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## Portraits of the Unstoppable Church, Part 1

Missions Conference 2005

Message by Pastor Jeff Petersen

Interviews with LBC Missionaries

(Drama: The Story of Perpetua)

This story that you just saw is not just a drama. It is actually based on a true story as recorded in the journal of a Christian in the early third century. I have to tell you, in some ways that bothers me because in our civilized, enlightened, twenty-first century world, those things seem almost incomprehensible. In our country we are, by and large, isolated and protected from true persecution. We are comfortable, wealthy, well fed and generally pretty happy. Frankly, most of us don't like to talk about or even think about such things. To be honest, I am just thankful that I live here now, rather than there then.

In fact, I have trouble relating to or even understanding some of Perpetua's words: "We walk together in the great hope of martyrdom. We wanted to die a death that would bring glory to the Lord Jesus and have others having been impacted to have faith in Him."

Can you imagine actually thinking that way? I think in our day and age one of our primary goals is to avoid any and all suffering or pain at all costs. When we do suffer we wonder what went wrong. Why would God allow such a thing? But Perpetua saw things differently. She said, "We did not see our imprisonment as God abandoning us; rather, it was God using us for His greater purpose." God using us for His greater purpose!

One of the saddest things about life in the twenty-first century in America is that we live for so little: comfort, pleasure, wealth, possessions, positions, titles, prestige, entertainment, experiences, escapes. The ironic thing is that in so doing, we are really not that different than the people of Perpetua's day. I am not talking about the Christians in her day; I am talking about the crowd.

In the days of the Caesars in the great Roman Empire, the thought of the great kings was that if they gave the people bread and circuses, that would keep the people from causing trouble. The belief and the meaning of the statement of "bread and circuses" was that if they kept the people well fed and well entertained, then those things alone would become the people's highest ambition. Today that is the unspoken, perhaps even unconscious, mantra of many in America. It worked pretty well in the Roman world, except for a pesky little group of people like Perpetua—Christians who clearly understood that God's calling for their lives and His plan was for far more than just comfort or pleasure. They understood that God's plan was to literally change the world through them.

A couple of months ago we began a journey together here at Lincoln Berean through the Book of Acts. Today I would like to take you back to the beginning of that journey in Acts 1. In the first chapter of Acts we saw Jesus' last earthly encounter with His followers. Forty days had passed since He was crucified, buried and then amazingly resurrected from the dead. Just before His ascension into heaven, He meets again one last time with His disciples. Let's pick up the story in Acts 1 with verse 6:

**So when they had come together, they [*the disciples*] were asking Him [*Jesus*], saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"** (Acts 1:6, \*NASB)

As Bryan reminded us back in September, the disciples were stuck on an agenda. They expected the Messiah to take over and establish an earthly reign. They thought Jesus was going to immediately

rule, and they were ready to be a part of the court of the king. But Jesus had another agenda for them and for us.

**He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (vs. 7-8)**

**“In the power of the Holy Spirit, be my witnesses.”** That was the mandate. That is the mission. Those words were not only a clear directive for the followers of Christ; they were also a prophetic promise. The progression of the gospel is exactly what we see in the rest of the Book of Acts and in the rest of church history as well. In the early chapters of Acts, we are seeing together the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel right there in Jerusalem. As the journey continues to unfold, we are going to see the gospel go to Judea, then to Samaria, and then begin to go out even to the ends of the earth.

Do you know what I often forget? I often forget that these marching orders were not just for Peter, James, John and the others. They are for me as well. Jesus gave this command in Acts 1:7-8 and then He left. In verse 9, He ascended to heaven and not another word was spoken. The last word, the final say, is the lasting word. This was the mission for them. It is the mission for us. As we continue to study the Book of Acts, we are going to continue to learn much more about God’s mission for our lives. We are going to continue to be challenged about who we are, with powerful biblical principles about what it is that we are to live for.

Before we go any further in the text, we want to put some flesh on the framework given in Scripture. We could have begun the service by just telling you the facts: that in the year 203, a noble woman named Perpetua was martyred for the faith. The information would have been the same; the impact would not—because we all understand the power of stories and how they touch us, how they challenge us, how they move us, inspire us, or cause us to reflect. That same thing could be said of pictures or of portraits. They can, in a glimpse, capture us in ways that facts and data just do not.

As we continue our journey, continue going through the Book of Acts and continue to learn about the unstoppable Church, we want to take some time to show you some portraits of the unstoppable Church. Just as in Acts, where nothing could stop the movement of God’s Spirit as it went through chapter after chapter, still today, after Acts, the same is true. In fact, if we could somehow get a glimpse of what God is doing today, even in just one single day all over our world, we would see that everything we are learning about in the Book of Acts was really just a little beginning of a world-changing movement of God—as the people of God were used of God to be His witnesses and build His unstoppable Church throughout all of the world.

I think the reason that Perpetua saw things so differently than I often do is that Perpetua clearly understood her purpose. She was not fooled into thinking that she existed for her own glory. She was not lulled into living only for her own gratification. She was not tempted into seeking her own prestige or comfort. She knew and believed that what Paul said was true: “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.” She lived for Christ. She died for gain.

Perpetua lived on this earth for 22 years. She suffered in a prison and died a cruel and painful death in a coliseum here on earth. The crowd cheered as they ate their bread and watched this disgusting service.

But fast forward. It is now the year 2005, and Perpetua has lived for 1,802 years in glory. As she does, she delights in the wondrous presence of her King. There is another crowd, a great crowd of witnesses that cheer as they worship together the living God and enjoy His great reward. She did not live for the bread and the circuses of her day. She lived for the glory of her God and for the advancement of His mission on the earth.

She is not alone. For from that very first day in Acts to this very day in November, followers of Christ have heard and heeded the call. God has been in the process of transforming millions upon millions of lives all over the world as He builds His unstoppable Church.

Let the glimpse begin...

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### **Narration by Worship Leaders:**

Today we celebrate the story of the unstoppable Church, as we look at a few portraits that will give us but a glimpse of the God who is at work in wonderful ways, in millions of lives, in countless places. Just as the story unfolds in the Book of Acts, so it continues today. Just as those first disciples heard and heeded the call to be His witnesses, so it continues today.

And though the task has never been easy, the power of our God and the passion of His people have been simply unstoppable. Through trials and difficulties, even opposition and persecution, followers of Christ have heard and heeded the call. Many have even given their lives to be His witnesses, that people they would never know—people like us—would hear, believe and be redeemed.

Today we are a part of the unstoppable Church. Today each of our stories is a part of the unending story of God's redemptive plan. But let us never forget that God has chosen to use people as agents of His plan—as the hands and feet, the hearts and voices of His promise.

And let us never forget those whose passion for our Lord led them to sacrifice all for Him and, ultimately for us—people like John Wycliffe. (Video clip of John Wycliffe from *The Story of the English Bible*)

And so, in the centuries to follow, the gospel did spread from the shores of England all across the colonies of America. And from America, millions would not only join the story of the unstoppable Church, but millions would go out from the church to be His witnesses to the *other* ends of the earth.

The sacrifice of men like John Wycliffe would also inspire future generations of transformed people in England—men and women who understood that the Church *is* unstoppable and the call of God is clear: to be His witnesses to the very ends of the earth.

And where men like George Whitefield and John Wesley were called to proclaim the gospel from England to America, not so very long after them, men like Hudson Taylor and C.T. Studd went from England to China. Let's turn our canvass toward China to draw a portrait of what God is doing to tame the heart of a dragon. (Video clip: *The Cross in China*)

In spite of much opposition, God has done the amazing in China. And, amazingly, even people from right here in Lincoln, Nebraska are being used by God to build the unstoppable Church all the way over in China.

This past summer, Ben Chestnut from Lincoln Berean had the opportunity to reach out to Chinese students as part of a Navigators' Summer Mission. Ben said going to China "...has helped me to take on a more global perspective," understanding that "Christ has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."

In China, Ben had the opportunity to build relationships and to share more of God's love and plan with Chinese friends. Through believers lovingly sharing Christ to the ends of the earth, the unstoppable Church *is* being built. And even in a place like China, lives are being radically changed.

Here's another portrait: (Video clip: *The Cross in China – Testimony*) Not only is God transforming the lives of people in the cities of China, He is building His unstoppable Church in tribes and among peoples throughout East Asia.

(Video clip: *The Hohhot of China*) Not so far north of Hohhot, in the country of Mongolia, LBC missionaries Mark and Karen are spearheading our church's efforts to build the unstoppable Church in that needy land. As they build relationships, God gives them strategic opportunities to share. Recently cancer struck a lady who has worked with them. But through this tragedy, Mark and Karen have had opportunities to talk to her further concerning her need for Jesus. And last week she prayed to ask Jesus to forgive her and save her.

Mark also recently had the chance to share Christ with the father of a man in their church. According to Mark, "He has had a stroke and is not doing real well. But it shook him up some and he is much more open to the things of Christ. He said that he is now believing in his heart."

Tragedy and hardship are a part of life for all people in all places. But when we go forth to be used of God to advance the unstoppable Church, God meets and redeems people in the midst of those hard times.

Bill and Linda lead our efforts to build the Church in the city of Macau. Bill reminds us that, "The unstoppable Church really finds its power in the overwhelming grace of God. In our weakness we try and be faithful to the assignment God has given us, and His grace does something that goes beyond the ordinary to surprise us."

Bill and Linda were surprised by Lori. For nearly a year Lori attended English classes at the church but showed no "unusual interest" in spiritual things. But at the beginning of this past school year she showed up "adamant that she wanted to become a Christian." Linda has been discipling her, and last December she was baptized and joined the church. Lori is now a key member of this new student movement. That is a part of the unstoppable Church and the grace of God.

### **Testimony: Jim**

*"My name is Jim, and for the past two years my wife and I have had the privilege of serving the Lord in East Asia. We have seen the reality of the unstoppable Church in the life of a former Buddhist monk named Mike.*

*Being a Buddhist, Mike was not expected to even open his mind to consider the gospel until after seven or eight years of sharing with him. But our missionary teammates often had deep conversations with him about his need for Jesus, often involving tears. Mike said he could see himself becoming a Christian, as he was less than satisfied with Buddhism. But he was told of the cost—certain ostracism from his village, rejection from his family, and humiliation from his parents.*

*Many people began praying for Mike. It was only a matter of a few months later that Mike walked in the door one day with great news. He excitedly reported that he had invited Jesus to forgive his sins, a miracle we doubted at first. But the change in his life was undeniable.*

*Mike used to live a double life. When he was in his village, he would put on his robes and live the life of a devoted monk. But when he traveled to the large city, he would take off his robes and proceed to drink and smoke, something a Buddhist monk would never do.*

*After he gave his heart to Christ, he was able to quit smoking for good, a miracle in itself. Also, he left the Buddhist monastery and took off his monk robes for good. Not long afterwards, he made a trip home with one of my coworkers along for moral support. His mother cried all day long when she found out he had left the monastery. Family friends stopped in throughout the day to scold Mike and urge him to return to his old life. My coworker was there to lend him strength, but this was the kind of suffering he was told he would have to experience as a follower of Christ.*

*This past spring Mike was offered a job working for a Christian relief organization that worked in his village area. Everything seemed to be going well for him and the Lord was using him to reach his own people. But one day his older brother, a well-respected monk himself, found out what Mike was doing. He called Mike on the phone to give him an ultimatum. He must quit this Christian company and immediately return home, or else his brother would never speak to him again. As a young believer, Mike buckled under the pressure, left his job and returned home.*

*Just this week, our friends are visiting Mike in his village to discern where his heart is and how God can use them in his life. Please pray for Mike and many others like him, whom God is drawing to Himself, as Christ builds His unstoppable Church.”*

### **Testimony: Jason Wilmot**

*“My name is Jason Wilmot and in the summer of 2003, I had the privilege of serving the Lord on a short-term mission in Pakistan and China. I have seen the reality of the unstoppable Church in the life of missionaries such as “Jack” and his family.*

*While in Asia, I was a part of a small group of believers who stayed in a town in western China. The population is 30,000; the number of believers is five.*

*Our team taught English classes to anyone who wished to learn, and I and two others taught the elementary-aged kids. It was painful knowing that each and every one of those children was going to suffer in hell because they’ve not heard the message of Jesus Christ.*

*Knowing this, I must rely on the truth that God is going to raise up workers to share His message. Workers like “Jack.” He’s had his home searched, been interrogated by the police, his visa denied. Yet he continues to set aside his life for the people of China. Before “Jack” and his family, the number of believers was zero. It’s now five, and it will rise. That is just another portrait of the unstoppable Church.”*

Why did God call the early church to be His witnesses? Why does He care so deeply about us continuing to fulfill His mission today? It’s because of His deep love for people and His clear understanding of the fact that they are lost without Christ.

One day there won't be missions. But there will always be worship. Because what missions is really about is the gathering of thankful, forgiven, redeemed people—from every tribe and tongue—who will join us as worshippers *forever* around His throne. And every time we hear of one who has received God's wondrous grace, that should be our response: a response of worship, joy, thanksgiving, and praise. For as we hear of their redemption we are again reminded of just how much God has done for each of us.

### **Testimony: Allison Potter**

*“My name is Allison Potter and this past summer I had the privilege of serving the Lord on a short-term mission trip in Indonesia. I have seen the reality of the unstoppable Church in the life of Pak and Ibu. Because Indonesia is a restricted country, it makes direct evangelism very difficult. Pak and Ibu are a married couple who are household helpers to “Ron” and “Lori,” the missionary family I stayed with. Over the course of the last few years, Pak and Ibu have seen Christ through the faith and obedience shown by “Ron” and “Lori” in everyday circumstances.*

*Pak and Ibu, who were very strict Muslims when they began working, are now involved in a Bible study with “Ron” and “Lori” and are interested in learning more about the true God. Because Pak and Ibu are young parents, “Ron” and “Lori” are studying parenting with them, while integrating basic biblical truths about salvation. Pak and Ibu are now studying the Bible out of their own interest.*

*Getting a Muslim into the Word is usually 80% of the journey toward Christ and is an incredible victory in a Muslim community. We are very excited as God continues to draw them toward Himself. That is just another portrait of the unstoppable Church.”*

### **Testimony: Ken & Joanne Gross**

*“My name is Joanne Gross and this past summer my husband Ken and I, along with our four daughters, had the privilege of serving for three months at a Christian hospital in a middle Eastern Muslim country. As I share with you a small glimpse of our time this summer, our heart's prayer was that we reflected the light of Christ into a dark world through our words and actions.*

*“Mummy, did you tell her about Jesus?” My daughter's question summed up one of the many reasons we went to the Middle East this past summer. While my husband worked at a mission hospital, my daughters and I spent time getting to know people in the community.*

*During one of my visits, my daughter overheard a conversation I was having with “Fatima” about the nature of children. “Fatima” believes that children are born “good” and it was impossible to teach right from wrong. During our conversation that day, God provided opportunities to plant seeds of truth about Him.*

*My daughter's question that night reflected her heart for people to know who Jesus really is and the difference He can make in one's life. “Mummy, I want to know that if I never see “Fatima” again, I might see her in heaven. Did you tell her who Jesus really is?”*

*As I reflect on my daughter's question I am challenged to look at my own heart. Despite external restrictions, God still does provide ways to reflect who Christ is and the difference He can make in one's life. Thank you, Lord, for using my daughter to remind me of what is*

*really important in this life. May my heart be as tender as hers. That is just another portrait of the unstoppable Church.”*

Today we hear much about Muslims: how they hate us, how they want to kill us, how they are against us. But are we against them? Or do we remember that they, too, are simply people who desperately need to understand the love and grace of God? Allison and Joanne have reminded us that God is building His unstoppable Church *all* over the world—even among Muslims. And believe it or not, even in Iraq. (Video: *Frontline Segment – Iraq*)

It’s not on the news each night, but God is reaching Iraqis—in Iraq and even here in Lincoln, where LBC missionary Steve Janovec spends time with people from that country every day. People like the 30 year-old Iraqi man who was recently given a Bible. He read Genesis to Acts in one week! He is seeking; he is struggling. Pray that the Lord will open His eyes, and the eyes of millions of Muslims, to see the true love of God.

One way God is reaching into the hard-to-reach Muslim world is through the air. Electronic media is penetrating through closed doors and even hard hearts. LBC missionaries Sam and Karla are involved in sending the gospel from southern Spain to the Muslims of North Africa. Thousands of people are responding. Discipleship is happening by mail and even by cell phone. And as He does, and has done in countless places ever since that day of Pentecost in Acts, Christ is turning lives completely upside down.

#### **Listen to just one recent story from Sam:**

*Two weeks ago, when two of our national workers returned from a trip inside of North Africa, they had this story to tell:*

*“We traveled to the Northeastern part of the country. After a long trip by car, we arrived at the agreed meeting place with “Mohammed.” The way he was dressed and the expression on his face were red flags, but we sat down to hear what he had to say. The story he gave revealed a spiritual depth that his appearance did not show.*

*“Mohammed” said, “I was a major drug lord in this region. Everyone in this city knows who I am and is afraid of me. But there was an emptiness in my life, and I heard that there were Christian programs on the radio, so I listened. And then one day as I was walking in the market, I found a Bible in a pile of used books. I couldn’t believe it! I began to read it, and I knew right away that it was the truth.*

*Today my life is very hard. I am under pressure from my former crime partners to return, and neither the police nor the others who knew me from a distance believe me. They think it would have been much better for me to remain a drug dealer than to leave Islam and become a Christian. But I can tell you this: even if they hang me, I will never give up the Jesus that I found in this Book!”*

That man first heard of Christ because of media ministries that we help support. And God is using technology in so many amazing ways in places that seem impossible to reach. We recently received a story about a new house church in Tehran, Iran. The leader of the church came to Christ through satellite Christian TV programming. In Iran he could not get a Bible to teach others. So what did he do? He downloaded and printed one off the internet on regular paper. It cost 1/3 of his monthly salary, it weighs about 20 pounds, and it’s the only Bible for the entire group. People are truly hungry for God’s word and Christ’s salvation.

From the tiny island of Guam, LBC missionaries Phil and Sterling work day (and sometimes even night) to keep the message of the gospel going forward on Trans World Radio. They have had a tremendous response from Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, and from China and some of the world's most "closed" countries throughout Asia. Recently a woman wrote from Cambodia to share a portrait of her story:

*"I had never heard of the name Jesus, but since I heard of your program and started to listen to it, this name has become more familiar. I liked listening to your program very much, even though I was not a Christian. Everyday I always left my paddy field early to come and listen to your program. Sometimes I had no hope in life because I didn't know what my life was about. With the difficulties that I had faced and the hurt that I had been through, it made me see that my life was so ugly and hurtful.*

*It had been two months since my husband left me with no words; it was only seven months after we got married. My heart was very damaged and hurtful. I started to blame and hate myself. But it was one of your programs that really encouraged me to see that my life is very beautiful and has so much value in Jesus' eyes. I felt so much energy after listening to the program, and I looked for your phone number in order to call and talk to you. At the same time, I happened to come to Phnom Penh, so I tried to find your office. On that day, I decided to give my life to the Lord Jesus Christ."*

Amazing! Awesome! Friends, we are not members of a club together here in Lincoln. We are a part of the movement of God, as through the ages into all places, He uses His people to proclaim His salvation and to build His Church—His unstoppable Church.

Throughout Asia, into the Muslim world and across Europe, God is at work. His people are at work. And His Church is being built. And just as in Acts, when Paul would reach people, teach and train them, and entrust them with the gospel, so today Christ's followers do the same with a new Generation.

### **Testimony: Doug & Jan Hamm**

*"Our names are Doug and Jan Hamm, and for the past 16 years we have had the privilege of serving the Lord in Serbia/Montenegro with Child Evangelism Fellowship. When we began working in former Yugoslavia, there were Jan and I and two national women doing a little part-time ministry. Many years later we are able to thank the Father for an officially registered CEF ministry, a national team of five dedicated colleagues, a complete Bible correspondence program for all school ages in three different languages, and thousands of children, teenagers, moms, and dads hearing the truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. This past May we had the privilege of turning the entire CEF ministry over to national leadership. Let us today share the story of the unstoppable Church, as seen in just one staff member, Mirushka, and her ministry in Montenegro.*

*Around 1990, Mirushka was a student at Greater Europe Mission's Yugoslav Bible Institute in Vienna, Austria, where we were living at the time. One of Mirushka's professors had just returned from Montenegro, the tiny southwestern half of today's Serbia/Montenegro. As the professor was reporting on his trip, he mentioned that there were no known Christians in Montenegro. Mirushka's heart was instantly filled with a burden and desire to help the people of Montenegro come to Jesus. In 1997, Mirushka joined CEF as a full-time national*

*missionary, living at home and working at many different ministries in the northern part of the country. But Montenegro was always on her heart.*

*In the early 2000s, Mirushka's work seemed to be foundering, like she had lost her zeal for service. At that time she and I returned to the Montenegro factor and her desire to go there. Now I was ready for this to happen—not because I had a sudden vision or feeling that I was holding her back. God had placed in Montenegro some of Mirushka's best friends, as well as her cousin. This meant that she would have a support base for friendship, help, and prayer and fellowship. She would not be alone. Mirushka left for Montenegro with the full blessing of CEF, her CEF colleagues, and the wary and somewhat grudging blessing of her parents.*

*Now, four years later, Mirushka is able to see God changing lives. There are three evangelical churches with up to 100 known believers in this province of 650,000 people. Mirushka has an active ministry in two towns and helps her cousin in a third. God has opened doors for her, and she gives all praise and glory to Him for what He is doing in her life and in the lives of the people of Montenegro—some of the hardest and most closed people to the gospel in the entire world. She thanks (and we thank) Lincoln Berean for standing with her and the entire CEF team in Serbia/Montenegro—just another portrait of the unstoppable Church.”*

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” He reminded us that no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. Rather, we are to let our lights shine. We ought be like a city on a hill. And we ought to take our light into the darkness. Through praying, giving and going we can light the darkness. And we can help others to join us in worshipping Him. Just a reminder: Only the gifts you specifically designate “Missions” will be used for the many global outreach ministries here at Lincoln Berean.

(Video Clip: *Beyond the Gates of Splendor*) Often we don't understand what God is doing in tragic situations. But throughout history God has used even intense trials to build the unstoppable Church. In the last 50 years He has done something truly amazing in Ecuador. Next Sunday night, November 13, we invite you to hear the whole story as we have a LifeGroup (and All-Church) Night Out. We hope you'll plan to join us at 6:00 pm for that.

Let's join our hearts together once more to proclaim the reality that “Great is His name in *all* the earth.”

\*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
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