

THE

FINISHERS

**COMPLETING THE MISSION OF CHRIST
IN YOUR GENERATION**

BY

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AND

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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*

one

THE END

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 threepeat 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, Americanized 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 subculture 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 conversation, definition, and effort surrounding the world missions task that lay before the worldwide Church. Winter, in the same address, stated that the Church had “people blindness.” The word translated “nation” in Matthew 28:19 is the Greek word *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 *people group* was given at a world-missions conference in Chicago:

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

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 untarnished 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?