

Is Jesus your personal Savior? That's a common phrase in the Christian world. Jesus should be your personal Savior. But make sure He is much more than that. Jesus absolutely saves individuals in a personal way. If your broken relationship with God has been restored, it's because Jesus sacrificed Himself for your sin and God's grace has renewed your heart. This happens to individuals—no one is saved because she has Christian parents, attends a church service, or lives in a “Christian nation.”

But your relationship with God should not be characterized by individualism. God worked in your individual heart to give you new life, but salvation is not about your making it to heaven as an individual. Jesus saves us as individuals to place us within a body—the church. In reality, Jesus is the Savior of the church. He died to create a people who together love and worship Him and fulfil His purposes in the world.

This means that the gospel is not only good news for me, it is good news for everyone. Jesus is the Savior of the world (John 11:51–52; 1 John 2:2). With Adam and Eve, the whole world fell into sin. With Jesus, the whole world can be redeemed, restored, saved, made new (Rom. 5:18). God's plan of redemption has always been global in scope. There is not a single tribe, tongue, or nation on the planet that will not be affected by the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rev. 5:9). The good news is for all nations (Luke 2:10).

God's Plan for the Nations

Spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth was not a new plan implemented by Jesus and His disciples. From the very beginning, God's intention was to restore every aspect of the world He created. His plan of salvation is not for the Jews only, but also the Gentiles (a broad term that simply means “ non-Jews ”).

The Old Testament pointed ahead to a day when all people, both Jew and Gentile, would come to the one true God. God promised Abraham that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 18:18). Similarly, the psalmist exclaimed, “Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!” (Ps. 67:5). God told Isaiah: “I will make you a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Is. 49:6). God's heart has always extended to every nation on earth.

When Jesus came as the Messiah, He demonstrated the worldwide scope of His mission. Even though His initial focus was to go to the “lost sheep of ... Israel” (Matt. 15:24), He always had a larger goal in mind. The Jews tended to focus on their national heritage and to look down on the Gentiles. They particularly disliked a group called the Samaritans. Yet Jesus had a loving discussion with a Samaritan woman in John 4 and demonstrated His heart for those outside of the people of Israel. Similarly, Jesus healed the demon-oppressed daughter of a Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:28). Jesus' goal was “to seek and to save the lost ” (Luke 19:10), including the wealthy and the poor, the accepted and the outcast, the Jew and the Gentile. Luke's gospel especially highlights this theme, where God's grace reaches even the least likely.

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) proves that Jesus wants all people to know Him. Both then and now He works through His disciples by His Spirit to accomplish this very purpose.

1. How should God's heart as revealed in the Old Testament and in Jesus' ministry affect the way we think about and relate to those people who seem "unreachable"?

A Jewish Messiah for All People

After He rose from the grave, Jesus announced to His disciples that the Holy Spirit would empower them so that they could be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The rest of the book of Acts explains how this played out, beginning with the growth of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 2) and ending with Paul's proclamation of the gospel from prison in Rome (Acts 28).

Acts 10 records an especially significant moment in the history of the church. God directly sent Peter (who, like the rest of the disciples, was a Jew) to bring the gospel to Cornelius (a Gentile) and his household. At this point in history, the Jews avoided close contact with the Gentiles. Yet God gave Peter a vision to show him that the gospel was for all the nations. As Peter told this household of Gentiles about the new life that God offers through Jesus Christ, they believed, and God testified to the validity of their belief by sending the Holy Spirit upon them.

As the gospel continued to take root in the non-Jewish world, a question emerged: Did these Gentiles need to become Jews before they could become Christians? Remember that God's plan of redemption had been firmly rooted in the people of Israel from the time that God chose to bless Abraham. Jesus was a Jew, and the concept of the Messiah was Jewish to the core. Some believed that while the Gentiles were invited to share in the life of the Jewish Messiah, they could only do so by taking on a distinctly Jewish identity. The issue came to a head in Acts 15, when the leaders of the church gathered in Jerusalem to decide how these Gentile converts should be handled. Should they submit to the Law of Moses? Did they need to be circumcised and offer sacrifices? James offered this solution:

Acts 15:19–20 // We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

Basically, they decided that being a Christian is not the same thing as being a Jew. This was a turning point in the spread of the gospel. While Christianity will always have Jewish roots, it is not bound to a particular ethnicity. The gospel is good news for all nations.

2. Read Acts 15:6-21. How is the global aspect of God's plan of redemption demonstrated in this passage?

An Apostle to the Gentiles

When God chose Paul to be an apostle, He specifically called him to reach the Gentiles. The second half of Acts focuses on Paul's ministry and follows his missionary journeys across the vast Roman Empire. In most church circles today, we tend to think of Paul mainly as a theologian. We explore his letters as we look for answers to deep theological questions. But most likely, Paul would have thought of himself primarily as a missionary.

Paul said that he received his apostleship "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations" (Rom. 1:5). His ambition was to share the good news in areas that had not yet heard about what Jesus had done (Rom. 15:20). And when people responded and began to meet together as Christians, he urged them to walk in obedience.

Paul had some important things to say about the Jew/Gentile question. He argued that faith in Jesus Christ was all that was necessary to become part of God's people. It's not about fulfilling the Jewish law or identifying with a certain ethnicity—all people have sinned (Rom. 3:23), therefore all people need God and His salvation. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the only bases for sinners to be reconciled to a holy God, regardless of their ethnicity or background. No other work or ceremony is necessary. To add to this firm foundation is to pervert the gospel (Gal. 1:8). Paul could not have been more clear on this important issue: There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:28–29)

3. Take a minute to meditate on Galatians 3:28–29. Why do you think Paul made such a big deal about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles?

Proclaiming the gospel to a lost world cannot be just another activity to add to the church's crowded agenda. It must be central to who we are. It forms our identity. Being a follower of Christ means being a part of this mission. The gospel message was never intended to be a private matter. As Jesus told His disciples, "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden" (Matt. 5:14). The light was intended to invade the darkness. The entire New Testament is about Christ's redeeming the world and calling every nation on earth to praise Him for this.

When Jesus called the twelve disciples to follow Him, He promised to make them "fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17). These disciples, some of them former fishermen, would now "fish" by telling people what they had heard and seen in Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection. Their goal was to be intentionally seeking new followers of Christ. Though Jesus certainly spoke about how we are to live our lives, His instructions were far more than an ethical code to be admired. He was preparing His followers to engage in the battle for souls. In our modern world, it is increasingly popular to keep your faith to yourself, to not "push your beliefs on others." But according to Jesus' commands, our faith is anything but private. He tells us to proclaim His message everywhere and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). These are our marching orders, regardless of whether or not the world approves.

Every aspect of our world has been stained by sin and death. From the very beginning, God has had one plan of redemption, a plan that reached its culmination in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The people around us may not realize that they are lost and broken (though they often do), but the world is in desperate need of redemption. God is working to set this broken world to rights. As we will see in the next session, this will not be fully accomplished until the story ends. But He has given His church the task of sharing His good news and bringing healing to that which is broken.

4. What does it mean to be a “fisher of men”?

5. Is there anything about your life that would identify you as a “fisher of men”? If so, what? If not, what can you do to grow in this area?

We all have a responsibility to take part in this mission, but we will all play different roles. Some of us will be sharing the gospel in some remote jungle or deep within Muslim territory. Others will be sharing the gospel locally while training others to go to the less-reached areas. Those who feel called to spread the gospel locally should still pray diligently and give sacrificially for those who leave. We all have to be involved. Carrying the good news into every corner of the world is the mission that Jesus left for us. Missions cannot simply be a department of your church. It should be a vital consideration in everything your church does. A church that does not care about reaching the nations is not a church in the New Testament sense. Missions is our identity. It cannot be neglected without compromising who we are and dishonoring the One we claim to serve.

6. How would you describe your church’s attitude toward and participation in spreading the gospel to all nations? How might you encourage your church to work toward this end?

7. What is your own involvement with missions? Are you at all involved in going, sending, training, supplying, praying, etc.? What changes might you need to make to this area of your life?

The book of Revelation assures us that God’s purpose to save people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9) will succeed. Let there be no confusion: God’s mission cannot fail! While aspects of Revelation can be confusing for all of us at times, it clearly teaches that God will redeem a people from all parts of the earth through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ. It seems the apostle John (the author of Revelation) was overwhelmed as he wrote:

Rev. 7:9–10 // After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

This picture of worship in the book of Revelation should give us confidence in our great God. All authority belongs to Him, and His plans always succeed. Therefore, we should have confidence as we reach out to the world around us. Because the Holy Spirit empowers us, we can be certain that our effort to make disciples of all nations is not futile. With God on our side, victory is assured. If God is for us, who can be against us (Rom. 8:31)? Even when we are rejected and endure suffering for our witness, God is completely in control. The power of the gospel will ultimately prevail. So, pray, go, share, and rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ.

8. How does this picture of a multi-ethnic multitude worshipping God at the end of history affect the way you think about our task of reaching out to the nations?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you a burning desire to see the good news of Jesus Christ embraced in every corner of the world. Ask Him to show you what part He wants you to play in seeing His name spread around the world.