

Title: The End of Missions<sup>1</sup>  
Text: Gen-Rev  
Theme: A Biblical Theology of Race (God and the Nations)  
Event: Mission Conference 2010 – opening sermon  
Prop. The Kingdom of God is comprised of people from every sector of life.

Racism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, forced migration, forced assimilation are sadly present and historical realities. No single race has a corner on the market of the sin of racism. Racism is not an issue of skin, blood lines, language or ethnicity, it is an issue of the heart. Every human is born with a sinful heart that believes itself to be superior to others. We are predisposed to see ourselves as being intrinsically better than others. The blinding, binding, grinding, and hardening sin of pride destroys, corrupts, poisons relationships on a personal level, and looks for military, economic or political excuses to carry out satanic schemes of destruction. This is our world. It is ugly. It is sinful. It is broken. But this morning and next Sunday morning, I want to bookend our missions-fest with two sermons that show you the plan and the power of the gospel as it relates to needy issue. If you are going to go across the street and around the world, you are going to encounter people who are different than you. I not only want you to know what God's plan is for people who are different than you, but I desire for that plan to give you picture, a gospel-based picture, a Christ-centered, Lamb-Worshiping, Savior-exalting picture of what this is. So, this week I am going to preach on the end of missions. What is the end of missions? What is our reason for going across the street and around the world? When will we know when our task is done? When will the mission of missions be completed? The end of missions is presented in these passages and to look at our world it is one of the most scandalous truths in the Bible.

Read Text: Rev. 5.9-10; 7.9

Two guys, two testaments, and one story, one ending.

## **1. Two Guys, Two Testaments**

OT - Jeremiah 38 – Ebel-Melech

How many of you are familiar with the man in the Bible named, Ebel-Melech? Jeremiah the prophet predicted that Jerusalem was going to be delivered into the hands of the Babylonians because of her sin. This, was not, as you can imagine, good for morale. So, instead of repenting, the people treated Jeremiah as if he was the problem. However, the king needed him for information since Jeremiah was a prophet. So, the king had a problem on his hands. People in high places accused Jeremiah of being a traitor, and the king did not defend him, and allowed the officials to do with Jeremiah what they pleased, which was, put him into a mud-bottomed cistern, where he was left to die. The nation had rejected God, and his messenger. The Babylonians were at the gate, Jeremiah was in this pit, the Word of the Lord was rejected, it was a desperate time for the nation, and extremely hopeless situation for Jeremiah. But someone chose to rescue Jeremiah. The man's name was Ebel-Melech. This man was a Cushite, that is, he was from

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<sup>1</sup> I have benefited much from J. Daniel Hays, *From every People and Nation: A biblical theology of race*. New Studies in Biblical Theology, Series editor, D.A. Carson, IVP, 2003, as a major resource for this message.

Ethiopia. Many have assumed that because he was from Ethiopia, that he was black and that he was a slave in the household of the king. A closer look at the text reveals that the assumption is right about the race, and wrong about the position.

The fact that this man is a Cushite (Ethiopian – ESV), is emphasized in the text (38.7, 10, 12; 39.16). Ethiopians were known in Jeremiah's Jerusalem (13.23). The Cushite kingdom was a powerful kingdom that stood for almost 2,000 years and occupied the territory just south of Egypt. Together with Egypt, they attempted to stop the advance of the Assyrian empire, and now the Babylonian empire. Since, Egypt was the major ally to Jerusalem in attempting to stop Babylon, it is not surprising at all, that Cushite officials would be in the palace in Jerusalem. Since the name, Ebel-Melech means, servant of a king, many have assumed that he was a slave who had been either a gift or a purchase somewhere along the line.

The problem with that view is that when you look at the text, it does not fit. A slave cannot simply go before the king. And if a slave was in the presence of the king, he would never talk to him the way this man did. Finally, look at the response of the king. He gave Ebel-Melech 30 men with which to go and rescue Jeremiah. Upon closer examination it has been discovered, that this term, when used in the context of a ruler, implies submission to a ruler, not slave social status. The Cushites and the Egyptians enjoyed a long history together. In that literature (Egyptian), high government officials frequently referred to themselves as servants of the king or pharaoh. That same designation is found in Jewish literature as well. The point is very clear. The Jewish officials reject the Word of the Lord and are against Jeremiah, so they throw him into a cistern. The Ethiopian, accepts the Word of the Lord and rescues Jeremiah, although Jeremiah has to stay confined to the courtyard. Finally, the Babylonians break through and they arrest the king and free Jeremiah.

An interesting postscript is added in 39.15-18, where God promises Ebel-Melech that he would be protected by God because of his trust in God. The Ethiopian was delivered because of his faith when the Jews were enslaved because of their unbelief.

NT - Acts 8

The Ethiopian Eunuch is a very interesting story, which many have understood as the result of the gospel beginning to be spread around the world. But, keep in mind that the book of Acts was written by Luke. Luke, more than the other gospel writers emphasizes the racial diversity, and harmony that was experienced and championed by some in the early church. In fact, when you look at some of the wording you begin to see what Luke is doing.

Eunuchs were not permitted to serve in certain aspects of the priesthood, and were denied full membership status in Israel. Luke is showing that the body of Christ is different. When the Ethiopian asked, (v.36) what hinders me from being baptized? He was asking a loaded question. Is there something wrong with my status, race, or (perhaps) physical condition that would exclude me from full participation in the church? What is the answer? Nothing! The reason that Luke, under the direction of the Spirit of God includes this story in the book of Acts is very clear. He is showing the barriers have been removed and that any physical or racial boundary has been destroyed by the cross. These two narratives taken together have much in common:

- Both are officials from Ethiopia
- Both are i.d. as eunuchs
- Both believe in the prophetic message of God when Jerusalem. rejects it.

But I think there is even more to note about the Acts 8 account. A black African believed, was baptized and went back to his nation before Cornelius was converted, and before Paul was converted. In fact, when you look at Acts 1.8, so far, Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria have been in view, and now the “ends of the earth” are coming into play, starting with Africa. The first converted foreigner recorded in Acts, is African. So, the Spirit of God directs a Greek-speaking Semitic Jew to lead a black African eunuch to Christ in one of the first evangelistic encounters recorded in Christian history, setting the stage for the explosion of the gospel into the world.

## **2. One Story, One End**

### **A. Genesis 1-2 – God is the Creator of all people.**

The Bible does not begin with the creation of a special race of people. Adam and Eve are not Hebrews, Egyptians, Canaanites or Europeans. Their race is not identified. They are not African, Caucasian or Semitic. When God created Adam and Eve in his image, he not only gave them the capacity to reason and to reflect His attributes, but God made them his representatives on the earth with the ability to relate to God. Psalm 8 makes it clear that humans are distinguished from the rest of the created order.

When you realize that every human being has been made in God’s image, then you must concede that racism or the presupposition that any race, particularly one’s own race is in some way inherently superior to another is a denial that all people have been made in the image of God. Along with that, Prov. 14.31 and 17.5 connect the fact of God’s creation of the human race with one’s ethical behavior toward another person who is different than you. Therefore, the oppression of another person due to socio-economic standing or racial inequality should be seen as an affront to God. As the creator of all people, all people on the earth owe God their absolute allegiance.

### **B. Genesis 3, 9.25-11 – the human race is divided from God and each other**

God told the human race to increase and fill the earth (9.1). Instead, they united against God and God judged them by scattering them into nations as the result of the human race’s failure to obey God. They were one blood under God’s blessing, but became diverse and scattered into many languages because of God’s wrath against their sin. National and racial boundaries are the result of sin and judgment, not a divine order given at creation to keep people in certain categories.

### **C. Genesis 12 - Deut. – God promises to bless the nations.**

God’s promise to Abraham is one that will involve the creation of a nation through whom all of the nations will be blessed. We discover that God is going to use a great king (Gen. 49.10) to accomplish this. This call (Gen. 12.1-3) introduces us to God’s incredible plan that culminates in

Jesus Christ. But from the beginning God has the diverse peoples of the world in view. God focuses on Abraham, but not exclusively. Even Abraham is blessed by one who is not a descendent from him, (Melchizedek).

So, sin scatters the nations, but God is going to unite the nations through the nation (descendent) of Abraham. The death of Christ was the means by which God began the process of re-uniting the races into one nation. God's goal was to have a people who loved and worshipped him. These people were to be unified in him. For the church to separate itself over race is a practical denial of the gospel. A taste of this was given even in Israel.

#### D. Joshua – 2 Chron. - **Some Gentiles are drawn to God**

In choosing a nation, God sought to affect the world. But, even the nation of Israel was not one pure blood line, as if often assumed. The sons of Jacob, and the fathers of the 12 tribes did not marry amongst themselves exclusively. Judah and Simeon both married Canaanite women. Joseph married an Egyptian, and when Israel left Egypt they did so as a “mixed crowd” (Ex. 12.8). The crowd that camped at the base of Sinai was not an exclusive ethnic community.

Moses 1<sup>st</sup> wife (2.15-22) was the daughter of a Baal-worshipping priest in Midian. When Moses married her he was running away from his people. When Zipporah rejoins Moses (chap. 18) she is now the one who joins him and his people as God-worshippers, rather than him joining her. Not too long after this event (Numbers 25), Midian becomes a serious threat to Israel. Midianite women lure Israelite men into immorality and the worship of Baal. This is a serious threat to the very existence of the nation. Their purpose was to be the people of God. You cannot be the people of God and worship Baal. So, the attempt to infiltrate Israel through idolatry and immorality (they always go together) has to be seen as a serious threat to national security. Therefore, one of the last public acts of Moses is to lead Israel to wipe out the Midianites in battle, which is generally not a nice thing to do to your wife's family. So, keep this in mind. His marriage to Zipporah is never presented as something that is all that good. He marries her when he is running away. But that does not seem to be the case in Numbers 12.1. Perhaps Zipporah is dead now. The text is silent. But, we discover that Miriam and Aaron are talking about Moses because he had married a Cushite.

That means that Moses married an African woman. This woman could have been someone that he knew from his youth in Pharaoh's palace, or someone he met after the Exodus began. Either way, the text indicates that it is a recent marriage and her ethnicity is stressed which contributes to Miriam and Aaron complaining about it. How does God respond? Moses' family apparently does not approve of an interracial marriage, but God does. In fact, it is Miriam who ends up being cast out of the camp (and the people of God) for a while. But, doesn't the law prohibit Israel from intermarrying with foreigners? Yes, if they are idol worshippers, and/or not followers of Yahweh. They were prohibited from marrying Canaanites because they were idol worshipers. Race was not the issue, faith and theology were.

The region along the Nile and south of Egypt was called Cush. Egypt referred to the people as *nehshiu*. In Egyptian, the prefix “ph” functioned like a definite article. When you put those together you get Phinehas. His name literally meant, “the Negro, the Nubian, or the Cushite.”

Phinehas is the hero of Numbers 25 and is set apart by God for a special blessing (25.11-13). In Numbers 31, Phinehas leads the battle that defeats the Midianites. Later, in Psalm 106:28-31, Phinehas's act of obedience was considered an act of faith, whereby he was credited as righteous. Those are significant words. What is clear is that at the highest level of leadership of the nation of Israel, there is an obvious multi-ethnic component that is not warned against, but in both cases, there is affirmation, not on the interracial aspect, but on their faith and obedience, which reveals the interracial issue for what it is – a non-issue, except for the fact that it helps illustrate the eventuality of the one nation under God as the people of God.

E. The Prophets – **The nations will see God's glory**

**Isaiah 2.2-4**

This theme is repeated throughout Isaiah, and the nations who are described as flowing into Jerusalem will be a Jewish remnant, the Assyrians (hated), the Egyptians and the Cushites.

11.10-12; 18.1-3; 45.14; 45.22-23; 66.18-24 (see Genesis 10)

The message of God is not for the descendants of Jacob, but for the whole world, and those of the world who respond are the true children of Abraham.

Psalm 67; 68.31-32; 87.4, 6

F. Gospels – **the Kingdom of Jesus is for all nations**

More than any other of the gospel writers, Luke includes aspects of race in the most central elements of this theology in Luke-Acts. But, he is not the only one to address this.

Matthew begins with a reference to Abraham, implying an allusion to the Genesis promise of blessing for all nations, and closes his gospel with the great commission. The mission to the Gentiles is found throughout Matthew's gospel (8.11). Even in the opening genealogy, there are four women named, two of which are Canaanites, one is a Moabitess, and the fourth was originally married to a Hittite. Interracial marriage is featured in the line of Christ. This does more than cross a line, it removes a boundary. Mark records that Jesus spoke of his house as a house for all the nations, and John records (10) Christ's language about the "other sheep" and the "one flock." But it is Luke who has the most to say about it.

**Luke 2.30-32**

G. Acts, Epistles – **the gospel goes to the ends of the earth.**

One gospel + many races = one people  
Only the gospel can do that like it is supposed to be.

## **Acts 1.8**

Acts 2 sits in between Genesis 10 and Rev. 7.9 Pentecost looks back to Genesis 10 and looks forward to Rev. 7.9 Referring to Pentecost, Stott says that, “Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly than this the multi-racial, multinational, multilingual nature of the kingdom of Christ.”

The church in Antioch is described in Acts 13.1. It is clear that Luke describes these leaders as being a culturally and socio-economically diverse group. Theologically, they were tight, but racially or socially diverse. In fact, Simon (Simeon) was probably from Africa, or was of African descent.

Galatians 3.14, 26-29 - Galatians makes it clear that Jews and Gentiles are no longer divided. Christ’s death has brought them together. Therefore all expressions of racial, ethnic or social divisiveness are betrayals of the gospel.

Ephesians – 1, 2.1-10, 14-16 - We are not only reconciled to God, we are reconciled to each other. Christians are not only equal, they are joined together.

Colossians 3.1-4, 11 - Barbarians were Gentiles who did not speak Greek or did not live according to Greco-Roman cultural norms. Scythian came to refer to the most negative elements of the Barbarians. So, Paul is challenging the idea that the church can take worldly views of segmentation and bring them into the church.

## **H. Revelation - God’s multi-national family**

The history of this world is the story of violence and war, much of which is driven by arrogance, and greed shrink-wrapped in racism. Apart from the gospel, this world will never experience the unity that she was intended to have. Standing in stark contrast to the killing fields of Cambodia, the gas-chambers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich, and the mass graves in Rwanda is the picture that John paints for us in Revelation 5 and 7. The people of God will be a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-national group of people who with one heart, and one voice, around one throne will sing and praise, and worship and declare so unanimously and powerfully till it echoes through all of the corridors and canyons of the universe, filling every crevice of creation with this glorious truth – Worthy is the Lamb. This is the end of missions. This is the goal of missions. This is the moment when our mission is completed. The church can do what the world cannot, because we have what the world does not. We have the gospel. We have the good news that by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, God and sinners are reconciled. Since God has resolved the most difficult issue of reconciliation between God and man through the power of the gospel, then the gospel most assuredly resolves the issue of personal, ethnic, and socio-economic reconciliation. In Christ we are one. In Christ we are made into one holy nation. So, church, arise and live as you are called. Speak the gospel with boldness because it is the most powerful force in the world. Be a taste now of that day to come. Rejoice now in the fact that in that day, there won’t be an Asian section or Latino section or Native American section, but there will be one people where only because of the cross, we will belong. But, until that day, we are to live in such a way that people now, are given a taste of what that day will be like.

John 3.16 For God so loved the world (that means that he loves people who look different than you, just as much as he loves you, and he loves you and them so much) that he gave his only Son, (because only in giving up his infinitely righteous Son to carry our sin, could his Son pay the price for our salvation), that whoever believes in him should not perish (which is what we should do), but have eternal life.