

# Overcoming Obstacles to World Missions

by John Piper

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*This sermon addresses obstacles to engaging in missions, emphasizing the importance of surrendering to God's call. It discusses the urgency of missions over cultural warfare, the hope amidst bleak end times, and the struggle of leaving comfort for the sake of the Gospel. The response includes insights on eternal rewards, the brevity of earthly pleasures, the promise of God's presence, and the value of sacrificial service.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 24:6, Mark 10:29, Matthew 6:19, Matthew 10:29, 1 Corinthians 15:58, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Matthew 28:18, Philippians 3:7

**Topics:** "Surrender to God's Call", "The Urgency of Missions"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Thank you, Carmela and Mark and Tom. Father, cause the word to ring out in China in the informal ways, in the formal ways. Cause it to ring out in Cameroon.

Cause it to ring out in Elliott Park and Phillips neighborhood and where any of these folks right here are dwelling and use these last few minutes of talk before we pray to remove obstacles that might be standing in the way of our fullest engagement for the sake of the peoples. I pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

So we heard this morning five obstacles removed by Andrew Scott. Number one, I'm not worthy. You are worthy in Christ.

Number two, I'm not called irrelevant. You're made for this. I love that.

Three, I'm not able. Yes, you are. S H A P E. Spiritual gifts, heart passions, abilities, personalities, experiences.

You're able. Number four, it's not in my job description. Yes, it is.

It's already written in. Did I say five? I only have four. So there they are.

So now I have three more, three more obstacles that are in the way, perhaps for you. And if not for you, they are for someone. And I have a response to these obstacles.

Number one, the present emphasis in America is for many on cultural warfare and nation building as the most urgent form of neighbor love so missions can lose its urgency before the political spectacle of fighting for the outward forms of American civic virtue. I'm so fired up about culture war that I'm losing it when it comes to the nations. What would be a response to that? Ten years ago, Robert Woodbury published an astonishing article in the American Political Science Review.

The article is called The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy. And the thesis of the article was, I was so fired up about this when I read it, I wrote an article about it at Desiring God, and you can look at that to see the summary. Quote, the work of missionaries turns out to be the single largest factor in ensuring the health of nations.

And he said this dropped on him like an atom bomb as a social scientist. To be more specific, here's a more specific quote. Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average economically developed today, more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment, especially for women, and more robust membership in non-governmental associations, close quote.

And then he adds this, what he calls a nuance. I said, are you kidding me? This is the atomic bomb. This is not a nuance.

He says, there is one nuance. Quote, the positive effect of missionaries on democracy applies only to conversionary Protestants. Protestant clergy financed by state, as well as Catholic missionaries prior to the 1960s, had no comparable effect in areas where they worked.

What is a conversionary Protestant? A conversionary Protestant is us, just crazy conservative, simple Bible-believing people who think our main job is to rescue people from perishing and get them converted from false religions to following Jesus. That's a conversionary Protestant. And then he concludes like this.

Most missionaries didn't set out to be political activists. But came to colonial reform through the back door. That is, quote, all these positive outcomes were somewhat unintended, close quote.

So here's my conclusion from that and incentive for us. The implication seems to be that the way to achieve the greatest social and cultural transformation through missions is not to focus on social and cultural transformation, but on conversion of individuals from false religions to faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins, for the hope of eternal life, or to put it another way, missionaries and pastors and churches. Now, I think this applies here as well as on the mission field.

Missionaries and pastors and churches will lose their culturally transforming power if they make cultural transformation their energizing focus. While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Now, scarcely for a righteous man will one die.

But perhaps for a good man, one might dare to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Therefore, having been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from wrath.

This is what drove Paul. Everybody's under the wrath of God. I've got the news that can rescue them from the wrath of God.

There isn't anything else more important in the universe than rescuing people from the worst outcome of their eternity possible. It just drove him. So, incentive, turning the obstacle into an incentive.

This means that the missionaries that will do the most good for eternity and time, for eternal salvation and temporal transformation, are the missionaries who focus on converting the nations to Christ, forming healthy faith maturing churches, and then from that route teach the disciples to obey all that he commanded. That's obstacle number one that I've been thinking about, and my response to it. Obstacle number two, related almost the flip side of the coin.

First one was like, I'm so engaged with fixing America or fixing the world. The other one is, the world's unfixable. It's going to hell to hand back, basket in, and there's really no future for anybody doing any good.

Here's the way the obstacle would go, or the objection. The end of the age is near, I hope so, pray so, hasten the day of the Lord. The end of the age is near when the love of many will grow cold, lawlessness will be multiplied, wars and natural disasters will increase, so there's little hope for missions to advance with any significant triumphs.

Here's what Jesus said, Matthew 24, Jesus answered his disciples, see that none of you, no one leads you astray, for many will come in my name saying, I'm the Christ, and they'll lead many astray. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, see that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet, for nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All of these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

A little pause here. One of the reasons I think Matthew 24, which I'm reading, characterizes the entire 2,000 years and implies an intensification of those negative things at the very end, one of the reasons I believe that is because that analogy of birth pangs. Birth pangs start small, they intensify, and they give birth to a new age.

I mean, in his analogy, this creation is groaning in childbirth. It's been groaning in childbirth ever since the beginning, but just before the baby is born, you ever been with her? Okay, keep reading. Verse 9 of Matthew 24, then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my namesake, and then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

This is what Paul talks about in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, how bleak it will be in the apostasy of those days, and because lawlessness is increased, Paul picks up on that in 2 Thessalonians, the love of many will grow cold. So, if you stop there and say, that's really bleak. I think those days are here, and therefore, there's no point in being, I mean, nothing good is going to happen.

No point in you guys pouring your lives out in missions right now. It's just, it's over. That mentality.

Here's the next verse. The one who endures to the end will be saved, and this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come. Okay, here's my question for you.

Given the reality, and I think it is a reality that the end is really bleak, and given the reality that this gospel will be preached as a testimony to all the nations, all those nations, all the 300 and whatever it was in China, and all the others around the world, all of those are going to be reached, and then the end will come. Who's going to do that in the midst of that horrible world? It won't be lukewarm or cold Christians. It will be martyr types who are white hot for Jesus, and I said to my preaching class the other day, I see one at least, two who are here from that class, three, Daniel, auditors count, I said, they're going to come from your churches, right? They're going to come from your churches.

White hot Christians just before Jesus comes are going to come out of your white hot churches, aren't they? Yes, they are. In other words, in that season of great apostasy and great lawlessness and great coldness, there will be these glorious pockets of white hot Christians producing missionaries that finish the Great Commission. There's no other explanation for how you can put together the love of many will grow cold, and this gospel will be preached.

Back to back, there they are. So my answer to the second obstacle about a pessimistic eschatology is that I share it, but that's not the whole story about those end times. Those end times will have in them tremendous outcroppings of white hot Christians who are ready to lay down their lives to finish the Great Commission and hasten the day of the Lord.

That's number two. And number three, well, I thought I was so smart to set my stopwatch here. All right, we're okay.

We're going to make it. Number three, I think this one is perpetual, but in America today, so let's just think of our own situation, perhaps the most common objection obstacle to being released and free and ready to go if God should call to the nations. Now, just for instance, I'm 76, not 87 like Tom, and I prayed this afternoon.

I mean, every time this week rolls around, I just went up to my study, and I prayed, God, please, I want to be surrendered. He said, that's the issue. It's not these obstacles, not really.

It's surrender. I want to be surrendered. I'm healthy.

Look at this. I can preach. I can do this.

I want to be used, God. I want to be used. Show me I'm on the right path.

I prayed that every year here at Bethlehem. 33 years, I didn't become a missionary. And so here we are, and I've got a wife who's always said, tell me when to pack.

So I'm saying this to myself here when I say it to you. Here's the obstacle. If I leave all that is familiar, and I'm talking to myself now as an objection to go.

If I leave all that is familiar and give my whole life to an unreached people, I will lose so many enjoyments of secure, healthy, comfortable life in America, and meet so many hardships. I'm just not sure it's worth it. I think that's the real kicker that keeps people from going.

And my response to that is, it's not true. It's not true. And I've got nine reasons why it's not true.

And I've got four minutes left. Let's do this, because I'm just going to read them in a verse and read them in a verse. Here we go.

And if I run out of time, we'll give this to Brad. He can give it to you. We'll give you a few more minutes.

I was hoping you'd say. Really, we're what number one. So these are my responses to that objection and underlining it's not true.

It's not true. They won't be worth it. Number one, whatever is lost for the sake of Christ and his gospel will come back to you one hundredfold.

No matter what or how much you sacrifice, you cannot wind up with less in following Jesus. There's no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands who won't receive a hundred fold now and eternal life in the age to come. Number two, this life of earthly enjoyments is short as a mist breathed out on a winter morning.

But pleasures at God's right hand are forevermore. What is your life? You are like a mist that appears for a little time and vanishes in your presence. His fullness of joy at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Such a deal. Number three, though all forget you. I think this is what I think about.

Like I'm I'm known by a lot of people. Right. And that feels good.

Right. We like that. We like to be known.

We like to praise. We like to be commended at least by 10 or 12. And you think, though all forget you and even turn against you, if God is for you, what can man do to you? He who did not spare his own son, will he not give you everything you need? So that fear of being forgotten.

Nobody remembers I'm even here. I looked up on that screen as they went by this morning. I thought some of those people have been out there for 20 or 30 years.

Some of them are single. And I'll bet she thinks they even know I'm here. Number four.

If you lose your audience. And there's no one to rejoice with you over small successes. No, this millions of angels are rejoicing in the presence of God over every one of them.

I tell you, there is more joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Even if nobody else knows about it. Number five.

If you feel alone with no one even aware of you. Let alone praising all the good that you do. Remember, your father sees and will reward you.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. Your father who sees in secret will reward you. Number six.

If you feel that you accomplish that what you accomplish is small, and that you are wasting your life. Remember, nothing, absolutely nothing in the Lord is wasted. Because it says so.

In first Corinthians 15:58. Knowing that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain. None of it.

Ever. Number seven. If you feel that it is simply too hard to keep on giving and giving while you get so little return in this life.

While the people back home are recognized and blessed for their good that they do. Remember, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.

Because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. Which is just around the corner.

And number eight. If you think, yes, I get rewards in the life to come. But the folks back home, they get rewards in this life and the life to come.

And I miss out on the ones in this life. And I'd like to get both. Remember, there is a greater reward for greater sacrifice.

Now, I get that from second Corinthians 4:17. See if you agree. This light momentary affliction is preparing for us.

And that's the key word, *kat der gods amai*, bringing about, producing, causing. This light momentary affliction is causing, bringing about, producing, preparing an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. In other words, there is a correlation between what you lose here, what you're willing to lay down here, small or great, and what will come back to you in the age to come.

It's not as though it's equal for everybody. Finally, number nine. When the thought of loneliness threatens to overwhelm you, go deep through the promise of Jesus and experience the reality, I am with you always to the end of the age.

All authority in heaven has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you. And then you get that King James word, *lo, look, behold, I'm with you*.

I'm with you always to the end of the age. That's a double promise. Always means moment by moment, to the end means it'll never stop.

Both, I'm with you. So John Paton climbs up in the tree while 1,500 warriors go underneath, escaping for his life this close, and quoted to himself, I'm with you. I'm with you.

And he said, I would not trade the sweetness of that fellowship in that tree on the edge of eternity for anything in the world. Conclusion. Three obstacles turned into three incentives.

Number one, a life devoted to rescuing people from wrath through faith in Christ and building their faith through healthy churches is precious in eternity and powerful in time. Number two, in the darkest days, Christ will have a white hot people. So at the end of the age, the darkest days, Christ will have a white hot people for himself and will lead them in triumph to finish the great commission, even if it cost them their lives.

And number three, whatever you lose by leaving familiarity and security and comforts of your own people for the sake of Christ, it will be worth it. It will be worth it. And in the eternal day, you will never, never regret it.

So let's turn to prayer, Ben.

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