

My name is Bland, as Matt introduced earlier. I am the pastor at City on a Hill Church in Boston. We started that church a few years ago. I'm going to share a little bit more about that in a minute, but I want to, first, thank the staff here at The Village, Dallas. What a blessing they have been, great hosts. Also, just in particular, Steve Hardin. He is just a fireball of a guy, isn't he? I'm getting the feeling, subtly, that he may have the spiritual gift of encouragement, but I'm no expert. I love Steve. I just love the fact that from the moment he heard about what we were doing in Boston, he has just been a great encourager to us.

I was down a couple of months ago for the Acts 29 Boot Camp and had all the campus pastors and Josh Patterson... Those guys were all up in Boston about a month before that. We've been developing this relationship-building, and, to just be honest, we couldn't be doing what we're doing in Boston without churches like The Village that came alongside us through prayer support. I met a young woman who came up to me right after the service this morning and just said, "You know, I've prayed specifically for you in our elder-led prayer time. I just felt burdened for Boston." It just encourages me.

Boston is very intimidating. It's 97.5 percent non-evangelical. For those non-math people, that's 2.5 percent evangelical Christian. I didn't even know there was a city in the United States like that, before I started studying it, but it has been so encouraging to have churches like The Village, and so many people praying and supporting us going up, that I sometimes feel a little bit like a Navy SEAL team storming an elementary school playground. I just feel like God is just doing something amazing and not even the gates of hell are going to stop it, so thank you so much for being a partner with us in that.

Steve invited me and Mike to come down and share, and he told me, "We want to hear your story. We want to hear what's going on with City on a Hill," so I'm going to share a little kind of biographical introduction, but it feeds into the message. We're going to get into the Word in a few moments, but I want to share a little bit about myself.

As I do that, I want to start by answering a question that is, no doubt, on some people's minds in this room. It may be a very pressing question for you, that you're just going to have a problem listening to the rest of the sermon if I don't answer it, and that is...*Is this dude's name really Bland? Really? His parents hated him that much?* Yes, it is. Okay? It is my middle name, and my dad is William Bland Mason, Sr. He was named after his great-grandmother. It was her maiden name.

My dad went with William. I got stuck with Bland. I thought they hated me as a kid, but then I found out it was actually my name. I hail from the great nation of Texas. I was born in San Antonio, but I moved out. My parents immigrated to the United States when I was 2 years old, and I grew up in Virginia, near Norfolk, Hampton, Williamsburg, and that area, on the Chesapeake Bay. It's a beautiful, beautiful area there. I grew up, like many of you, maybe, active in church. Your family was active in church. They dragged you to church, no matter what.

I was there. I was active in the youth group. I went on the youth trips and that kind of stuff, but what happened is... By the time I got into high school, my life kind of diverged. In one direction was this life I had outside of church and home. Over here was the nice, church-going youth kid. Then over here was the partying, getting drunk, chasing girls, and smoking pot guy. That was so different, and I realized later why I didn't have any peace and joy in my life. It was because I was trying to live two separate lives.

It culminated at the end of my senior year. I was such a goof-off in school. At the end of my senior year, five days before graduation, I found out I was not graduating. I flunked my senior English class. I missed my final exam by three points that I needed to guarantee graduation, and the teacher (her name was Ms. Beelzebub) rounded me down. She had the option to pass me, but she chose to round me down. You can just imagine if I wasn't living for Christ at that moment, that would have just kind of sent me over the edge.

That summer, I would go to summer school in the morning, and then work in the grocery store in the afternoon (I had worked there for a couple of year), and I would get drunk at night as often as I could. That was my summer. At the end of the summer, I graduated on August 14, and left for college on August 17. I actually got into a school. They were accepting anybody with a pulse at that moment. I think they would accept anybody without a pulse if you had prepaid.

God sent me to that school and just wrecked me in a gloriously beautiful way. He put me in a room with a really strong Christian guy who was a religion major, and when I talked to him on the phone ahead of time, I was like, *Oh, no. I got a religious wacko in here. I hope he doesn't start preaching at me. I'll have to beat him up.* Then I met him, and he actually played high school football, and he was a pretty big dude, so I was like, *Well, that's out.* He didn't preach at me, but every night, I would look over at him and he would get down on his knees next to his bed with his Bible, and he'd read, and he'd pray.

What happened was, just over time, I began to see this amazing joy and peace about him. He wasn't perfect, but he just had this real, amazing joy and peace about his life. I kind of knew my life had been like this: Joy, partying, no joy. Joy, partying, no joy. I was tired of that roller coaster, and so God just really drew me back to himself in a beautiful way. I got into Scripture and got into the BCM on campus. I started going

to church because I wanted to. That's crazy. I actually wanted to go to church. I wanted to be around God's people.

My high school GPA, when I finally did finish, was 1.56. That's on a 4.0 scale, by the way. That wasn't curved at all. It was 1.56. I graduated 313th out of 338 students. Yeah, it was a commitment. While other students were studying, I had to resist the temptation and go goof off. If you read my report card, it sounded like *D-D-D-F-F-F...* My parents paid for my first semester of college because they are insane, because I wouldn't have paid for my son to go to college if he had a 1.56 GPA and didn't graduate from high school on time. I would just go burn the cash, because at least I could make a fire and warm myself or something fruitful.

God, in his grace, inspired my parents to pay for my first semester. God, in his grace, changed my life so radically in my first semester, I took 16 hours, and more than doubled my high school GPA, and from then, I went on to double major in two different schools, in business and religion. I graduated with 154 credit hours in 4 years. I averaged like 18 and a half to 19 and a half hours for 4 semesters straight as a dean's list student. I loved it. I loved school. I loved learning. I still didn't do my absolute best, but I loved it. I loved and enjoyed it. I finally just found this joy in it, going, *Okay. This is what God has given me to do. I should do it.* God gave much grace in that.

I met my wife in my junior year, about the same time God began to call me into ministry. I left there. Right after graduation, we got married and moved to Louisville, Kentucky, to Southern Seminary, where I've started an M.Div. and started pastoring at 23. This was a little rural Baptist church. They had always had seminary students, and I was 23. They really put up with some preaching there for a little while. I tell people, if nothing else, at least I read the Scripture each week, so they heard the Bible. I may not have said much that was worth anything after that.

I pastored a little church during my M.Div., and then when I finished my M.Div., I felt called to go do a Ph.D., so I went on and did a Ph.D., and pastored full-time at a county seat Baptist church of a couple hundred people. Then when I finished in '05, I began to teach on the side at a small Baptist college. Just right there, I go, *This guy who actually taught college didn't graduate from high school on time. If that doesn't point to the grace of God and what God can do in your life, then I don't know what does.* I mean, it was just a perfect example of how God delights in taking our brokenness and just healing it and bringing out of us what he has created us for.

While I was working at this college on the side, and pastoring, my heart began to go, *Okay, what's next in my life?* I'm a big dreamer. I want a big thing. I wasn't interested in moving up the pastoral scale. I wasn't interested in just going and kind of moving around a bunch. I wanted to go plant my flag for 25 years and

see what Jesus could do. I began to pray about cities. I began to pray about planting or whatever, and God began directing me to Boston.

Boston is an amazing city. It was founded by Puritans, and the founding governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a guy named John Winthrop. While the Puritans were coming across the Atlantic, preparing to land at Massachusetts Bay and found the colony, he preached a sermon that came to be known as, *A City on a Hill*. It was this beautiful vision of a community where there were no needs. No one had any extra while anyone was in need. It was a picture of doing life together, just beautiful community.

As I was reading that sermon, it just began to move in my heart for this city. Then I saw, *Oh my gosh, it's only 2.5 percent evangelical Christian!* Looking at church plants in the city, I found out Anglo church plants have like a 90 percent failure rate over the last 15 years in Boston. God said, "I'm going to give you somewhere." I had no idea he was going to give me one of the hardest cities in the United States to go plant a church in, but what a beautiful call, as God began to put that into my heart and my wife's heart. We just said, *You know what? This is it. We're moving.*

So after nine years of pastoring this county seat church... My kids were born there. I had seen people come to faith in Christ. I had baptized people's kids and seen them graduate from high school. I had seen so much. These people were part of my life. In October of 2008, I resigned from that church and we moved to Boston just in time for winter, which is not a good plan. I still don't know who recommended that, but that was our move.

God has been very faithful. We were able to plug into (this is kind of a crazy, providential story) the one successful Anglo church plant, especially among Southern Baptists. It was called Hope Fellowship Church, and it's in Cambridge, just north of Harvard. Hope was planted by a little church down the street here called Prestonwood. Have you heard of it? It's a little deal. Then I heard this morning that this church, Northway Baptist Church, planted Prestonwood, so this is some kind of like weird... *You're my grandpa*, or something, but you're also involved in this. What a beautiful circle! Prestonwood is still deeply involved with Hope. They send teams up all the time and connect there.

We launched our core group in August of 2009. On Sunday nights, we met in the basement of a Jewish synagogue (true story), and then in August of 2010, we launched on Sunday morning in an elementary school, in a gym that's around the size of this room. Then in February of 2011, we launched our Sunday night service, so God has been really good to us. I have seen his grace poured out in things I could never have predicted or even counted on or anything ahead of time, like I have in Boston. In just a couple of years of church planting in Boston, I've seen him move in ways I never have seen in my life, and so it has been a great blessing.

That's the biographical part. Now kind of tying into that though, we're going to get into the Word, so I want you to grab your Bible. Turn to Genesis 12. How we're going to tie into that is we're going to talk about mission. We're going to talk about mission in the sense of us becoming a part of what God is doing. I think, too many times, we think about what our mission is, like us personally, and we miss the big picture. I'm going to pray, and then we're going to dive in. Would you pray with me?

God, thank you for just your amazing grace to us today. Thank you for your Word that is powerful and active and sharper than any two-edged sword. I just pray now, as we look at this 40,000-foot view of Scripture, Lord, would you come? Would you open our eyes? Open our hearts to receive, hear, respond to, and believe these truths, God, that can shape us, Lord, that can change our perspective on our own lives and help us to understand, Lord, we are meant to live for an amazing story, your story. So I just pray for your enlightenment now. May your Spirit come. In Christ's name, amen.

One of the most powerful things that has happened to me in my study of Scripture over the years was around 12 years ago or so. I began to try to really get a grasp on the over-arching story of Scripture. You can read individual books, and I'm a big fan of reading through the Bible. I read through it each year. I've been doing it for about 11 years. I plan to do it until Jesus calls me home. It's a great habit to get into, but sometimes, if you're not careful because you're focusing on one verse, or one chapter, or a few chapters in a book, you forget about the big picture. Today's message is going to be that 40,000-foot view and why it's so important.

Here's the reason. Number one, it's important; number two, it just rocked my world when I got it for the first time. I was born into an upper-middle-class family, and I, like many of you, was given the same kind of message from the youngest age, that is, "You are special. You're amazing. You're incredible." Without saying it, my parents basically almost acted like I was the center of the world. I think parents do that in general. They won't tell you you're the center of the world. They just do things like organize the entire family schedule around you, and they affirm you at all times. They tell you horrendous lies like, "You can do anything..." Okay, I was the only one.

My parents told me I could do anything I wanted to do. Do you know how bad of a lie that is? I could have trained from the time I came out of my mother, and I could not be a professional gymnast. Okay? I am like a carrot. I bend a little, and then I break, so I could not be a professional gymnast. There can only be one president of the United States. They're not taking options right now for that. There's one guy, and everybody else is disappointed if that's what you thought you were supposed to do.

True story... My cousin is a colonel in the Army. He was head of the Army test pilot program for a while, and he has this crazy story of things that happened to him. He came through and came up the ranks and became friends with a guy who was training to become an astronaut. My cousin actually considered it for a little while. He had all the credentials to apply for astronaut school but just decided not to do it. His friend, though, did. He had wanted to become an astronaut before he even joined the military, so I mean this guy had a track. He was brilliant. He excelled in everything he touched and everything he did. He tracked toward that, and he got into the astronaut program.

Do you know how selective they are? Harvard Medical School has the lowest acceptance rate of any school in the United States. It has a 96 percent rejection rate. I don't even know what the astronaut program's is, but I'm thinking it's higher than that. I'm thinking it's probably like 99.9 percent of all applicants to the astronaut program do not get in, but this guy did. "You can do anything you want to do." Then, two months into the program, they run a routine medical test and find he has some kind of disposition toward a virus, and they explain to him, "You will never go into space. Not with NASA, at least." This guy's world was literally rocked. Could he do anything he wanted to? No. There are constraints in our life.

Here's what happens. We grow up in that. The parents are like, "Okay. Play all the sports you can. Have all the hobbies you can. Do all you can. You need to be playing at least three instruments by the time you're 12 years old," or whatever. It's this...press you, and then go to college. "You have to get into a good school because you have to do well so you can get a good job and make a lot of money. Then you can buy a big house and have all the dreams and hopes of this world. Then, if you save enough, you can retire really young and play the rest of your life. That's the hope, because you're important, and you're special, and everybody should want to get in on your story."

The problem with that is the day you leave for college, your professor doesn't act like that. Boston University has 32,000 students. It's the fourth largest private school in the country. They're a mile from where we meet on Sunday morning. There is no professor, this fall, who will be chasing around the roughly 8,000 freshmen and telling them, "You're special! You can do whatever you want!" There will be no professor doing that. As a matter of fact, when the freshman walks into the class that's about this size and they look out, and the professor is calling out numbers, or whatever, for enrollment, you begin to realize (this is where it comes crashing down) you're not the center of the world.

The world is not about getting in on your story. Here's the simple but accurate truth. If everybody is special, nobody is. What happens is people go, *Okay. So that's not really true, so I'm just going to try to carve out as much happiness as I can for the rest of my life.* But there's still this echo in their mind, *There's something greater. There's something more than just me living my little deal in this world.* That's where we come to God's story, which is overarching and huge, and we find in Scripture... Literally, today we're

going from Genesis to Revelation. I know you're like, *Oh my gosh, this is the longest introduction ever.* It's almost as long as some of Matt's, right?

We're going to just look at three verses and three movements, because when I started studying Scripture, a word kept coming up: *nations*. We don't have time to do it (I literally could do a whole sermon series on it), but go home, and if you have a chance, just do it on an online concordance or Bible Gateway, and look up the word *nations*. You'll be surprised how many times it pops up in Scripture.

We're going to look at God's mission to the nations. His mission to the nations is simply this. This is the overarching story, not only of Scripture, but of history. That is, God is about redeeming for himself a family from all peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations on earth. That's God's plan. It has been his plan from the beginning. It's his plan now, and it's the plan at the end. The story you and I find ourselves living in every day, walking, breathing, eating, working, studying, having a family... That all fits into that story. How sad that we end up living for our own little story!

It's like relegating Einstein to become a mall cop. What a horrible waste. You're created in the image of God. You were made to be a part of this grand story of redemption. Let's look at Genesis 12, just picking up in verse 3. What you're going to see is this word, *nations*, showing up. Before we get to it, here's just an intro. Genesis 11 comes before Genesis 12. I know that's a revelation to you, but Genesis 11 is about the Tower of Babel. Do you know what the story is? It's really the city of Babel.

All of sinful mankind had gathered in one place and they were like, "We're awesome. We need to build a city. Let's build a tower. We're going to build a tower up to heaven so we can knock on heaven and go, 'Hey, what's up God?' because we're awesome and we're amazing." God said, "No. You're going to spread across the world. I'm going to confound the languages and spread you across the world. You're not staying in one place," because that's not what God's plan was. Let's face it. God could have saved humanity at that moment. They were all gathered in one place, right?

But God had a plan to spread them across the world, because his plan for redemption involved all these nations and all these different cultures, and bringing it all together. So we see God grabbing a guy. Weird, grabbing one guy... I mean it's like counterintuitive. Humanity would go, "You know, God, you had them all together. You could have just had a meeting right there with all of humanity, but you spread them apart and now you're starting with one dude, Abraham." So he gets Abraham, he grabs him, and this is what he says in verse 3. **"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."**

Now isn't that interesting? Because Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation of Israel, right? He was the father of the Jews. He was Father Abraham. Right here, he hasn't even mentioned a nation. All of a sudden he goes, "Listen. I'm going to bless all the families..." Not of Israel. Not of one geographic location, but, "All the families of the whole earth will be blessed through you." God gives us a clue right here, 12 chapters into the Bible. For me, it's eight pages. Eight pages into the Bible, God is like, "Here's a clue. Here's my plan. This is the mission."

God's overarching mission of history is to redeem for himself a people for his own name and fame. Now to get a little more specific, turn to Genesis 22. Abraham was kind of thick, so God kept repeating the promise. Sometimes we need that, you know? Sometimes God promises something and we're like, *Eh, I don't know. Really?* Or you believe him at that moment. Well, he kept repeating himself and expanding on it and helping him to understand even more. In Genesis, chapter 22, verse 18, God says to Abraham, **"...and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed..."**

"...your offspring..." Now if we had our Hebrew Bible, we'd see that word is a singular, and if we didn't know anything else, we would just see it as a singular collective. It's kind of a Hebrew way that would say offspring as in, offspring, a singular of all offsprings. He didn't use the plural there, and nobody picked up on it at that point. But further down the line, a guy named Paul, in a book called Galatians (which some of you are maybe familiar with or have heard of)... In Galatians 3:16, Paul tells us, **"Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is..."** Anybody? Jesus! Yes, that's always the answer, right?

I tell my folks at City on a Hill... I mean we have Ph.D.'s, and I literally have a guy who is a neurosurgeon from Stanford in our congregation. It's very intimidating sometimes, to preach to them. I tell them the answer is always Jesus, unless it's the Devil, and then it's not Jesus. But always answer, "Jesus," when I'm asking, because it's going to always be right. "What's the weather like outside?"

"Jesus."

"That's right!" That's exactly what Paul was saying. Listen. Jesus is the answer! The promise God gave to Abraham about his mission to the nations... They didn't have a clue. *What does it look like? How is he going to do that?* God says, "Through your offspring [singular], Jesus." Jesus is the means for the mission. He's the means for the mission.

God said, "I'm going to bless the nations through you, Abraham," and Jesus showed up as the means of salvation for the nations. God came down in Christ, revealed this answer to this question, and put an exclamation point behind God's promise to Abraham, "I'm going to bless the nations." That's the picture

of God's mission. God's mission is to the nations. Jesus is the means. Everything is in play at this point. Everything is in play except our mission.

I think we could all accept that if God is sovereign and he could do all things, he could have brought the mission to the nations without us. Right? I mean he could have written it in the sky. He could have given people dreams. He could have done anything to get the gospel around the world, but he didn't. He chose to use us. So we see God's mission. Now our mission is this. From Matthew 28... See, we jumped from Genesis to Matthew. That's a big jump, so we're two thirds of the way through the Bible already. Some of you were getting worried. *Man, he's going all the way to Revelation?* We'll be there in like two minutes.

This is our mission. This is called the Great Commission. If you grew up in church, you've heard this a billion times, but let me challenge you to listen for the exact same language God used with Abraham. Matthew 28. **"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...'"** That's that word again. **"...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**

Now the mission here is to make disciples of all the nations. Now when we read, *nations*, specifically here, and even throughout the rest of Scripture, we need to realize and understand he's not talking about the geopolitical markings you see on a map. When you look at a map of the countries of the world today, you see what we refer to as nations. This word, in the original language, is the word *ethne*, which is where we get our word *ethnic* from. Ethnicity has far more to do with language and cultural unity and things like that and less to do with race or nationality or location.

So here in Dallas, there are multiple ethnicities. One of them is American, English-speaking people. That could include second- or third-generation immigrants who are very comfortable in American culture at this point. That's one people group, but there are also other people groups. There are first-generation immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, and maybe some from overseas, Asia or wherever, and they don't know the language. They don't know the culture. So even here in Dallas, you have the nations as defined in this text.

So he tells us to go and make disciples of all of these nations. This is a beautiful truth because he's challenging us. He's inviting us to be a part of his mission. This is the story of God's mission to the nations, and he's saying, "Hey, you. Stop living for *your* story. I'm inviting you to come be a part of *my* story, my mission to the nations." See, you and I want to selfishly kind of hijack that and live our own little secure lives, and God is inviting us. As a matter of fact, he's calling us, commanding us to go be a part of reaching the nations for his name.

Now I know some of you maybe think, *Well, what about the challenges? I mean the challenges are huge!* Let's use the early church here. Jesus gave the Great Commission to roughly 100 believers in the early church. This is 100 people in what was, at that time, the Roman Empire, which was somewhere around 65 million to 75 million people spread over 3 continents with a pluralistic culture of religion and jacked-up sexual immorality all over the place. It's like the United States...10 times worse.

Yet these 100 Christians, in 3 centuries, managed to take the gospel to every city so all the major cities of the Roman Empire were 90 percent Christian or more, and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 3 centuries. Do you know how they did that? They didn't do it by electing a Christian Roman Emperor. Some would argue that Constantine was the worst thing that ever happened to Christianity in the Roman Empire, and I would actually suggest that myself as well.

It wasn't because they got all kinds of support from those around them. Around 65-68, there were Roman Emperors who killed Christians like rats, exterminated them like rats. *This is an awful little sect of Christians. These people are annoying. They believe in this Jesus guy. Let's kill them all.* That was the basic movement during that time, and yet the gospel could not be constrained. Why? It's because God's mission cannot be stopped!

It's happening, and it's going to happen, and it's going to happen (sadly enough) whether you participate in it or not. But for you to choose to live for your own little story, as if that's epic, is like... God gives us, like, *The Lord of the Rings*, the trilogy. Take the whole trilogy together, all the extended cuts (it's like 42 hours or something) and put them all together. This is us. We're the most individualistic culture in the history of the world, so it's not surprising that as Christians, we want to make everything individualistic.

Oh, I'm going to play a major role for Jesus through The Lord of the Rings. No, you're not. You get like two seconds in scene two of movie two, and you're in the background. You can either play your role to support the greater story or you can stand there and look at a rock. That's what some people are doing. They're like, *That's a really amazing rock.* It's like you're missing an epic, amazing story, because you're self-absorbed.

God has invited us. I am not intimidated by the fact that Boston is 2.5 percent evangelical Christian. Listen. Some of you, when you heard I had a Ph.D., you were impressed. Listen. They're not impressed there. I literally have a brain surgeon from Stanford. I have a guy getting his Ph.D. in medical engineering at MIT. Three of the five guys who are on my elder track... one of them is a post-doc at Harvard. One of them is getting his Ph.D. in economics at Boston College. Another one is a Ph.D. at MIT. I have a guy getting his

MD., Ph.D. at Harvard Medical School. They don't care that I have a Ph.D. They're like, "Oh, that's nice. I have three."

You could be intimidated, thinking, *Oh, these super-hyper-educated people... I can't do that. I can't reach that culture.* Even where you are, you're like, *Oh, these people are so much smarter. They're so much better off financially. They're so much cooler,* or whatever. You're like, *I just don't think I can.* Don't be intimidated! God is not short on resources. The power of God brought the gospel through the Roman Empire so that it ended up here today. If my God can do that, my God can take the gospel and just blow America's doors off, and it's not going to be because we have a Christian president.

I'm not against a Christian president, okay? So don't email me or whatever. I am all for a Christian president, okay? We should have Christian politicians. We should have Christian doctors, lawyers... That's the beauty of it. You can serve Jesus in the mission, whatever he calls you and equips you in your vocation to do. God help us, we don't all need to be ministers, okay? Ministers didn't win the Roman Empire. People, God's people, won the Roman Empire, with his power, and so whatever God has called you to do, do that for the glory of God, and be on mission in that field.

This brings us to the final scene here. I love this. We've seen God's mission, and he invites us to be on his mission in Matthew 28, and now turn to Revelation, chapter 7. Revelation 7 is like the end of time. This is big. This is after the great battle scene of *The Lord of the Rings*, when it should have ended (you know, the first time it should have ended), in *The Return of the King*, when they were up on the top of the city, and they were coronating the king and all of that. That's this scene.

I'm just saying at that point, everything is done. Everything is over in the story. There are no new Christians at this point. There are no changes. There's no evangelism. There's no spreading the gospel across the globe. This is the end of the mission, and this is what the scene is that God gives to John.

"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!'" The Lamb is Jesus. Yes! You're getting it. All right. He's the offspring. Remember? He's the offspring from Genesis 12. Here's the culmination.

"And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'" I love that scene. That's the end of *The Lord of the Rings* times a million! This is history. It's

all tracked down to one giant multi-cultural worship gathering. It's not going to be a bunch of white people. Okay? Amen.

It's not going to be a bunch of white people. We're probably not going to be singing in English. If we sing in the predominant language of most of God's people, it might be Spanish. It might be Chinese. I don't know. Maybe we'll just all sing in our own language at that point, but this is all the nations. God wanted all the diversity, all the beauty of all these ethnic groups from all over the world, every corner, every tribe and tongue and nation, brought before the King who has died and the Lamb who was slain for their sin. What a beautiful picture!

I don't know if you've ever thought about this. This may be the most encouraging thing you hear today. If you're a Christian here today, you are in the Bible. I know that sounds crazy, but God gave John a glimpse into the future at this moment, and this was all of God's people, all of them, past, present, and future, gathered before God. Now he wasn't like, *Oh, hey, there's Bill!* It wasn't like that. It was like all of us together, and you're there! You're part of the story! But the question is...will anybody else be there because of you?

Now you don't have to go to New Guinea. Like I said, right here in our backyard in Dallas... I don't know. There are still some lost people in Dallas, right? A couple of people don't know Jesus. Yeah. There are people who don't know Jesus in Dallas; therefore, the mission should go on in Dallas. But in places like Boston, there are more challenges because there are even less believers. We stand today, we stand after the Great Commission, after Christ has died, after he sent us out, and we're standing before this great story, which we don't know when it will happen, when Jesus will wrap it all up and he'll come, but we're standing in front of that.

What we do now can affect that. The people who need to hear the gospel... People are like, *Well, that means I might have to stop spending as much time with my Christian friends.* Well, yeah! You get to hang with them forever! You can catch up then, right? I mean seriously. You should have Christian community, but if you're not intentionally carving out time to befriend people who, right now, aren't going to be in that scene, who are you living for right now? You're living for yourself, your comfort, your security.

Listen. I had to pack my wife up. My kids cried. They lost their friends. They were 13, 11, and 8 at that time. I packed them up in a truck and moved them to Boston. We knew like four people, but they had prepared, and they knew their life was about this greater story, so my kids don't hate me. They love being in Boston. Crazy enough, everybody is like, *Well you took your kids to godless Boston.* No, I took my kids to Boston and they now know their own beliefs better than they ever did in Kentucky. They are now more grounded in

worldview. When one of my sons' teachers was a cross-dressing individual, it confronted his worldview. He has to process that and think through it.

My kids are all evangelistic. They all have non-Christian friends who they're very close with, who they're sharing the gospel with, and God has already saved some. How cool is that? I took my kids up there to be a part of planting a church, and God is using them in his story, and they'll never forget it! They're prepared right now. I could send them anywhere in the world, I believe, when they're old enough (like 40 or something). They could. They're well-prepared and they understand King Jesus may call them to the nations, which is beautiful. We're thinking the youngest is probably going to marry a missionary, which would be awesome. She'd love to go overseas. Or a church planter; that would be cool.

Let me share just a couple of thoughts, and I'm going to close with a couple of stories of God's grace, then we'll wrap up. Two thoughts... Right now, the practical implications of this are, number one, for some of you, you just need to get serious about Jesus. You can't get serious about mission while you're compromised in sin. If you have habitual, unrepentant sin you can't seem to get over, if you're in bondage, if you're in porn, if you're sleeping with your girlfriend, or ladies, if you're just buying clothes because you just want to impress other people... If you're living in that struggle of sin, and you're not set free from that, you need to get serious about Christ.

Listen. You can't enjoy this mission, this being a part of this bigger story, while you're bound up with sin, because Jesus invites you into the freedom of living in that great story, not bondage. So some of you need to maybe be a part of the Steps programs, or need to get in an accountability group or something, but you need to get serious about your walk with Christ. Time is short. People need to hear. The story is happening. It's like you're sitting in the green room, and *The Lord of the Rings* is going on, and you have a part in scene two, and you're just going, *Uh...* You need to get out there, and you can't get out there unless you are walking with Christ. When you're walking with Christ, he will direct you in the mission.

Secondly, we need to think missionally about our lives. If you're walking with Christ (not perfection) and you're not in bondage to habitual sin and junk, you are now able and open to walking on mission. Christ delights in having us be a part of his mission. I can say this truthfully. Have there been struggles moving to Boston? Sure! Listen. I owned my own home in Kentucky. I had an acre of land that backed up to a state park golf course.

When I sold my house, I couldn't have bought a burned-down crack house in the worst area of Boston for what my home in Kentucky sold for. Boston is one of the top five most expensive markets to live in in the United States. It's crowded. Transportation is crazy. It has its challenges, but the blessings of being on mission for God there have far, far outweighed any challenges I have found.

I have never sensed God's presence in my life in any greater way than when we moved. My wife and I called it our big adventure. We said, "We have one shot, honey. We're going to go see what we can do, and plant our flag for 25 years." We talked about what we were going to do after we retire. The average age of our church is probably around 26 right now, so we're hoping to get a few older people in there so I can stay longer, but at some point, I'll be too old to pastor a church with an average age of 26. We'll go do whatever at that point, but I want to see what Jesus can do, and I'm looking forward to it. He's already doing crazy things.

I just want to share with you a couple of those things. In an amazing way, Boston is the nations. God has brought the nations to Boston. It's in the top 20 global cities. We have people from all over the world because of the universities, because of medicine, because of research, and because of finance. It's an amazing city. Our local population is 40 percent non-Anglo. About 24 percent of that is Asian, and our church reflects that.

I love the fact that I look out on a Sunday and I know we could have like five or six different languages spoken. I'm seeing the nations. We have people who are going to school in Boston who are from Middle Eastern countries, whom God is drawing to salvation while they're students. What a beautiful thing! We get to send them back as missionaries when the time comes. We have the nations at our doorstep. That's one of the reasons why Boston was so strategic for me. We've seen God's grace in amazing ways.

A couple of things, and then I'll close. One story is an amazing story I can promise you I never would have even remotely known about if I didn't step out in faith and move right before winter. It's a horrible idea to move to Boston right before winter, but I did, and God did something amazing. Ten days after I landed in Boston I got a phone call from an organization called Baseball Chapel. I'm sitting there talking to a guy. Baseball Chapel places chapel leaders in all the major and minor league teams across the country.

I'm talking to a guy and I'm like, "I just got here. I'm looking at boxes in my living room. I am not a Major League Baseball fan. I quit Little League because I had a bad average. I like basketball and football!" This guy says, "Well, we need a chapel leader to the Boston Red Sox. It's a volunteer position, a few hours on Sunday, and a little bit on homestand... Let's talk." About six weeks later, right before Christmas of the first year I'm in Boston (I've been in Boston less than two months), I get the position of chaplain to the Boston Red Sox.

If you don't know this, Red Sox Nation is a religion. It's the largest religion in New England, and they have a large church in Boston. It's the biggest one. It's big and green. It's called Fenway Park, and there is a lot of worship that goes on in there. I'm not even a baseball fan, and in less than two months, God connects

me with one of the most culturally important things in the city of Boston. We had a Faith Day at Fenway last year, the first one in their 100-year history. I'm telling you, it has been amazing to just look at that. My wife and I still laugh about God opening that door up.

That's just one story, and I can tell you more if you want to talk to me afterwards, but the other one is one I would never ask for, and nobody would, but God just gave it to me as a bitter gift he used. It was the beginning of September 2009 when we had launched off and stepped out from Hope. We're doing our own deal on Sunday nights. Six weeks later, I go to bed on a Tuesday night.

At 12:10 a.m. on October 14 of 2010, my heart stopped. I had what's called a cardiac arrest. It wasn't a heart attack. It wasn't a clot or anything like that. Electrically, my heart just stopped, and I went into a seizure. I was asleep. We were asleep, and I woke my wife up. Fortunately, by God's grace, she was able to and knew how to give me CPR. She gave me CPR for eight minutes, and a cop came in. If you don't know this, 95 percent of all people who have a cardiac arrest away from the hospital never make it. God did an amazing thing.

I go in the hospital for two and a half days. I'm in a medical coma. They think I'm going to survive. My heart is beating. I'm breathing on my own, but they don't know what kind of brain damage I have. By God's grace, when I woke up two and a half days later (I tell people this), I didn't have any more brain damage than I had before. I woke up and this amazing peace came over me. I never struggled with dying, and I don't know where that comes from except to say that did not come from me.

God granted that, and I firmly believe it's because people were praying. Mark Driscoll tweeted and put a thing on Facebook, and I went back a while back and looked at it. There were 200 posts on his, "Please pray for Bland Mason." There were 200 posts on that of people who just wrote comments, let alone all the likes or whatever. People prayed for me all over the United States and as far away as Australia. I had what I can only describe as a "God time" in the hospital.

They had not run a test yet. They didn't even know what was wrong with me, but they said, "We're going to get to the bottom of it, Mr. Mason. We're going to help you figure out what happened to you, because this is not supposed to happen to 36-year-old guys. They ran an MRI and I had multiple EKGs and echocardiograms. I felt like an 80-year-old lady. I had a heart catheterization. They looked at my heart. That's one of the most detailed ways they can look at it, and they never found anything. They never found anything wrong with me, and I made a 100 percent recovery.

God did this amazing work in our church. I really thought we were going to scare off... We had these new people visiting. I was like, *Oh, no. They're going to run away.* I went in the hospital, and that Wednesday

night, we had three community groups. They were meeting, and they all prayed for an hour and a half to two hours. Deep, just passionate prayer is what I hear from people's testimonies. I went home nine days later, and I went to church 11 days later. I would have preached that night, but they wouldn't let me. I was so glad to be there. I had people come to me and say, "This was like Peter! This was like Peter in the book of Acts! You were in prison, and we prayed for you, and now all of a sudden it's like you showed up!"

God bound those people to me on a very deep level, and bound to City on a Hill. They're our covenant members now. They're people who've literally changed their plans to move out of the city after graduation or when a job transfer offer came, and have stayed in the city. I literally have had people get offered better jobs to move out of the city of Boston, and they stayed where they were because of the mission. Someday I'm going to write a book called *Dying to Plant a Church*. I'm going to talk about how God used it as an amazing plan. I'm not going to recommend it as a strategy.

I just want to challenge you on it. This was one of the greatest things that came out of it. I had an amazing peace come over me, not just of not fearing death and not fearing whatever the doctors told me... Honestly, I had no fear, but I had this amazing peace that my life was exactly on the track God wanted it to be if I had died. I believe every Christian should have that. If God calls you to stay in Dallas, then stay in Dallas and know that's your call, but don't stay here because it's comfortable. If you get a call to New Guinea, go to New Guinea! You have one shot with this life, and guess what. Not everybody gets to live till they're 80 and die in their sleep.

Let me challenge you and encourage you. You guys have heard this because you've heard... Chandler's deal happened six weeks after mine, so my wife and I were just really burdened, and we prayed so hard for Matt and his family when that was happening, because I was still kind of physically recovering. Let me just challenge you. If you're not a Christian here today, God is inviting you into a relationship with him, and he's inviting you to be a part of this grand story. If you are a Christian here today, then he's inviting you into this grand story. The worst thing you could do, the silliest thing you could do is to live your life for you.

I want to challenge you to pray, as we're getting ready to sing. We're getting ready to respond in communion. I'm just going to ask you to bow. We're going to pray together. You do as the Spirit leads today, and if you want to talk about mission or whatever, I'll be over here after the service is over. Let's pray together.

Jesus, what a beautiful thing that you came and you died for us, and not simply so we could just meet you at the end, but so we could be on mission for you, to serve you, to take your name to the nations. God, we are here today. If we are Christians in this room today, we're here today because someone took the gospel

to us. May we carry on that mission and be a part of that story, Father. May the gospel not terminate on us. May we be a conduit for your glory, for your name, for your fame, and for our joy. In Jesus' name, amen.

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