

## Finishing the Task

Acts 20:22-24

### Gospel Visual

Balloon - The Bible teaches that everyone is born with a heart that is darkened and hardened - twisted toward sin and selfishness. So think of this balloon as the dark and sinful heart you were born with. Every day you have lived you have breathed more sin into that heart. When you choose your own way instead of God's; when you choose your own desires instead of serving someone else; when you flat out sin by lying, cheating, stealing, coveting - really what you're doing is worshipping other things instead of giving God the wholehearted love and worship that only He deserves.

And so all of us end up with a heart full of sin, and deep down we all know there is nothing we can do to fix it on our own. We can't cover it up, we can't pay it back. All we can do is carry the guilt and shame of it until we stand before God to bear the punishment we know we deserve.

But that is precisely why Jesus came. Listen to Romans 8:25

***"Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." Rom. 8:25***

He was delivered up to death for our trespasses - our sins. He died on the cross to pay for your sin and mine. We could never pay for it. So Jesus came and paid for it himself. The Bible calls this the doctrine of the Atonement - which means COVERING. [Red Table Cloth]: ***Jesus' death covered our sins.***

For over 1,000 years the Jewish people had been presenting animal sacrifices to make atonement for their sins. But the blood of animals could only provide a partial and temporary covering - so they had to come back every day, every month and every year with more sacrifices. But Jesus' sacrifice provided an infinite and eternal atonement. His death covered our sins FOREVER.

But that's only half of the good news. "He was delivered up for our trespasses **and raised for our justification.**" It is wonderfully good news to know that the guilt and shame of our sin has been covered by the blood of Jesus. His death covered our sins, AND ***His resurrection conquered them.*** [Slam hand down to pop the balloon.]

Through his resurrection Jesus defeated sin and death forever. He set us free from penalty of sin and also from its POWER. We who belong to Jesus by faith no longer belong to sin! Sin is no longer the driving force in us - the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts and He is our driving force. [Show the shriveled remains of the balloon] For a little while longer sin is still present in our lives but its controlling power is broken and we are free to follow the Spirit, free to live and love and serve and reach out with this wonderful good news!

**Jesus' death covered our sins and his resurrection conquered sin and death forever.** Isn't that incredibly wonderful Good News? **[Give kids each a Red Balloon...]**

To help us remember this Gospel message, please take one of these Red Balloons home with you today and when you play with it, remember that if you believe in Jesus your heart is no longer controlled by sin because Jesus' death covered that sin and his resurrection conquered it! Your heart is covered by the blood of Jesus and filled with the power of His Holy Spirit!

Now, please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 20. The Apostle Paul is completing his third missionary journey and returning to Jerusalem. **[MAP of the Missionary Journeys](#)**

He has already experienced the fulfillment of Acts 1:8 where Jesus' commissioned his disciples saying, ***"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."*** The Gospel has advanced through the witness of the apostles from Jerusalem, throughout Judea and even Samaria, and thanks to Paul and his missionary teams, the Good News of Jesus sacrificial death and victorious resurrection has now spread all over the mediterranean.

Here we see Paul's zealous determination to finish the task - to complete the Great Commission Jesus had given His followers - to bring the Gospel to the end of the earth. The next major stop for the Word had to be Rome. We know the rest of the story - how Paul went back to Jerusalem, was nearly killed in a conspiracy but appealed to Rome and was sent to stand trial before Caesar himself. The book of Acts concludes with Paul in prison in Rome, freely preaching the Gospel there "with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31).

We know from the letter to the Romans that Paul's desire was to go past Rome and bring the Gospel on to Spain - the frontier for missions in his day. That was Paul's missionary calling and he represented the very tip of the spear in the advance of the early church: ***to advance with the Gospel***; to bring the banner of Jesus Christ forward; to reach another city; to break into another region.

Brothers and sisters, our mission remains the same today - ***to move forward with the Gospel as far as we possibly can.*** There are still people groups out at the ends of the earth who have NEVER heard the good news of Jesus Christ. If you go to [finishingthetask.org](http://finishingthetask.org) you will see that there are still 1,347 unreached UNENGAGED people groups who don't have a single missionary, a single gospel tract, a single portion of Scripture or a single gospel ministry at work among them. Not one radio broadcast. Not one satellite TV signal. Nothing. 1,347 people groups representing over 41 million people.

The first number may sound large - 1,347. Wow. How could we ever reach so many different peoples and cultures? But the point of [FinishingtheTask.org](http://FinishingtheTask.org) and the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization is for all believers who share a commitment to the authority of Scripture and the centrality of the Gospel to work together to complete the Great Commission in this generation.

Every believer and every church has a part to play in finishing the task.

- Some are front line ***cross-cultural missionaries*** who will give their lives to learning a new language and immersing themselves in a foreign culture. We need to consistently send short term teams to help identify those called to long term missions and we need to joyfully send workers out into the global harvest.
- Some are successful ***missionary SENDERS*** - skilled to make money in business and spiritually gifted to give generously to the cause of Christ. Don't apologize or feel guilty if God has given you skill and passion for business - use every ounce of your skill to make as much money as possible and give away as much as possible to advance the gospel!
- Some believers are skilled and gifted ***to attack issues of poverty and injustice*** - adorning the Gospel with the practical love of Christ to a world in desperate need. These are the folks who work in refugee camps, who go on medical mission trips, who dig wells where there is no clean water and who create systems like Feed my Starving Children, World Vision and Compassion International to bring compassion and relief to the poor.
- All of us are called to PRAY and all of us are called to PREACH the Good News.

***We share the same mission*** with all believers everywhere on earth: "to GO and make disciples of all nations." Those are the marching orders. Our mission is to advance the gospel as far as we possibly can. The next objective for you may be the neighbors who live beside you or in front of behind you. The next hill the Lord is calling you to take might be a family member or a co-worker you can take out for lunch or coffee to hear their spiritual journey and help point them to Christ.

**Our mission is simply to advance the Gospel for the glory of God and the joy of all people in Christ.** Our vision is not to impress people with our zeal or devotion but to impress people with the glory and majesty of God. We are not on a mission to make much of ourselves but to make much of Jesus - to lift Him up so that He can draw all people to Himself. Jesus is the light of the world, the bread of life and the fountain of living water. But people cannot come to Him until they HEAR about Him. Let the words of Romans 10 ring in your heart:

***"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'"*** Romans 10:13-15

This was the driving passion of Paul's life, as it was for Jesus and the other apostles. To move the Gospel forward. To reach one more person, one more city, one more region. That must be our mission too. Let's carry the banner of Jesus forward here in Tampa and let's prayerfully find a couple of places out there in the world where we can bring the Gospel forward for the glory of God and the joy of those people in Christ.

Look at Acts 20 and let's reflect briefly on the **three core commitments** Paul brought to this mission to advance the Gospel. The first one is that he was ***Directed by the Holy Spirit.*** ***"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there."*** Acts 20:22

The word Paul used was "constrained" or "compelled." The Holy Spirit had actively led Paul from one city to the next. At one point he had a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come and preach the gospel there. We need more obedience to this kind of Macedonian call. There are **1,347 people groups** just like Macedonia was in the first century with people who are crying out, "Please come and help us!"

Paul knew that going back to Jerusalem would be dangerous for him. Jews chased him from one town to the next, attacking him and trying to kill him. Of course, in their capital city, the Jews would come after him - traitor to the Pharisees that he was, sell out to this new cult that called themselves Christians. Paul was public enemy number one to the Jews.

But Paul knew that he had to go to Jerusalem because he was committed to following the Direction of the Holy Spirit. Paul's second conviction is in v. 23 - he was **Determined to endure any hardship and opposition.**

***"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."*** Acts 20:22-23

He knew that persecution and prison were almost certainly in his future. He had already been beaten and stoned and kicked out of numerous cities. The Holy Spirit Himself had shown Paul that suffering was in his future but as we saw in Philippians, Paul rejoiced that he could fellowship in the sufferings of Jesus, becoming like Him in His death. And so he was determined to endure hardship and to walk through opposition to move the Gospel forward.

Finally, Paul was **Devoted to the mission.** Look at v. 24. This was the core conviction underneath the other two.

***"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."*** Acts 20:24

Here was the secret for Paul, and every truly great servant of God. His life was not his own. He said, "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." He said, basically, I am nothing but a grain of wheat. What purpose does a grain of wheat have but to fall into the ground and die?

Brothers and sisters, we are so obsessed with living a long and healthy and happy life. We worship the American dream and long for it for ourselves and our children. We are not gripped by these missionary convictions of Paul because we secretly love this world more than we love Jesus. We love earthly comforts more than we want treasure in heaven. But not Paul.

He said, "I don't account my life of any value nor as precious to myself." Rather, he said there is One Thing and only One. To run the race with Jesus. To run faithfully, and not stumble and be disqualified. And part of running that race is to finish the ministry Jesus gave me - to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Now don't dismiss that and say, "Sure, that's the job description of a missionary, like Paul." Sure it is. ***But it is the very same job description for every follower of Jesus.*** All of us have the same mission - to advance the Gospel. We have the same vision - to see the name of Jesus glorified in every tongue and tribe and nation. All of us are directed by the Holy Spirit to accomplish this mission both where we are right now and in the places He leads us to go. All of us must be determined to endure all kinds of hardships and opposition. **We are soldiers fighting in a war, not wealthy suburbanites relaxing in a country club.** So all of us must be devoted to the mission and do our part to move the banner forward!

Let me close with a powerful story from **World War 2**. Most people today know about ***the Holocaust*** in Germany and the death camps where Jews and gypsies and blacks were systematically slaughtered. News of the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Jews in Poland and Latvia began reaching the Allies as early as 1941 and 1942. Hitler's vision had been clear since the 1930s - to exterminate lesser races, like Jews, and exalt the superior race of Aryan Germans.

Sadly, until Pearl Harbor made the war personal to Americans, the majority were content to leave the war in Europe - that it was not our concern. ***Isn't that often how we feel about missions?*** If there are people groups yet to reach, let the Christians who live closer to them geographically and culturally - let them finish the task. Let them complete the Great Commission. Shame on us if we ever think that way - and shame on America before December 7, 1941.

By D-Day and the landings at Normandy, it was well known that Hitler did not have concentration camps, he had extermination camps. ***And some of what gave the Allies their drive to conquer the Nazis was an urgency to set these captives free.*** After breaking through the outer defenses, the tanks and infantry were in a race across France - a race to Berlin. They knew their final objective was Hitler himself and German headquarters. They knew that time was of the essence - so they pressed forward, advancing as fast and as far as they possibly could. Over and over again the tanks outran the fuel supplies and had to wait so they could get back into the race.

Oh, ***that is how we should be when it comes to missions!*** Racing ahead as far as we can, as fast as we can - pressing the advantage, taking every opening. And though they knew the death camps existed, none of the soldiers were prepared for what they saw when they actually liberated one. The

prisoners in these camps were walking skeletons. And every one was haunted by the horrors they had experienced.

Now to shift to the Pacific. Some of you have read the book or seen the movie *Unbroken - the story of Louis Zamperini*. I read that over Christmas break and had to share some of it with you because it perfectly illustrates the sense of urgency we should have to reach into the darkest strongholds of the enemy to set captives free.

Louis was a mischievous kid who learned to run by stealing from local stores - not so much because he needed anything, but simply for the excitement of the theft. In High School his brother saw his running potential and got him into track and cross country. Louis didn't like the hard work of running at first (who does?) but really liked the cheer of the crowds and learned that he had a knack for distance running. He set a record mile time as a senior in high school of 4:21 - a record that stood for nearly 20 years. [\[Picture of Louis Running\]](#)

Soon after that, Louis qualified to run in the 1936 Olympics - remarkable for a 19 year old - and two years later he set the NCAA record for the mile run at 4:08 - a record that held for 15 years. Had the war not intervened, Louis would almost certainly have been the first person to run the mile in under 4 minutes.

As it was, like every other able bodied young man in 1942, Louis enlisted. He became a bomber in the Navy, targeting the drops from a B-24. He survived some harrowing adventures in the Pacific and then on May 27, 1943, his B-24 crashed, killing 8 of the 11 men on board. Louis and two others survived the impact but were stranded on two small rafts with only one pint of water each and a few fishhooks. [\[Picture of Louis by his B-24\]](#)

They managed to survive the equatorial sun, terrible dehydration and near starvation, plus numerous attacks from ever prowling sharks - for an incredible and record setting 47 days, during which their raft drifted over 2,000 miles. Unfortunately, they drifted right into an island controlled by the Japanese.

And so Louis became a prisoner of war in Japan. The book and movie give details of his suffering over the next two years - gruesome, unimaginable torture and deprivation. Most POWs in Japan endured miserable conditions, grossly insufficient food, impossibly hard labor - and over one third of these POWs died as a result. Louis, for different reasons, had it far worse than most - and it is truly a miracle of God's grace that he survived, unbroken (though the truth is that he was deeply and severely broken - the story should be called Broken but Healed - but that's a different message).

Here's the point. The U.S. Navy and Marines were pressing hard through the Pacific - conquering one island after another [\[Picture of raising flag on Iwo Jima\]](#) and pressing on toward Tokyo just as the Army and Air Force were doing in Germany, pressing toward Berlin. *Both sides were*

***devoted to their mission to advance as far as possible, as fast as possible.*** They followed direction from their generals and were determined to overcome every hardship and all opposition.

Both sides knew that there were prisoners suffering under both the Nazis and the Japanese. Nobody knew how unfathomably wicked and despicable the treatment in these death camps and work camps actually were - but everyone knew they existed and this motivated the troops to complete their next mission and carry the Allied banner forward.

And so, finally, on August 15 - a few days after Hiroshima and Nagasaki - the Japanese Emperor agreed to a cease-fire. The guards in Louis' camp made it clear that something big had happened - and B-29 super-fortress bombers had been flying overhead for weeks now, lighting up the sky as they dropped their firebombs all over Japan.

Then on August 20 - nearly 27 months after his crash in the Pacific - a torpedo bomber flew low over Louis' camp. The POWs all scattered in fear, but when they looked up they saw it wasn't a Japanese plane, it was an American plane - and it was flashing a signal on its light in morse code. A radioman understood the message and shouted the good news: ***"The war is over! The war is over!"***

Finally, and for the first time in years, Louis felt a glimmer of hope. "I'm free!" That first plane dropped a bag of candybars and cigarettes along with the precious gift of magazines in English with details of the news of the Allied victory and the Japanese surrender. A few days later more bombers dropped crates on parachutes with all kinds of food and medical supplies. The emaciated prisoners were saved!

Louis' story was far from over just because the war had ended. He met a girl, married her and they had a baby. **[Picture of Louis w/ family]** But Louis was haunted by his ordeal and one cruel Japanese guard who had beaten and abused him over and over. He could not escape this man they called The Bird, and so withdrew into a deep addiction to alcohol that eventually cost him his wife and his child. Louis became convinced that the only way he could ever be free of The Bird was to go to Japan and kill him. Listen to how the author of Unbroken sums up Louis' condition:

***"The paradox of vengefulness is that it makes men dependent upon those who have harmed them, believing that their release from pain will only come when they make their tormentors suffer. In seeking the Bird's death to free himself, Louie had chained himself, once again, to his tyrant. During the war, the Bird had been unwilling to let go of Louie; after the war, Louie was unable to let go of the Bird."*** 366

Louis was no longer a prisoner of war, but he had become a prisoner of his anger and pain. Four years of misery and drinking went by until a young preacher from North Carolina showed up in California. Louis' wife came back and begged him to come to hear this preacher. Louis resisted - even though on his raft in the Pacific he had three times begged God to save him by sending rain and three times had promised to serve heaven forever when he did.

But finally, Louis agreed to go and Billy Graham preached about the woman who was caught in adultery and condemned by the elders of her town. Jesus drew on the ground - and simply said, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." All of those gathered gradually walked away, unable to condemn the woman because they knew that they too were guilty of sin.

Louis tried to defend himself, tried to hold on to the fact that he was a good man. But he knew it wasn't true. He knew he was a miserable wretch who had failed in so many ways and desperately needed the forgiveness of God. Billy Graham went on: "Here tonight, there's a drowning man, a drowning woman... a drowning boy, a drowning girl that is lost in the sea of life." 373

Louis got up to leave - to run away - but in the sawdust covered aisle his old promises from years before on the raft came back to him and he suddenly knew that it was only God's hand that could have saved him:

"When he thought of his history, what resonated with him now was not all that he had suffered but the divine love that he believed had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that the Bird has striven to make of him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation." 376

He went home and threw away all of his alcohol and cigarettes and renewed his promise to serve heaven forever. From then on he was a preacher of the gospel, sharing his story and proclaiming the freedom that can only be found in Christ. He even went back to Japan to see the guards who had so badly abused him - graciously forgiving every one and inviting them to put their faith in Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, there are captives out there right now - all over the world. 1,347 PEOPLE GROUPS who are enslaved to their sin and under the just condemnation of God. They are bound to their sin, blinded by their pride and utterly unable to save themselves. **Our mission is to take the gospel forward: to reach the next person, the next city, the next region.**

Our banner is that of Jesus Christ and we carry it proudly, we advance with it boldly. Jesus is building his church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Our lives are just grains of wheat and if we hold on to them they will simply wither in our hands. But if we let them fall to the ground and die, the Lord will produce from them a great harvest.

Will you join the apostle Paul and join me in saying, "***I do not consider my life worth anything to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given to me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace***"?

Let's pray.