

## **God's Strategy for Saving the World**

What we define as “indispensable” for our lives says a great deal about us, don’t you think? Newsweek provided a list of ten things that didn’t even exist in 1999 but are “indispensable” for modern Americans today. Here’s the top 5:

5. Chipotle 4. Digital video recorder 3. iTunes 2. YouTube 1. Wikipedia

Now, for me, this list confirms how out of touch I really am because I’m pretty sure I could live for months without any of these (with the possible exception of Chipotle!). The real problem with lists like this is that they presume that we are capable of identifying what we actually need! In other words, are lists like this one demonstrating what we really need or what we really want?

Back in the fall, we studied chapters 8 through 12 of the book of Acts. We called that study “The Church in Action,” because it described how the first church in human history began its life by getting organized, selecting leaders, beginning to put into practice what Jesus had taught them and generally forming teams for carrying out its God-given mission of making disciples. We now pick up this story as the church begins to move out, to cross borders and multiply itself to bring this message of life in Christ to the world. If we asked the members of that first church in Jerusalem what had become “indispensable” for them over their past 10 years, what do you think their list would’ve looked like? I think it would’ve looked something like this:

1. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross 2. Holy Spirit 3. Christ’s commands/teaching  
4. Christ’s love 5. One another

Five things they didn’t have ten years before but now were “indispensable” for their lives. What does your list of “indispensables” look like?

What we will study now over the next 8 weeks is the second half of the book of Acts. And we begin this week to see that immediately the church got about the task that God had given it. Which was what? Well, Paul verbalized it so well in **Acts 20:24**:

**However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me (What task?) – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.**

*Testifying to the gospel of God’s grace...* THAT is the mission of the church!

Today we want to see how they began. First, we’ll see that...

### **I. God Sent People Across the Border.**

When last we saw Paul, he had been brought to the city of Antioch by Barnabas to help establish the church there. It was in Antioch that believers were first called “Christians,” which is quite a compliment when you think of it, because they didn’t call themselves that. No, it was the non-believers who called them that. They must have been living a very genuine faith.

Well, that was back in Acts 11. Now, in Acts 13, “*While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting...*” God spoke to the Christians in Antioch. He said:

**“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2-3)**

We need to notice something here. It’s very important. This wasn’t Paul and Barnabas’ idea to go to the Gentiles. God sent them. And it came about *while they were worshipping and fasting...* Now, Jesus had already told Saul (soon to be Paul) that this was going to be his life mission. Remember on the road to Damascus? Jesus appeared to Saul in a bright light and then He told Ananias:

**This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. (Acts 9:15, 16)**

So, Paul and Barnabas aren’t concocting some scheme to “see the world.” No, God is sending them and He is sending them into great suffering, as we will see in the weeks ahead.

Now, I want you to know that as much as it was possible, we followed this model when we were seeking God’s will for the near future of this church. It wasn’t the whole church that was worshipping and fasting when the Holy Spirit spoke to them. It was five people – Barnabas, Simeon called Niger (which means he was probably a black man), Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen and Saul. After listing these names, the very next verse says: (Acts 13:2)

**While THEY were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said...**

It was a group of about six leaders here at Valley who were studying and praying and asking God to show us what He wanted this church to be in ten years; it was that small group who first recorded these 8 Destination Statements. They were then taken to the staff and elders for further discussion, prayer and refinement, and finally they were shown to the congregation. We didn’t start with our ideas, but with listening to God through His Word and prayer. That’s why we have such confidence that these destinations are from Him.

And secondly, we need to note here in Acts that God sent Barnabas and Paul across the border. In other words, God sent them beyond their comfort zone. As we will see, WAY beyond their comfort zone. Now it’s also worth noting that there doesn’t seem to be much of an itinerary for their trip. All it says is that they “*sent them off.*” In other words, their itinerary was “*Wherever the Lord leads us.*” Barnabas, Paul and John Mark simply said, “We’ll go where You want us to go.”

Do you have that kind of a relationship with Jesus or are you cutting deals with him? “I’ll move to New Jersey, Jesus, if you give me a house with a pool.”

Most of you know Joni Eareckson Tada’s story about how she became a quadriplegic in a diving accident when she was 17. But do you know what immediately preceded this in her life? Joni became a Christian at the age of 14 but she says she “confused the abundant Christian life with the great American dream.” In an interview with Marvin Olansky of World Magazine, she says she dreamt of:

...going to college and marrying a wonderful man who made \$250,000 a year, and we’d have 2.5 children. It was me-focused: What can God do for me? I almost thought that I had done God a great big favor by accepting Jesus... [but my boyfriend and I] were doing some things together that were wrong.

In April 1967, I came home from a sordid Friday night date... and I cried, "O God... I'm staining your reputation by saying I'm a Christian, yet doing one thing Friday night and another Sunday morning. I'm a hypocrite... I want you to change my life... Please do something in my life that will jerk it right side up because I'm making a mess of the Christian faith... and I don't want that. I want to glorify you." Three months later she had the diving accident.

Immediately after the accident, Joni told God, "I'll never trust You with an honest prayer again!" If you know her story, as the reality of her paralysis sank in, she fell into a deep depression. She asked God to end her life. But He refused. After a long struggle in anguish and anger, Joni says, "I prayed one short prayer that changed my life. [I prayed] 'Oh God, if I can't die, then show me how to live.' That," she says, "was... the most powerful prayer I had ever prayed." <sup>i</sup>

Have you confused the Christian life with the American dream? I believe, without a doubt, that God wants me, wants us to, "cross the border." He's calling us to move out of our comfort zone to accomplish the task of *testifying to the gospel of God's grace*. In the weeks to come, I'm going to share some of the strategic ways that we think God may be calling us as a church to do that, but the first question we must answer is the heart question, "Do I want what God wants or do I want the American dream?"

Marvin's last question to Joni was this, "What do you think your life would have been like had you not broken your neck?"

Joni replied, "Had I not broken my neck I'd probably be on my second divorce, maxing out my husband's credit cards, planning my next ski vacation. I wouldn't be here extolling the glories of the gospel and the power of God to help a person smile, not in spite of the problems, but because of them." <sup>ii</sup>

God sends people across borders. Next, we need to add to that this phrase:

## **II. God Sends People Across Borders with the Good News of the Gospel.**

God isn't a divine travel agent. He's sending us across borders for a purpose and with a message. This first trip of Paul, Barnabas and John Mark is often called their "First Missionary Journey." If you have a good study Bible or if you've downloaded a "map app" onto your electronic device, look that up now (or just look up here!).

[Show Map – First Missionary Journey of Paul]

The stats on this trip are that they traveled about 900 to 1,000 miles by sea and by walking. It took them about three years to complete the trip as they preached in at least 6 cities staying for months in each one. Less than half way into the trip, John Mark deserted them and returned home. They faced severe criticism in every city and, in Lystra, Paul was actually stoned and left for dead. But through it all, they did one thing consistently – they told people the Good News of the Gospel. Or as Paul put it, they "*testified to the gospel of God's grace.*" In Pisidian Antioch, Paul worded it this way:

**Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.** (Which is EVERYTHING as Paul says in Rom. 4:13) (Acts 13:38, 39)

Now, in this city, Paul is speaking to a Jewish audience. So, in telling people the Good News, he refers to something they know – the law of Moses. But in other cities where he’s speaking to mostly Gentiles, he explains the Good News differently. In Athens he sees an altar to “the unknown god,” and he says, “Hey, I know who that is!” And he uses that to launch into the Gospel. So, let me ask you this, do you have a plan, a way to tell someone about the Good News of Jesus Christ? Let me ask you another question, “When’s the last time you did that – told someone the Good News?” Do you think your answer to those two questions might be connected?

If we’re going to cross the border, we can’t go empty-handed. Every Christian needs to have at least one way to tell someone that “through Jesus their sins can be forgiven.” I want to give you at least one way to do that today. (Get out your pen or your Ipad. You need to get this down). It’s called “The Roman Road to Salvation” because it consists of four verses from the book of Romans. You simply read people these four verses and ask them if they understand each one. Here they are:

1. Romans 3:23 **This states our problem. “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”** You could ask, “Do you acknowledge that you haven’t lived a perfect life?”
2. Romans 6:23 **This states our choice. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** You could ask, “Which of those two outcomes would you rather have?”
3. Romans 10:9 **This states our assurance – how we receive eternal life. “...if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”** You should ask two questions. First, “Do you understand that this is how you can be forgiven for all your sin?” If they say “Yes,” then you should ask, “What reason would you have for not wanting to do this right now?” If they are willing, lead them in a simple prayer asking Jesus to forgive their sin and accept them as His follower.
4. Rom. 8:28 **This states our comfort. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** You should state, “Jesus promised to never leave His followers alone.” You could add, “In John 16:7 Jesus said He would send His Spirit to be with us forever.”

There is no guarantee that everyone you share these four verses with will choose to become a follower of Jesus Christ. But I can guarantee you this, if you DON’T share these verses with someone or something similar, then they won’t become a follower or at least they won’t do it with you.

Now please listen to what I’m going to say next. I’m not trying to guilt you into doing this. If you do this because you’re afraid Jesus will hate you if you don’t, please, please – don’t do it. He doesn’t feel that way. How do I know that? Because He said so. In Acts 1:4 when Jesus is getting ready to go back to heaven, He’s already told the disciples to go out and make disciples. But now look at what He says:

**Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised...**

What’s the gift? The Holy Spirit. He says:

**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses... (Acts 1:8)**

Pray for friends you know who need the Lord. Practice your plan of how you will “*testify to the gospel of God’s grace,*” whether it’s the Roman Road or some other plan but DON’T leave Jerusalem; not until you have received the power of the Holy Spirit. When that happens, you will not be afraid. You will share the Good News with great joy! Lastly, we need to add a third phrase to our calling...

### **III. God Sends People Across the Border, with the Good News of the Gospel to Plant the Church in the Community Where People Live.**

On each of Paul’s missionary trips, he always left one thing behind: churches. An Anglican missionary to China 100 years ago, Rolland Allen, writes this:

“Nothing can alter or disguise the fact that St. Paul did leave behind him at first visit complete churches. In little more than ten years, St. Paul established the Church in four provinces of the [Roman] Empire; Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia. Before AD 47 there were no churches in these provinces; in AD 57 St. Paul could speak as if his work there was done.”<sup>iii</sup>

I had not read this commentary until this week, yet our leaders decided two years ago that God was calling us to come up with some strategy to offer the Good News of the Gospel to all 1 million plus people in Hartford and Litchfield Counties within a ten-year period. Where’d they get that number? Is that just a coincidence? I don’t think there ARE any coincidences with God. So how could this happen within ten years?

As I’ve said, we didn’t start with a Master Plan. We started with prayer and fasting. But now, several strategies are already starting to emerge. For example, one of our Converge Northeast churches is planting a church in Windsor and has asked us for prayer support. A Christian Counseling Center, begun by our Converge church in Fairfield CT, wants to place an office here in the Farmington Valley and we are going to partner with them. And we are exploring how we could expand our ministry throughout our region through an initiative called “Multi-Site.” Essentially what this is, is one church in many locations. So, we might have a “Valley Bristol” site or a “Valley West Hartford” site. In each site, the sermon preached here in Avon would be “aired” by video, but everything else would be “live” in the worship service and each site would have its own “Site Pastor” and ministry team to do exactly what the Apostle Paul was doing in the first century – crossing the border and planting the church of Jesus Christ in communities where people lived.

Now some of you might be saying, “Why are we trying to plant more churches in Connecticut? Aren’t there churches everywhere here?” Well, there are church buildings, but the church is not a building. The biblical definition of the church is “people who have been born from above, born of the Spirit.” In a recent survey done by the Barna Group which measured the percent of “born-again” believers in different regions of the country, there was only one city with a smaller percentage of born-again Christians than Hartford. That was Salt Lake City, Utah. One out of six residents of CT are atheist or agnostic, nearly double the national average. Born-again Christians in CT make up only 2% of our population, less than most African nations. God’s solution to mankind’s need is Jesus Christ. His strategy to communicate that solution is to: **Send people across the border with the Good News of the Gospel to plant the Church in their community.** You, me, let’s go!

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<sup>i</sup> Marvin Olasky, "Loving Life," *World Magazine* (1-12-13)

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 83, 87, 3