

Missions Month 2015
The Mission of God and the Missional Church
 Sermon 1: “*The ‘when’ of missions*”

Passages: Genesis 3:1-15
 Matthew 1:18-25

Let’s pray.

Exactly one day after my 11th birthday (on September 17th, 1966) a new television show aired in the USA...and it soon became my favourite! It was called *Mission: Impossible*. Over the course of the next 7 years (168 episodes), I watched as Jim Phelps (the head of a super-secret government agency) sent out his secret agents on covert missions to attempt the unmasking international criminals or rescuing hostages. Though countless intricate plots, dire situations, ingenious devices, split-second timing – I was kept on the edge of my seat for 60 anxious minutes.

But, of course, **their mission was**, humanly-speaking, **always impossible!** And so, to accentuate this fact, the show always began with Jim Phelps playing a tape in some, dark secret, back alley or phone box...a tape which not only outlined the enemy plot, but it made it absolutely clear that if a member of the IMF were to be caught or killed, “*the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions.*” The tape then gave Mr. Phelps 5 seconds to accept or to reject this impossible assignment, concluding with these famous words: “*This tape will self-destruct in five seconds.*” Its smoky demise led straightaway into the show’s memorable theme music.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACV4r7oiPHU>)

Of course, Mr. Phelps always accepted the assignment, and what was thought to be an ‘**impossible mission**’ always turned out to be **possible** for the IMF... but just by the skin of their teeth.

Now, as human beings, we also face an **impossible mission**. Ever since the Fall of humanity in Adam and Eve, sin has increasingly had a destructive influence over the world. The enemy of God (aka ‘Satan’) has hatched a plot to destroy us all!

The question is, what can **we** do? And the answer? Nothing! We can do nothing! For this mission really is **Impossible**...and no amount of *human*

cleverness, no collection of man-made gadgets or clever disguises, will mend our broken world and heal our souls.

Fortunately, as the Scriptures teach us, ***“With God everything is possible!”*** God can fix what we have broken. God can restore what is beyond our power to repair. God can do what we cannot do; namely, reconcile the human race back to himself and bring healing to a shattered world. That’s what theologians call, ***“The Missio Dei—the Mission of God”!*** Thankfully, God has chosen to embark on a mission to fix this world! In the words of N.T. Wright, God’s mission is one of *“putting the world back to rights.”*

But, of course, it’s a trap to think that **we** are called to be the IMF... taking orders from the invisible voice of God in the dark alleys of this world. Remember, in human terms, this mission is truly “impossible”! No, although the voice on that tape is the voice of God, **He speaks**, not to us, **but to His Son!** In the secret counsels of the eternal Trinity, the Father asks the Son whether or not **He** is ready...if He will accept this mission to enter into the fray of human sin and self-destruction, becoming the Father’s secret agent *“to put the world to rights”*.

This is an incredibly important distinction to hold onto...and I’ll tell you why.

I can clearly remember back to when I was a brand new Christian, and how the Baptist church that I belonged to was big on ‘missions’. Each year, they had a missionary convention (something like our missions month) and all of us young people were encouraged to consider going to the mission field, as if that was the highest of all Christian callings. Indeed, most of the sermons we heard during that time were focused on *our duty* to fulfil the (so-called) *Great Commission before it was too late*. We were told to *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel.”* God’s question from Isaiah 6 was often asked of us; ***“Whom shall I send?”***; and, of course, the correct response was, ***“Here I am, Lord; send me!”***.

In other words, *missions* was clearly about **us**. God was sending **us** to fix the problems of the world. Mission was something that we did! We were going to do great things *for* Jesus...in His name. This was an incredibly urgent priority.

One of the amazing truths that I was to discover in my seminary education, however, was that the Biblical understanding of missions is really focused, primarily, on us! It is not primarily about human beings being ‘sent out’ by God to do a high-impossible task on His behalf. (Sure, there is a sending side to

missions, but that comes much later in the program.) No! The most fundamental concept of ‘mission’ found throughout the Bible is that **God, Himself, is on a mission! The Father sends the Son, and the Son sends the Spirit.** Indeed, the Bible’s overall thrust is really one, long revelation of God’s intervention—of His long-term plans and actions on behalf of the human race, to re-establish His rule over His earth. Indeed, the Bible repeatedly presents a God who is unquestionably purposeful and decisive... ‘for us and for our salvation’, constantly making choices as to how he will resolve the problems He sees in our fallen world.

As Christopher Wright says (in the introduction to his massive book, *The Mission of God*) “*God walks the paths of history (pinning) His mission statement to every signpost on the way.*”

Now, for the next 6 weeks of our *Missions Month*, we’re going to explore what this means. We’re going to take note of those signposts of history! And we’ve decided that the best do this is by breaking down this theme of *the Mission of God* into 6 basic questions: **When? What? Why? How? Where? and Who?** Each of these questions will help us to explore a different angle to God’s universal plans and purposes, encouraging us to better understand where we fit in to His grand scheme.

The first question we want to explore, then, is: **When? When did God first engage in this *Mission Impossible* to overcome the destructive effects of sin?**

To answer that question, we need to go back to the earliest chapters of the Book of Genesis...to Genesis 3:15.

We all know the story, right? God created human beings in His own image and likeness so that He might have fellowship with us and that we might serve Him faithfully as managers of his creation. To put it another way, God was to be the King who reigned over heaven and earth, and we (human beings, made in His image) were to be his royal family, charged with the authority to implement His reign.

But, as the story unfolds, we discover that the human race is not satisfied to simply be God’s ‘princes and princesses’. We want to be kings and queens ourselves. As indicated in verses 5 and 6 of Genesis 3, what really tempted Eve was the thought of being “*like God, knowing good and evil.*” Adam followed suit...and before you know it, the entire human race had succumb to this disease.

Clearly, what this shows is that humanity's sin is not some minor offense...one which God can simply ignore. We have engaged in an outright '*coup d'état*'; a rebellion against God's reign over us as King. The result is a pervasive brokenness in creation. We have shattered the intended perfection of God's world.

Of course, even when we recognise our blame for the problems of this world (everything from wars, to personal health problems, to climate change), we will soon discover that we are powerless to fix the mess we've made. Even the greatest efforts of science and humanism have failed to bring this broken world back to the pristine beauty and order of its original perfection. **Only God can mend what we have broken.**

And that is why this must be "God's Mission!" ...a mission first revealed in Scripture in Genesis 3:15. (Most scholars refer to this verse as the "*proto-evangelium*"—that is, it's the "*first good news*" found in the Bible.)

Let me read verses 14 and 15 to you again.

¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field... ¹⁵And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel."

It's easy to overlook what's being said here, so let me make 3 clarifying points:

1. When God speaks a **curse** over the 'serpent', it's obvious that God is terribly angry! But there's more to it than that! The word 'curse' is actually a *description* of what the serpent has begun to do to God's good earth. Satan has successfully *cursed* the world by lying his way into the Garden and extending his own rule of darkness inside God's pure and holy creation! The blessed life, health and harmonious relationships that God intended are all being challenged—they are being cursed.
2. Although God is angry, He will not fight evil with evil! (That is, He will not contradict His own nature of love by resorting to aggression or violence.) What will He do? **He will fight evil with righteousness! But, of course, that takes time. And that's why He initiates a long-range plan to reverse the Fall through "the seed of the woman", Eve.** (Notice: the Hebrew uses the singular word, 'seed', here). There will

one day be an offspring of Eve who will not give in to Satan's lies and deceptions. Rather, He will fully resist the temptations of the devil and live in perfect obedience and faithfulness to the Father. It will, in fact, be the power of His pure and undefiled life (as a perfect human being) that will "*crush*" the head of the serpent! Satan, the liar and deceiver, will be unable to get a hold on Him! Satan will have no grounds to manipulate or condemn him. And although this serpent, the devil, will **temporarily** "strike" His heel (foretelling the crucifixion), the fact is that the head of the serpent's offspring will be "crushed", indicating a **permanent** end to evil in this world.

3. But what is the most amazing part of God's Mission is the fact that this plan will take thousands of years to realise! It's amazing because it shows the extreme patience and forbearance of God! His mission is, first and foremost, to love the world and bear with its faults and failures, all the while bringing to pass His divine solution. Furthermore, at every step of the way, God will watch over 'the seed of the woman', protecting it and preserving it, making sure the genealogical offspring of the woman are not harmed by the Evil One, until the day when Jesus can be born of a Virgin in the city of Bethlehem, thousands of years later!

I say that this is the amazing part of God's Mission because this is what creates the real tension and intrigue of the OT. Why else is the OT filled with genealogies? **Genealogies confirm that...**

- a. Despite Cain's murder of his brother, Abel (who was the first seed-bearing son of Adam and Eve), God raised up another righteous offspring in the child, Seth. God, then, guarded him and his descendants for the many generations that followed.
- b. All throughout the days of the flood, God preserved 'the seed of the woman' in Noah and, then in his son, Shem, whose lineage would, years later, bring forth a boy named Abraham.
- c. Through Abraham's journey from Ur to Canaan, and despite Sarah's barrenness, God preserved the seed into the next generations of Isaac and Jacob.
- d. When Jacob's sons refused to have children through Tamar, God preserved the seed, protecting it even as the Israelites were in Egypt or as they wandered through the wilderness towards the Promised Land!
- e. And even when, many years later, Israel forfeited their right to live in the Land, even then, God still preserved the seed

throughout the 70 years of Israel's exile in Babylon, until the day they were restored.

The point is, God was on a mission—a mission to preserve the 'seed of the woman' as it was passed on from generation to generation...until, after several thousands of years, the day of Christ's Incarnation finally arrived; that day when the Word of God finally became flesh in the womb of that most famous descendant of Eve, the Virgin Mary! For thousands of years, the patience and perseverance of God protected the chosen offspring of Adam and Eve until the day when Jesus was born!

Again, I say to you-- that's why genealogies are so important in the Bible! They are there to prove to us God's faithfulness to His own mission which inevitably leads us to His Son, Jesus Christ.

If you jump to today's Gospel reading from Matthew 1, you'll get a much shortened version of this very long, OT story! Not surprisingly, the chapter begins with a genealogy, quickly taking us through an overview of all the dangerous moments when the seed could have been snuffed out...but wasn't! Then, in verse 20, we're told how an "angel of the Lord" tells Joseph that he will have a son, and that he is ***"to give Him the name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."*** Have you ever wondered how this angel knew that this was the name the baby should be called? Well, let me remind you that angels don't age. That means that the same angel that visited Joseph in a dream that night had most likely been around when God uttered the curse over the serpent and made a promise to see him defeated by the seed of the woman! Indeed, I imagine that this same angel had also watched the long line of descendants who carried that seed over the generations. He was probably also involved in protecting that seed over the course of time.

In other words, this angel of the Lord was well-aware of God's mission. His/her awareness of that mission is what made it possible for him/her to be involved in it. The angel peered into the mystery of our salvation and, thus, was able to participate in it!

As we begin our **2015 Missions Month**, it's worth remembering that *it's only through our knowledge of God's Mission that we, like the angel of the Lord, can truly get involved.* After all, it's not our mission—it's God's. It's not up to us to *get out there and do missions!* In fact, if it was up to us, it would be a **mission impossible!**

But the undeniable fact is that the mission started with God, a long, long time ago, when, in response to the Fall of His perfect world and the destructive threat that hung over the heads of those made in His image, **God** initiated a plan (in the counsel of His Triune Self) to fight Satan with the power of holiness, by raising up a perfect man... an offspring of the woman who could finally “crush” the serpent’s head.

What that means for us is that Missions is not just a good idea... an optional extra for the Christian life...if we feel the calling, or if we have the time get involved. No, Missions is at the heart of God’s agenda. It is His plan to save His world. And our joy and privilege is to simply align ourselves with what He is doing... by our holy worship, our holy lifestyle, our holy marriages and families, our holy professions and callings in the workforce and in our daily lives. It is only then that we can participate in God’s mission and see Satan’s head crushed under OUR feet! Romans 16:20 says, ***The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.***

In this light, our Missions Month is but a healthy (and very necessary) reminder of our place in the eternal ‘when’ of God’s cosmic plans and purposes.

Let’s pray.