jonah refuses and runs, ending up in the digestive tract of a “great fish,” is vomited up after a prayer of repentance, and is called again to go. This time he does, and a great revival takes place, but after Jonah delivers his message we see his true colors on display. He’s disgusted, as he knows God’s character: He will be gracious and merciful if Nineveh repents. The Lord responds to Jonah’s anger by showing His heart, and the heart that should have characterized His people as well: “And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11). The book closes on this uncomfortable note, begging Israel (and us) to wrestle with the question.

Jonah’s attitude, when compared with the Lord’s, shows just how far Israel had run from the course God had set. Instead of compassion for the wayward nations, they felt pride in their
position, as though they’d earned it. They abhorred the nations around them rather than just hating their practices, and in their growing hatred they wanted God to bring down the hammer. They became like a bloodthirsty crowd at a gladiator match, frothing at the mouth for the emperor to give the thumbs down sign. When the thumbs up came instead, they were incensed. “How could God show favor to these wicked people? This is outrageous!” They became so focused on themselves and their own blessing that they forgot why it was given. This attitude is prevalent throughout the history of Israel. Rick James sums it up like this: “Israel, ceasing to be a channel of God’s grace, was now a roadblock to the mission and a spoiler of the plot.”

A lot more can be said about the theme of redemption in the Old Testament, and the actions God undertakes in the drama: the sacrificial system, the many words of the prophets promising the Messiah and calling Israel to repentance, the return of the Israelites from Babylonian exile, etc. The point is this: God clearly displays His heart for all nations throughout the Old Testament, and clearly had given Israel a commission to share Him with the nations around them. God was committed to carrying this mission forward, even in spite of the refusal of His people to join Him. The redemption of the nations was underway, and the drama would soon heighten, as the long-promised Deliverer would finally take center stage, ushering in a new era in redemptive history.

**An Unexpected Twist in the Story**

Israel’s Messiah came literally out of nowhere. Jesus arrives in the story in the unlikeliest of ways: born to a virgin mother in a dank stable in the tiny hillside village of Bethlehem. From this nondescript beginning He spends much of His childhood in the
backwater Galilean town of Nazareth, serving as a carpenter’s apprentice to His dad. But when he leaves this homely life behind to pursue His earthly ministry, He bursts onto the cultural scene like the Beatles in 1960s America.

Crowds flock to Him in hopes of hearing his magnetic teaching or becoming a benefactor of His miraculous healing. The nation buzzes with chatter over who He might be. Some say prophet, others say one of the greatest teachers ever to grace Israel, and yet others dare to think that He might be the one—the Messiah, the One they’ve all been waiting for. Could this Jesus be the one the prophets foretold? Could we be privy to Israel’s deliverance?

Amid this growing frenzy it’s easy to understand why most, if not all, of His followers—and the many bystanders off to the side watching and hoping—thought that they were witnessing the dramatic conclusion of God’s great rescue operation. Jesus was mistakenly considered a political figure, One who would break Israel free from the Romans—the latest in a long line of conquering and oppressing kingdoms. This is not at all surprising, considering what we just saw about the mentality of Israel toward their neighbors. Failure to grasp their role as a blessing to the nations led to a failure to recognize the role of their Messiah. And so the Deliverer became a political figure who would finally unshackle Israel from the hated nations holding them captive, placing them on their rightful pedestal while God’s judgment rained down upon the ungodly. They missed the point completely, and the tension mounted as Jesus confronted the Jewish religious leaders, challenging them and the people to repent and embrace the true kingdom of God—one that would include even Gentiles. But, apart from a small remnant, repentance was nowhere to be found.

Israel’s failure to respond put them in a precarious position.
Their last chance—God Himself gracing their nation, calling them to turn and embrace His original design for them—was passing them by. And so Jesus’ ministry took on the purpose of transferring responsibility from Israel to a new entity, the Church.

We see foreshadowing of this throughout the ministry of Jesus, particularly in the parables He shares within earshot of the Jewish spiritual leaders. Matthew 21:33–43 is a good example:

“Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.’”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:”

“‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”
Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”

The metaphor here isn’t hard to discern. The farmers in the vineyard represent Israel, commissioned to bear fruit—not the least of which was worshippers of God from all nations. Their consistent failure in this endeavor would result in their eviction. The chief priests and elders speak their own sentence when they say that the wicked farmers should be judged and removed, and the vineyard rented out to other tenants. And so, as the privilege of being God’s set-apart nation would pass Israel by, so would the responsibilities of it. Ralph Winter said, “Jesus did not only come to give the Great Commission but also in a sense to take it away.”

The Church, a new Israel of sorts, becomes the recipient of this exchange, and the responsibility of bringing people of all nations to fear and follow God is still binding. The Church is expected to produce fruit.

This exchange of responsibility is not the main purpose of Jesus’ ministry, but it is an important one. Primary to Jesus’ mission was, of course, sacrificial atonement for the sin of humanity, thus securing eternal salvation for all who will believe in Him. His death and resurrection make reconciliation with God possible for people of all nations. It is the central event of history, the basis of our faith and the reason for our hope.

The Mission Goes Back into the Hands of Men

Even after Jesus’ death and resurrection, His followers still don’t quite get what is happening. Let’s face it—until they receive the Holy Spirit, the twelve disciples are a bit slow. We see this in Acts 1:6. The disciples, gathered with Jesus on what would be the last time they’d see him with earthly eyes, ask,
“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Graciously, Jesus doesn’t sigh or slap His forehead, instead He gently re-orient their minds to the plot that had proven to be so easy to forget. He says, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But 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 1:7–8).

God desires for His people to carry out their divinely given responsibility of expanding His Kingdom and propagating His salvation and joy. He leaves the scene, committed to using us in His purpose of winning the nations to Himself. His people are His primary plan, as they have always been.

This passage in Acts is one of five Great-Commission statements recorded in the New Testament. The others are as follows, one each from the four Gospels:

And Jesus came and said to them, “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).

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15–16).

Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and
forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:46–49).

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:21–23).

With these words, Jesus sends His people out to accomplish the same purpose God had given to Israel long before. The mission goes back into the hands of men, but it comes with an important distinction.

Israel was a political nation existing in a physical place, but the Church is a spiritual entity, existing wherever someone proclaims the name of Jesus. Instead of God’s presence resting in a physical temple in Jerusalem, He abides in us, His people, the new temple of God (2 Corinthians 6:16). No longer is geography a key missions strategy. And so we are commanded to go; we are sent outward. As we do, we carry God’s very presence with us. He is with us always.

What happens next in this epic narrative deserves its own chapter. To the Church age we turn, where we will see that the mission has, even through some significant sputters, accelerated rapidly and is drawing tantalizingly close to its finish.
Moviemakers love sequels. This is primarily because they love money, and a sequel comes with an emotionally invested audience willing to drop ten bucks to enter into a story and characters they’ve grown to know and love. It’s also a chance to cash in on yet another Happy Meal marketing campaign and reap the rewards of selling poorly made plastic action figures and other types of “movie merchandise” we gullible moviegoers will invariably buy. Shrewd ones, we capitalists are.

The typical sequel manages to generate a new, self-sustaining plot line while carrying forward the story arc that began in the first movie. It is new drama on the way to a unified conclusion. New characters are introduced, new settings appear, and new antagonists (or resurrected old ones) enter the story to create conflict and heighten tension. Think of The Two Towers, the second film in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. We meet Gollum, who becomes a new obstacle among the many standing in the way of Frodo chucking the dastardly One Ring into the far-off volcano. We also travel to Rohan, meeting likable characters