


Chapter 5

OUR HERITAGE

A Brief Summary of World Missions Throughout the Ages

Throughout our world's history, God has orchestrated the events of time to accomplish His plan for mankind. The following historical overview shows God's heart for world missions and His purpose in bringing His message of salvation to the very ends of the earth.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND ISRAEL

Since the creation of the world and Adam and Eve's first sin, God has prepared the way for mankind to be saved.

For a thousand years, people multiplied on the earth. About 3000 B.C., a man named Noah was born who alone was righteous before God. Because of the terrible wickedness of that time (about 2348 B.C.) God destroyed the entire earth with a flood, sparing only Noah and his family, and the animals on the great ark.

Many years later (2249 B.C. or earlier) mankind had again increased on the earth—both in numbers, and in wickedness. While the people were building the mighty Tower of Babel, God saw that it was not good for all of mankind to be united, so He confused their languages. As people spread to different areas of the earth, individual nationalities, languages and customs began to develop.

About 2000 B.C., God chose a man named Abraham to be the father of a chosen people, through whom "*all the nations of the earth will be blessed*" (Gen. 28:14). Through his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob (or "Israel"), the nation of Israel was born, and through his son Ishmael, came the Arab race, and the Islamic people today.

For hundreds of years, the people of Israel lived and multiplied in the land of Goshen during the time of the great Egyptian civilization. Later, they became the slaves of Egypt until the great Exodus led by Moses. (Estimated dates of Israel in Egypt vary from 1715 B.C. to between 1498 and 1200 B.C.)

Through Moses, God established His law and the importance of the blood sacrifice. These laws, rituals, and sacrifices could not take away man's sins, only "cover" them, and demonstrate man's great need for a Savior.

After the Israelites refused to believe Joshua and Caleb's reports of the promised land and by faith possess it, God condemned them to wander forty years. After this time the people of Israel finally entered into their promised land, where they were led by judges, and then kings, reaching the height of their kingdom during the reign of King David and his son, King Solomon. Prophets were raised up to speak God's word, as well as to point the way to the coming Messiah.

THE GREAT EMPIRES

Just as specifically prophesied by men of God, many great empires were established and destroyed—from Babylon (625-539 B.C.) to Persia (539-330 B.C.) to Greece and Alexander the Great (330-323 B.C.) and the Great Roman Empire—and God's perfect time for the Savior's birth. The stage was set, and everything was in place: international roads, communications, well established sea routes, commonly used Greek language; Israel's bondage had her crying out for the Messiah louder than ever before.

THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST

At this perfect time in history, God chose to send His only Son down to earth to make a way for man to be saved. In an obscure little town called Bethlehem, in the ancient city of David, Jesus Christ was born. Heavenly angels announced His birth to simple shepherds, declaring that finally there was news of *"peace on earth, good will toward men."* Later, wise men from the East came to pay homage to the newborn king. Even His birth declared that His coming was for all mankind: for both Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, near and far.

The life of Jesus Christ was different than any other life in history. He healed the sick, raised the dead, performed many mighty miracles, and taught many about the kingdom of God. Jesus Christ lived His entire life perfectly, completely without sin. Yet He allowed Himself to be arrested, beaten, and crucified on a cross to pay the death penalty for man's sins. At the age of thirty-three, Jesus Christ died and was buried in a tomb. Three days later, He rose from the dead and appeared unto many of His followers. After forty days, Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving us with these last words, known as the Great Commission:

"Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15)

EARLY CHURCH MISSIONS

After Christ's ascension into heaven and the establishment of the church, God continued to work out His plan of redemption.

Through both the mission outreaches of the early disciples—and dispersion due to terrible persecution—God's message of salvation began to spread throughout the world.

Ironically, it was the political acceptance of Christianity (when Constantine made Christianity legal in A.D. 313, and later the official and only religion in A.D. 375) that brought the world into the Dark Ages. By the time of Emperor Theodosius I (A.D. 379-395) the empire had begun to persecute all other religions, forcing everyone to become a "Christian."

MEDIEVAL EUROPE AND THE DARK AGES

For over a thousand years (A.D. 400-1500) Christianity was distorted into merely a religion and a political tool. Popes and leaders began to use their religious power to gain wealth and military victory. Huge groups of people were baptized en mass—without any true conversion—while the Holy Bible was restricted to isolated groups of monks and friars. Religion was at the center of this Medieval age, yet the true light of the Gospel was so dim it was almost extinguished.

During this time, German Barbarians and Viking invaders from the north came in to conquer Europe, and as a result, were also influenced by this religious Christianity.

THE CRUSADES AND THE HOLY WARS

Years later, the ancestors of these Europeans launched the Great Crusades (from the late tenth to the fifteenth centuries) to win back the land of Israel from the conquering Muslims (who had declared their own Holy War or "Jihad").

Through the use of force, the Christian religion spread into the Middle East, though only temporarily. Later, other "Christian" warriors (such as the Teutonic Knights) actually used violence and military force to

“convert” the heathen to Christianity. This type of religious conquest has led to a distorted view of Christian missions that has negatively impacted the world to this day.

ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSIONS

The Roman Catholic church continued to spread during this time into places such as India and Africa, through the missionary efforts of Boniface, Saint Francis of Assisi, Xavier and others.

Throughout time, there has always been a remnant of people who have kept God’s word and His Gospel alive. Even through the Dark Ages, there were those who had a true belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Many worked diligently in isolation to preserve and hand-copy the Holy Scriptures, while other believers were persecuted and even martyred for their faith. Yet, God’s kingdom could not be destroyed!

THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

It was during the Renaissance and Reformation (in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) when the true light of the Gospel was rekindled. Through men like Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, there was again an emphasis on salvation by faith. Others, such as John Calvin, began to see the need for evangelism and world missions.

There was a new quest for knowledge, and a surge of invention and discovery. New tools, such as Johann Gutenberg’s printing press gave common people greater access to the Bible and information. Christian literature could now be printed in volume and many began to see their personal need for salvation.

THE AGE OF EXPLORATION

With this quest for knowledge came a desire to explore. Beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing into the eighteenth century, the Gospel spread primarily through political exploration and colonization. Many explorers like Christopher Columbus were deeply religious (although many historians today may claim differently), and had a heart not only for discovery, but also to bring the message of Christianity to the heathen natives. Others, such as the Pilgrims, came to America to find a place to freely worship God as they believed they should.

THE FATHER OF MODERN MISSIONS

In 1792, a man named William Carey published a little book called *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*.

Soon afterwards, he preached a powerful message on missions. “Expect great things from God,” he challenged, “attempt great things for God.” As a result of his teaching, a new mission board was established and Carey himself (now known as the *Father of Modern Missions*) soon went to India where he and his co-workers translated the New Testament into forty-four different languages and dialects. He was also actively involved in evangelistic work.

EARLY MISSIONARIES

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many more brave men and women began to see the need for Christian missions. During this time, great missionaries (such as John Eliot and David Brainerd to the American Indians; Robert Moffat, David Livingstone, and Mary Slessor to Africa; Hudson Taylor to China; and Adoniram and Nancy Judson, the first Americans to India, began to spread the Gospel into areas formerly isolated from Christianity.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

Since that time, many thousands of missionaries and national ministers have taken the message of Jesus throughout the earth. So much has been accomplished. However, there still remain approximately 2.7 billion “unreached” people consisting of over 11,000 distinct “people groups” throughout the world.¹² Every day, multitudes of these people are dying in their sins...without any hope of salvation...unless someone goes to them to share the Good News.

Today we have technology such as the airplane, telephone, computer networks, radio, television, and satellite information, that enables us to reach the lost at a rate of which the early missionaries could only have dreamed. Combined with the move toward national missions³ and great spiritual hunger in, there is potential for completing the Great Commission in our lifetime!

AN UNPRECEDENTED TIME IN HISTORY

When we see events in modern history such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany in 1989 and the

breakup of the former Soviet Union in 1991, we can know that God is still at work—opening doors for a time of spiritual harvest. In the former communist countries, people are searching for answers and multitudes are coming to Christ as never before.

Around the world today, God is moving in miraculous ways. In Albania, for example, there is now complete freedom of religion and a hunger for Christ, despite its former atheism.⁴ In Latin America, the number of evangelical Christians has grown from 200,000-300,000 in 1900 to 21 million in 1980, and 46 million in 1990!⁵ In East Africa, revival is taking place as multitudes in unreached areas are hearing the Gospel for the first time.

South Korea, formerly a Buddhist nation, is now largely Christian, with ten of the twenty largest churches in the world. South Korea now sends out thousands of its own missionaries to other nations!⁶

As our world's population is continuing to grow, there are more people alive today than ever before, especially in third-world countries where the Gospel has yet to be preached. The need for world missions is greater now than ever before.

WILL YOU BE A PART OF GOD'S PLAN?

Throughout the ages, God has worked through many people from both simple and willing Christians, to ungodly and selfish rulers, to see the spread of His kingdom. God's perfect plan will be established on the earth, but he is still looking for people both available and obedient to help see his plan accomplished.

The Bible tells us that the "harvest (of souls on the earth) truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matthew 9:37), "And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14).

