

Will the Great Commission be fulfilled in 2023?

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The Gospel Sign

What is the most important sign that we are living in the season of the Lord's return? Some might say the re-establishment of the nation of Israel (Matthew 24:32-33). Others might point to the declining condition of our culture (Luke 17:26-29), or the growing apostasy in the Church (1 Timothy 4:1-3). But, to me, **the clearest and most definitive sign that we are living in the season of the Lord's return is the promise Jesus gave His disciples in Matthew 24:14.**

The disciples had been admiring the Temple and its courts when Jesus surprised them by saying, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left on another; which will not be torn down." Shocked, they replied, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:2-3).

In response, Jesus delivered what we today call the Olivet Discourse, listing several events and circumstances that would occur before "His coming" and "the end of the age." But then, in verse 14, He said, "This Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."

In other words, **when the disciples asked Jesus, "When are You coming back?", He answered, "Only after the Gospel has been preached to all nations."**

The Nations

To understand Jesus' answer and how it points to His imminent return, we need to consider the concept of "the nations" in Scripture. **How close are we to seeing His command — to preach the Gospel to all the nations — fulfilled?**

When we think of the word "nation" we think of a country, like France or India or China. But the word has a different meaning in the Bible. In the New Testament and in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, the word translated "nations" is the Greek word *ethnos*, from which we get the English words *ethnic*, *ethnicity*, and so on. An *ethnos* is a group of people who share a common ethnicity, ancestry, heritage, culture, geography and/or language — an *ethnolinguistic* people group.

According to "Finishing the Task," **there are more than 12,000 of these biblical nations scattered around the world.** Some modern countries have only a few people groups, but some have many. Nigeria has over 450 "nations" within its borders. India has a similar number. China has hundreds as well.

The Great Commission

In Matthew 28:19, **Jesus commands His apostles to go and make disciples of all nations. Today we call this command the Great Commission.**

It's important to understand that when Jesus gave this command to His followers, He wasn't just making up a challenging task for them to accomplish while He was away. Instead, He was commanding them to fulfill the promise God had made throughout His Word — that **the blessings**

of the Gospel were not just for the Jews, but for every nation. At the Great Wedding Feast of the Lamb, when Jesus and His Church are united forever, the multitude will contain men and women from every nation on earth. Not one will be left out.

Where Do We Stand?

The Church has been working for 2,000 years to fulfill the Great Commission, and much has been accomplished. But exactly where do we stand in the effort to make disciples of "all nations?"

Amazingly, today there are believers in all but about 200 of the world's 12,000 people groups. About 6,000 groups would be classified as "reached," meaning that they have a significant Christian population. Nearly that many would be considered "unreached," meaning that while they have some Christian presence, it is small — less than 2% of the population. But a couple hundred groups remain that are called "unengaged," meaning that no one has ever shared the Gospel with them and there has never been a single Christian among them.

As you might expect, these remaining unengaged groups are mostly very small, typically just a few thousand people. They are found in remote, difficult, dangerous places: in vast deserts, high mountains, and deep jungles. Many are Muslim groups. Some are aggressively hostile to outsiders. Most are illiterate. They are the last groups for a reason!

But over the last few years, the number of unengaged groups has fallen dramatically. In 2005, there were more than 3,500 unengaged people groups. Even as recently as 2017, there were still more than 1,400 groups with no known Christians. But today, there are only a few hundred unengaged groups remaining.

The Holy Spirit is working with urgency, in places where until recently the name of Jesus had never been heard, to gather in a great end times harvest. By God's grace, I believe the Church will reach all the remaining groups by the end of 2023. We are very close to the finish line!

And Then the End Will Come

This brings us back to Matthew 24:14 and Jesus' promise that "this Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come." When will the end come? Jesus said, only after the Gospel has been preached to "all nations."

If we are only a few years away from crossing this finish line, could we also be only a few years away from the return of Christ? I believe we could!

In fairness, we can't be sure exactly where the Great Commission finish line lies. Peter tells us that "the Lord... is patient... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9, NIV). Even after the Gospel has been preached to every people group, Jesus may tarry so that every person has the chance to hear.

But once we've crossed that finish line — there are disciples in every one of the earth's people groups — the return of Christ will be even more imminent than it has been in 2,000 years. Jesus said that the Gospel would be preached to all nations "and then the end will come." We can't know for certain if that will be immediate, but based on Jesus' promise, the clock is ticking for His return, and He could come at any time. I think it will be soon!