

"INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

BEGINNING AT JERUSALEM

"For thus saith the Lord God; Behold I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel" (Ezekiel 84:11-14).

Like some old painting, Godet suggests, each of the four Gospels has in some corner, obscure until you discover it, the name of the writer.

- Matthew refers to himself anonymously as the one who sat at the receipt of custom.
- Mark speaks of a young man who fled naked from the Garden.
- John tells of one who leaned on JESUS' bosom and whom He loved: we know it was John himself.
- And Luke says that one of the two who went to Emmaus was called Cleopas. Was not the other Luke himself?

It is in Luke's Gospel (24:47) and again in the Acts that we have the striking emphasis on Jerusalem as the point of departure for evangelism.

"Repentance and remission of sins," said JESUS to these disciples, should be preached in His Name **"among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."**

When we recall the place, the occasion and the speaker, the words are the more remarkable.

The Saviour after His resurrection identified Himself:

- By His voice to Mary,
- By the breaking of the bread to the two who went to Emmaus,
- By His scars to the ten disciples and a week later to doubting Thomas.

But in these brief words recorded by Luke He identified Himself by the use of the word Jerusalem. No one but JESUS would have said it. No one but JESUS could have said it, after His rejection, His suffering and bitter death on Calvary. It links close to the words, "**Father forgive them; for they know not what they do**" - "**Beginning at Jerusalem.**" And in uttering these words CHRIST laid down a great missionary principle to which we desire to call attention, a principle which obtained in apostolic missions and has ever since been valid, although often forgotten.

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Why did JESUS say, "**Beginning at Jerusalem**"? After His terrible denunciation in Matthew's twenty-third chapter, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee . . . Behold, your house is left unto you desolate,**" He still put Jerusalem first on His program.

JESUS knew her history as no one ever did. She was called the city of David, the city of the Great King, the Holy City, the Perfection of Beauty. The Psalmist describes her as "**beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth**"; "**a city compact together where the thrones of judgment are set**"; and he adds, "**The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob**" (Psalm 48 and 122 passim).

Jerusalem has had thirty-three centuries of history from Melchizedek to Lord Allenby. She has been rocked by earthquakes, sacked by invaders, and endured twenty sieges. The Temple built by Solomon was rebuilt by Nehemiah and Ezra, destroyed again by Antiochus, rebuilt in splendor by Herod the Great and then destroyed by Titus in 70 A.D. Was it because of His patriotic devotion that CHRIST loved Jerusalem? Or were there deeper reasons for this command? And do not these very reasons give us an abiding principle as to where evangelism must always begin?

1. It was the hardest place for Peter and the rest to begin and preach repentance and remission of sin.

Annas and Caiaphas dwelt there and sat in the seat of the scornful. Those in the Sanhedrin were filled with discomfiture and fury. Their plans had not succeeded. Herod was still alive and even Pilate was not a friend of those who were loved by the Nazarene. If ever a place could be called "Gospel-hardened" it was Jerusalem.

Would the priests whose livelihood depended on the Temple-worship welcome the new message? Would the Pharisees in their pride and prejudice become disciples of JESUS? And least of all the Sadducees, those hardheaded agnostics, who denied resurrection, would they lend an ear to the call for repentance?

But the hardest place was a challenge; and in that hardest place they preached the Gospel first.

2. Jerusalem was in need of the Gospel.

With all their privilege and prestige, with all their searching of the Scriptures and prayers and fasting and the daily sacrifice, the people of Jerusalem needed repentance and remission of sins through the Only Saviour.

Peter had no doubt after Pentecost that the Jews in Jerusalem were the very ones who crucified CHRIST and yet could receive pardon.

"Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Today there are Christians who are opposed to "proselyting" our Jewish neighbors. In the beginning it was not so. Paul's Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians are logic on fire to prove that the Jews need CHRIST as much as the Gentiles need Him. This also is the message of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

3. Unless they began at Jerusalem the early disciples could not and would not go to the regions beyond.

It was the testing-place of their sincerity and faith.

They were to make the great venture at Pentecost and in the very Temple. What finer proof could we have of Peter's courage and love than his words in Acts, beginning **"Ye men of Israel, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth . . . "**

Mark Antony's great oration over Caesar's mantle pales into insignificance beside Peter's eloquence through the Holy Spirit:

"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain . . . whom God hath raised up . . . Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:22-36 passim).

Then was fulfilled the great promise of the prophet, **"I will pour upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced."**

It was the first mass movement in missions - three thousand souls in one day! Peter must have recalled the gentle reproof of JESUS, "**Simon, lovest thou me? . . . feed my lambs . . . feed [shepherd] my sheep**" (John 21:15, 16).

4. It is also an indication, as we have seen, of CHRIST's special love for Jerusalem; we have it in His words after the resurrection, "**Go tell my disciples, and Peter.**" He lays stress in both cases on a special love and a special forgiveness.

The Wailing Wall outside the gates is proof of how every Jew loves Jerusalem. It's very stones awaken memories of the ancient glory. Here thousands of pious Jews press their cheeks to the wall and mingle their tears on Sabbath days - a sight once seen never to be forgotten. We read that JESUS wept over the city. He knew its streets and loved its children. Through the Via Dolorosa He went to His trial and scourging and Cross.

"I can imagine JESUS saying," said Moody, "'Go search out the man who put the crown of thorns on My brow; tell him I will have a crown for him in My kingdom if he will accept salvation; and there shall not be a thorn in it. Find out that man who took the reed from My hand and smote My head, driving the thorns deeper into My brow. Tell him I want to give him a scepter. Go seek out that poor soldier who drove the spear into My side; tell him that there is a nearer way to My heart than that! Tell him I want to make him a soldier of the Cross and that My banner over him shall be LOVE.' "

CHRIST's face was turned for three agonizing hours toward the Holy City before darkness veiled the scene. "**Father, forgive them . . .** " "**Repentance and remission of sins . . . beginning at Jerusalem.**"

5. It was Jerusalem's last chance and JESUS knew it.

He foreknew and foretold her doom.

In 70 A.D., Titus marshaled his armies and besieged the city. Josephus in his account tells of the dark tragedy and gives details of the terrible siege and the final destruction of the city.

- Ninety thousand Jewish slaves were carried to Rome.
- Over a million perished in the siege;
- 115,000 dead bodies were thrown out of one gate and 10,000 Jews were crucified outside the city. "**His blood be on us, and on our children**" . . . (Matthew 27:25). "**Beginning at Jerusalem.**"

Now let us turn to the application of these words and the universality and perpetuity of this command as a missionary principle.

"Jesus Christ (is) the same yesterday, and today, and for ever."

The same reasons that put Jerusalem first for the apostles put it first for us.

Beginning in our own neighborhood, our own homes, our own pulpit, we are to preach repentance and remission of sins.

1. It is the hardest place.

A recent volume on missionary education puts it plainly:

"We may be tempted to begin by introducing, say, our young people to the youth of Egypt or India - they are so different and so underprivileged! They need the Gospel of CHRIST. Let us awake to the fact that Egypt and India lie at our very doors. Areas of human need cry out from our own neighborhoods for the love and service and fellowship that the Church professes to offer to all. There are men and women, young people and children in our own neighborhoods for whom the Church and fellowship with CHRIST are as alien as they are to the Moslems of Egypt. Is a program of missionary education that ignores this opportunity for direct personal relationship and immediate Christian fellowship for the sake of more glamorous relationships on the other side of the world likely to be a living program." [1]

2. Those nearest and dearest to us, the children of our street, our postman, our Chinese laundryman, the porter in the train, need the same Gospel.

Neither baptism nor the Church nor their Bibles nor education nor Christian nurture by themselves will save them. They need repentance and remission of sins by regeneration. "No student of the deeper problems of life," said Rufus Jones at the Jerusalem Council meeting, "can very well fail to see that the greatest rival of Christianity in the world today is not Mohammedanism, or Buddhism, or Hinduism, or Confucianism, but a world-wide secular way." We need higher ideals than business success, intellectual attainment, artistic taste and worldly pleasures for our children.

Revival of religion must begin at Jerusalem.

3. We must begin here in our preaching before we can go abroad.

The Old Story is a test of our sincerity. Is it true that -

"I love to tell the story,
For those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting
To hear it like the rest"?

Then why not tell it?

The shade is often darkest right under the candle. Paul's words have a spiritual as well as a material significance. **"If any man provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel"** (I Timothy 5:8).

JESUS still tests our sincerity by saying, **"Go tell thy friends and thy neighbors."**

And this is true of the mission-compound, the hospital-staff, the missionary household in every mission-station.

"In the first century," says Harnack, "the most numerous and successful missionaries of the Christian religion were not the regular teachers but Christians themselves in virtue of their loyalty and courage. How little we hear of the former! How much we hear of the effects produced by the latter! . . . It was characteristic of this religion that everyone who seriously confessed the faith proved of service to its propaganda." [2]

In other words, the early Christians began to preach at their own doors. In the early days of missions in Korea (Chosen) one condition of admission to church membership was that the convert had already won someone else for CHRIST.

4. GOD's love is universal but may we not say that He has a special love for the children of Jerusalem the children of the Covenant?

We do not refer here to the Jewish race but to the great company of so-called "baptized" children in all lands. Are these not in a special sense our primary field for evangelism? And this is true of the indigenous churches across the seas as well as in America. There is a terrible discrepancy between the number of those who, as children, are initiated into the faith and the number of those who confess CHRIST after adolescence. Is it not because of neglect to "**begin at Jerusalem**"?

5. We will never lose the sense of immediacy if we remember Jerusalem.

It is now or never in reaching men with the Gospel. This is true as regards personal evangelism and also in a wider sense. We pass this way only once. Every hour we stand at the crossroads.

As an old hymn puts it for all of us in a world where we rush through the crowded ways of life in a hectic civilization -

Sin worketh, let me work too,
Sin undoeth, let me do.
Busy as sin my work I'll ply
Till I rest in the rest of eternity.

Death worketh, let me work too,
Death undoeth, let me do.
Busy as death my work I'll ply
Till I rest in the rest of eternity.

Our whole task of evangelism must be studied in the light of the revolutionary changes going on today across the world.

The Gospel has priority, but it also has persistent foes that challenge its prestige. We close with the solemn words of the Madras Conference in 1938 (Vol. III, pp. 378, 381):

"There is more organized opposition to the Christian Church than at any time within the past hundred years. There is a real danger that if the work of the Church is not intensified the adverse movement will become so strong as seriously to threaten the whole work of the Church in the world.

"The Church must either make its impact upon the secular world of today and win it for CHRIST, or the secular world will increasingly encroach upon the spiritual life of the Church, blunting its witness and dimming its vision. There is, therefore, in this summons a note of urgency and insistence. We live in perilous days and the Church cannot stand still; it dare not retreat, yet advance is only possible as the whole Church unites in a new fellowship of the Spirit to evangelize the world."

"Beginning at Jerusalem" - yours and mine.

FOOTNOTES:

1 Harner and Baker, *Missionary Education in Your Church*, p. 85.

2 Harnack's *Mission and Expansion*, Vol. I, pp. 336, 337.

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