

THE CHALLENGES OF THE MISSION

**A Sermon Series
Promoting World Missions**

**By
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Series Introduction

This four-part sermon series is based on the narrative concerning the conversion of Cornelius at Caesarea, found in Acts 10:1-11:18. This passage was chosen to illustrate the various challenges and needs involved in sharing the Gospel with new audiences that are beyond our normal focus and realm of influence.

REACHING BEYOND OUR COMFORT ZONE

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Selected verses from Acts 10:1-48¹

Warren Wiersbe writes, “Some years ago, a very good friend of mine, Dr. E. Myers Harrison, gave a missionary message that I cannot forget. It was to a small group of people, but I will never forget the sermon. Dr. Harrison is now at home with the Lord, but he was a great servant of God and a great missionary statesman. He said that each of us as Christians must hear what God has to say. There is the command from above: ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature’ (Mark 16:15). Have you heard that?

I’ve heard people say, ‘But God wants our church to be different. We’re not supposed to have a missionary program.’ I don’t believe that. I believe the command from above is given to every Christian and to every assembly that God has raised up. Then there is the cry from beneath. Remember the rich man who died and woke up in hell and begged for someone to go and tell his brothers? (see Luke 16). ‘I pray thee, therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house (for I have five brethren), that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment’ (vv. 27,28). There is the cry from beneath. If you and I could hear the cries of people in a lost eternity right now, we’d realize how important it is to get the Gospel out. There’s the command from above. Have you heard it? There’s the cry from beneath. Have you heard it?

Then, according to Dr. Harrison, there is the call from without. Acts 16:9 says, ‘Come over into Macedonia, and help us.’ People around us are saying, ‘Please come to help us!’ So much money, time and energy is being spent on routine church matters in America when there is a whole world to reach for Christ! We face so many open doors!”²

This remains a great challenge to the church each and every day. Beyond the comfort zone of many, the Holy Spirit is at work, both in the hearts of the hungry and in the hearts of those who are willing to take the message. But the question remains: when will we go beyond our comfort zone in our giving, in our work, in our prayer and in our concern for other peoples? There are at least two compelling *reasons* for us to reach beyond our comfort zone.

¹ All scripture used in this series is from the New International Version

² W. Wiersbe, Something Happens When Churches Pray, pp.102-3.

I. GOD IS WORKING IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO ARE SPIRITUALLY HUNGRY (vv. 1-8).

A. The Holy Spirit is leading many on the path to an encounter with Jesus Christ.

“According to *Baptist Press*, the church in Africa adds 6 million new Christians every year. There are more than 100 million evangelicals, and one out of five Africans claims to be a follower of Christ.”³

A. The Holy Spirit is setting the stage for encounters that will produce eternal results.

I. GOD IS WORKING IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO ARE WILLING TO GO (vv. 9-19).

A. The Spirit will lead those who will *accept* that they are not favored by God above others.

B. The Spirit will send those who will accept God’s love for all.

Acts 10:34-35 reads, “Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.’” NIV

A. The Spirit will work through those who will obey His voice.

Acts 10:44-48 tells us that, “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

³ *MinistryToolBox*, Oct 17, 2001

Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days." NIV

Virtually every mission agency operating around the globe is desperate for more workers. This raises the question: "Why are there so few workers available for such an enormous task?"

The answers are many. A lack of vision keeps the church from sending out workers. This, coupled with a lack of prayer, means that the church is unable to respond to both the need and opportunity the mission field presents.

Legalism is also a factor. The church sometimes gets hung up on issues it thinks are important but which amount to manmade rules that stifle rather than encourage workers to respond to the call. So-called "distinctives" become more important than reaching the lost.

Sometimes negative reporting influences our perception of missionary work. Gossip and rumors fly around, and discouraging news deflates the spirit, causing the church to forget about discernment, grace, and forgiveness.

Finally, the church has strayed from biblical truths and has compromised with falsehood. The error of universalism has crept into evangelical circles, and such a heresy removes the motivation for mission. Biblical ignorance seems to be rising, and it is a cause for great concern.

Satan is still active, and the church must fall to her knees until it can recognize that the harvest is upon us and laborers are needed now more than ever.⁴

CONCLUSION

There is no time for delay or hesitation in our obedience to the Great Commission—lives and souls are at stake.

Alila stood on the beach holding her tiny infant son close to her heart. Tears welled in her eyes as she began slowly walking toward the river's edge. She stepped into the water, silently making her way out until she was waist deep, the water gently lapping at the sleeping baby's feet. She stood there for a long time holding the child tightly as she stared out across the river. Then all of a sudden in one quick movement she threw the six month old baby to his watery death.

Native missionary M.V. Varghese often witnesses among the crowds who gather at the Ganges. It was he who came upon Alila that day kneeling in the sand crying uncontrollably and beating her breast. With compassion he knelt down next to her and

⁴ "Interview" by George Verwer. *Pulse*, Sep 1, 2000 (Vol 35, No 17). Page 5.

asked her what was wrong. Through he sobs she told him, "The problems in my home are too many and my sins are heavy on my heart, so I offered the best I have to the goddess Ganges, my first born son." Brother Varghese's heart ached for the desperate woman. As she wept he gently began to tell her about the love of Jesus and that through Him her sins could be forgiven. She looked at him strangely. "I have never heard that before," she replied through her tears. "Why couldn't you have come thirty minutes earlier? If you did, my child would not have had to die."

Each year millions of people come to the holy Indian city of Hardwar to bathe in the River Ganges. These multitudes come believing this Hindu ritual will wash their sins away. For many people like Alila, missionaries are arriving too late, simply because there aren't enough of these faithful brothers and sisters on the mission field. ⁵

We have all the reasons that we need to make the decision to reach out to those in our world. Even if we do not go ourselves, we still have a mandate to send those who are ready to go into the harvest field of world missions.

⁵ *Christianity Today*, 1993.

DISPELLING FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

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Text: Acts 10:9-19; 27-28

It's ironic that the world is more divided than ever in a time when more and more is heard about world unity and the world "community." There are many reasons for such division, such as a lack of understanding or a lack of communications among nations which inevitably lead to false assumptions. Yet, the body of Christ is called to go beyond all the false assumptions that are often based on human prejudice and only lead to division among people of different nations and hinder the churches efforts in World Missions.

It's been said that, "A different twist on John 3:16 forces us to reevaluate our true commitment to international missions. "For God so loved the United States that he gave his only begotten Son . . ." The same effect can be felt by doing this substitution with the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19."⁶

Too often, under the guise of national pride, which is not necessarily wrong, we have seen that some people have tried to hide their beliefs that Americans are more special in the sight of God than are other nations. These false assumptions include several false beliefs.

I. THERE IS A GOODNESS THAT MY PEOPLE POSSESS THAT OTHERS LACK (vv. 13-15).

A. Innate human goodness does not exist in anyone or any race.

A. True purity and goodness is a gift from God to all who call upon Him.

⁶ "Rediscovering the Church: Embracing or Excluding People," Dieter Zander, Seeds Tape Ministry, Feb. 21, 1996

I. THERE IS A RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT MY PEOPLE POSSESS THAT OTHERS LACK (vv. 28-29).

A. No one is devoid of the guilt of sin without faith in Jesus Christ.

A. The same faith that has saved so many millions of Americans is in the heart of the unconverted in other countries.

I. THERE IS A LOVE FOR MY PEOPLE THAT OTHERS HAVE NOT BEEN OFFERED (vv. 34-35).

A. Humanity—not America—is the object and recipient of God’s love.

B. The cross of Christ is God’s offer of love for all humanity.

CONCLUSION

All we need to do is to look at the work God is doing in the hearts of others—regardless of where they may live in this world or what their station in life may be.

Pastor Jack Hinton had the opportunity of leading music for a worship service in a leper colony on the island of Tobago. There was time for one more song so he asked for a request. A woman who had been facing away from the pulpit turned toward him and raised a fingerless hand. The woman’s nose and ears were entirely gone, and most of her lips had rotted away. Nonetheless, she asked if they could sing *Count Your Many Blessings*. Pastor Hinton was overcome with emotion and had to leave the service. A team member followed him out and said, “Jack, I guess you’ll never be able to sing that song again.” The pastor replied, “Yes I will, but I’ll never sing it the same way again.”⁷

All false *objections* are rendered meaningless in the face of what God’s love can do in the human heart.

⁷ Pastor’s Update on Foreign Missions, May 1996, p. 4

THE UNSTOPPABLE REVIVAL

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Text: Acts 11:1-18

Many are unaware. Some are even resistant to the idea. Yet, the Holy Spirit is moving over the whole earth in a great wave of revival without respect to geographical boundaries or people of different race. America is no longer the center of the Christian world. In fact, “now only 37% of Christians worldwide are residents of the developed Western nations.”⁸

Those in Jerusalem had to accept the undeniable *truths* of God’s work among the Gentiles and either chose to resist it or to become a part of what God was doing. Our choice is similar. We can either ignore what God is doing or we can become a part of it!

I. WHAT YOU ARE HEARING IS TRUE (vv. 1-3).

A. The world is hearing and receiving the Word of God (v. 1).

“During the last five years of the 1990's, Christianity grew approximately 8%. An estimated 165,000 people come to know Christ every day. At this current rate, nearly half the world's population will be Christian in only a few years.”⁹

⁸ *Christianity Today*, Feb 5, 2001 (page 136)

⁹ *Net Results*, Aug 2000 (page 20)

A. God is sending us to those outside our faith (vv. 2-3).

Much of the world that we are trying to reach for Christ already holds to another religion, yet we must take the Gospel to them somehow.

Luis Palau, in his sermon, "*Go to the Ends of the Earth*" said, "My family and team have gone to over sixty countries declaring the glory of God. When I first went to the Muslim-, Hindu-, and Buddhist-majority nations, I trembled to do the right thing for the glory of God. I talked to a Hindu guru years ago, and he said, 'Luis, don't ever use the Western style of arguing, trying to show your religion is better than my religion or your Savior is superior. Just simply tell who Jesus is. Tell of his character. Tell what he's like. Let people do the comparing for themselves.' That was great advice."¹⁰

I. WHAT GOD WANTS FOR US HE WANTS FOR ALL (vv. 4-14).

A. The blood of Jesus was shed to cleanse all of humanity (vv. 4-14).

Pastor and author Anthony Evans writes, "Racism isn't a bad habit; it's not a mistake; it's a sin. The answer is not sociology; it's theology."¹¹

A. The plan of God is salvation for whoever calls upon His name (v. 14).

I. WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US, HE WILL DO FOR ALL (vv. 15-17).

A. God has given His Holy Spirit for all to receive (vv. 15-16).

The same Holy Spirit that fills our hearts fills the heart of every convert.

A Fuller Theological Seminary survey of some 600 converts from Islam to

¹⁰ Luis Palau, "Go to the Ends of the Earth," Preaching Today, Tape No. 124.

¹¹ Leadership, Vol. 17, no. 3.

Christianity has yielded interesting insights as to how God is working among Muslims. In their responses, Muslim converts listed a number of factors, many of them complementary, that led to their decision for Christ. Below are just a few.

•**Confidence of salvation.** While the Koran, Islam's holy scriptures, states that Muslims who have faith and who do good deeds will inherit heaven, it also indicates that Allah can be capricious in choosing who to forgive. Many converts stated that their main attraction to Christ was the assurance of salvation that offers.

•**Dreams and visions.** Dreams and visions don't play a large part in conversions among Westerners, but God's convicting use of dreams is a recognized trend among Muslim converts. One woman had a dream in which God directed her to go to a Christian woman who would teach her the truth. Another man had a vision of two men, one a devout Muslim suffering in hell, the other a poor Christian who could not afford to give alms, in heaven. A voice explained that the difference was the Christian's faith in Jesus.

•**Love.** The attractiveness of love (from God personally as well as through His people) was critical in at least half of the survey respondents' decision for Christ. For these men and women, rigorous submission to God was replaced by adoration as a response to God's unconditional love.

•**Relationship with God.** To Muslims, Allah is universal and distant. For 10% of Muslim converts, the ability to have an actual relationship with God was the strongest factor in their coming to Christ.¹²

A. The one who opposes God's gift to the world opposes God Himself (v. 17).

Who will resist God?

CONCLUSION

Verse 18 tells us that, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'"

Their understanding was clear. Accept His work. Be a part of His work.

In this touching story from Love is a Costly Thing by Dick Hillis, we see just how important it is to be a part of God's work.

She was lying on the ground. In her arms she held a tiny baby girl. As I put a

¹² "Why I chose Jesus" by Dudley Woodberry and Russell Shubin. *Mission Frontiers*, Mar 2001 (Vol 23, No 1). Pages 28-33.

cooked sweet potato into her outstretched hand, I wondered if she would live until morning. Her strength was almost gone, but her tired eyes acknowledged my gift. The sweet potato could help so little -- but it was all I had.

Taking a bite she chewed it carefully. Then, placing her mouth over her baby's mouth, she forced the soft warm food into the tiny throat. Although the mother was starving, she used the entire potato to keep her baby alive.

Exhausted from her effort, she dropped her head on the ground and closed her eyes. In a few minutes the baby was asleep. I later learned that during the night the mother's heart stopped, but her little girl lived. Love is a costly thing.

God in His love for us (and for a lost world) "spared not His own Son" to tell the world of His love. Love is costly, but we must tell the world at any cost. Such love is costly. It costs parents and sons and daughters. It costs the missionary life itself. In his love for Christ the missionary must give up all to make the Savior known. If you will let your love for Christ, cost you something, the great advance will be made together. ¹³

Remember, love is a costly thing. Do you love enough? If you and I do, you and I can be a part of the unstoppable revival sweeping across the earth today!

TRAILBLAZERS FOR THE KINGDOM

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Text: Acts 11:19-24

Kennon Callahan said, "The church is never at its best in a time of social conformity. It becomes lazy and bloated and bureaucratic. It is when on a mission field that the church is at its blazing best."¹⁴

Americans give \$700 million per year to mission agencies. However, they pay as much for pet food every 52 days. A person must overeat by at least \$1.50 worth of food per month to maintain one excess pound of flesh. Yet \$1.50 per month is more than what 90 percent of all Christians in America give to missions.

If the average missions supporter is only five pounds overweight, it means he spends (to his own hurt) at least five times as much as he gives for missions. If he were to choose simple food (as well as not overeat), he could give ten times as much as he does to

¹³ Hillis, Dick. Love is a costly thing

¹⁴ Kennon Callahan (quoted in *Explorer*, Jly 31, 2000,)

missions and not modify his standard of living in any other way!¹⁵

The question to the church is clear. What will we do to put men and women on the mission field? There are many new lands and many new cultures into which Christian Missionaries are seeking to go. They are ready to blaze new trails if we will send them and help them to stay.

Note the *traits* of today's true trailblazers.

I. TODAY'S TRAILBLAZERS ARE THOSE WHO WILL GO WHERE OTHERS WILL NOT (vv. 19-21).

A. The good news compels us to go to new peoples and lands.

David V. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson write, "In our opinion, the greatest enemy of world evangelization is Christian rhetoric--the continual rhetorizing (playing the orator), discussing, arguing, the endless talking and preaching about evangelizing the world, without any of the crucial implementation."¹⁶

Everyone may not have the call or the opportunity to go, but everyone has the opportunity to be involved.

B. God's blessings are upon those who will go.

It has been said that, "It is our privilege to have world evangelism as a passion, not our responsibility to have as a burden."¹⁷

I. TODAY'S TRAILBLAZERS ARE THOSE WHO CAN SEE BEYOND PREVIOUS ASSUMPTIONS (vv. 22-24)

A. The grace of God knows no limits (vv. 22-23a).

¹⁵ Ralph Winter of the William Carey Library, 1705 North Serra Bonita Avenue, Pasadena, CA 91104, in *Leadership*, IV,4,p. 64.

¹⁶ David V. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson in *Our Globe and How to Reach It*. Christianity Today, Vol. 37, no. 13.

¹⁷ Attributed to Mary Nordstrom; quoted by Gary Ginter in a sermon. Christianity Today, Vol. 38, no. 6.

After the Soviets left Mongolia in 1990, the doors to the country opened once again to the rest of the world. Relief workers poured into its capital, Ulanbaatar, to such an extent that today almost 1,200 non-government organizations (NGOs) are working among its people.

One of the largest is Joint Christian Services (JCS) which operates a consortium of relief agencies. Their work is sorely needed.

When Mongolia gained its independence after the Soviet collapse, life got harder, not better. The price of a loaf of bread shot up 250%. Unemployment went to 60%. Social problems grew. There are an estimated 4,000 children who live on the streets.

The staff of the JCS are very open about their faith, but they exist as a support agency, not a church-planting organization. They get involved in health, education, business, and agriculture projects that help the people survive and make a decent living.

For example, they have put together the Vet Net program that trains veterinarians to help take care of the farm animals so crucial to the lives of many Mongolians. They run a small model dairy that can be reproduced in small farm settings.

Most of the people are Buddhists or shamanists. However, the church is getting stronger. One JCS leader is convinced that if they were to pull out now, the church would survive. There are over 60 groups meeting now, and two of the largest churches have 250 attending on Sundays.

Their faith has been supported by the publication of the Bible. The first New Testament took 17 years to get into print and appeared in 1990. In 2000, the entire Bible was published and 10,000 copies sold out on the first day.

A country once closed to the witness of the gospel is now eager to hear. The results are heartening.¹⁸

A. We are the brothers and sisters of all who are true to Christ (v.23b).

Will we stand with them?

CONCLUSION

Verse 24 reads, "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." NIV

The *traits* revealed through our hearts will determine if we will be a trailblazer.

Judy Anderson, whose husband is the West Africa Director of the World Relief

¹⁸ "Mongolia: blue skies, rugged lives" by Debbie Meroff. *Pulse*, Aug 17, 2001 (Vol 36, No 16). Pages 1-2+.

Corporation, grew up as the daughter of missionaries in Zaire. As a little girl, she went to a day-long rally celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of Christian missionaries coming to that part of Zaire.

After a full day of long speeches and music, an old man came before the crowd and insisted that he be allowed to speak. He said he soon would die, and that he alone had some important information. If he did not speak, that information would go with him to his grave.

He explained that when Christian missionaries came a hundred years before, his people thought the missionaries were strange and their message unusual. The tribal leaders decided to test the missionaries by slowly poisoning them to death. Over a period of months and years, missionary children died one by one.

Then the old man said, "It was as we watched how they died that we decided we wanted to live as Christians." That story had gone untold for one hundred years. Those who died painful, strange deaths never knew why they were dying or what the impact of their lives and deaths would be. They stayed because they trusted Jesus Christ. ¹⁹

There are men and women willing to go, and if necessary, to die. They are blazing new trails and striving to be faithful until the end. Can we not join with them in some way?

¹⁹ Leith Anderson, Eden Prairie, Minnesota . Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 2.