

Jeremiah 31:7-9 Theme: To the Ends of the Earth

7 This is what the LORD says. Sing with joy for Jacob, and shout for the greatest of the nations. Make your praises heard and say, "LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel!" 8 Watch, I will bring them from a land in the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. The blind and the lame will be there, the pregnant woman together with the woman in labor. They will return as a huge community. 9 They will come weeping. They will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water, on a level path where they will not stumble. For I am a father to Israel. Ephraim is my firstborn.

We're going to take a journey. Would you join me on a trip "to the ends of the earth"? [show map of world]

You might be surprised how close this really is. | But I suppose I'm getting ahead of myself.

First, we should talk about: why? Why are we going to such lengths?

You know, someone might especially ask that question to Christians like the ones whom I met on a visit to Indonesia. Some of them were formerly Muslim, now Christian. Some of those same individuals have also become pastors in our Gereja Lutheran Indonesia. | Understand, a person who lives in Indonesia risks arrest –and worse– for going where they go. Where they go in conversations, that is. What moves them to strike up such a dialogue, like this one?

"You are Muslim. Right? So you say your prayers five times each day. Yes? And in those prayers you say ____ (and my friend fills in the Arabic words 'Show me the way'). These prayers repeat that same request many times. So each day you are praying, 'Show me the way.' Have you found it yet?"

He steps out – and goes to that point – all in the hopes of a chance to ask this question...

"Can I share with you what I've learned?" |

Someone might ask: "why? Why would your friend from Indonesia go there when so much is at stake?" That makes the very point, doesn't it? So much is at stake! If we are going on a journey – with our sight set on carrying God's truth *to the ends of the earth* – we should grasp why we're going to such lengths.

Jackson Rodriguez comes to mind as I say that. I've never met Jackson. But I heard his story just a week or so ago. Jackson lives in Venezuela. His country is in crisis, as you might know. The crime rate is through the roof. The economy has tanked. And so Jackson spends hours in line each day just to get food for his family for that day. There is instability all around. In most cases, those who can get out of the country are getting out. | Not too long ago, Jackson himself got out. He flew to Columbia. There he studied the Bible intensely for a week with others from our church. Then, while waves of people continued to flee out of Venezuela, you know what Jackson did? He flew back in. He's not crazy. He's just moved to share what he has come to know about Jesus. And he wants the people of the place where he lives, the people of his country, to have the opportunity to hear.

The answer to "why" we go to such lengths, to carry God's truth to the ends of the earth, struck me again when I read some news on our church body's website. It was from a letter – not too long ago – from one of the leaders of the Hmong Fellowship Church in Vietnam. Some of you have heard me talk about the invitation we as a church body have to go into Vietnam, to continue and even increase the Bible instruction and training-up of leaders who are soaking in God's truth. The church leaders there

wrote: “We thank you for the training for the past three years. Now we believe that we have salvation. Without that, today we would still be living in the darkness of Satan.”

That’s the “why” that we are getting at here.

And that happening is not unique to Vietnam. I’ve heard the same story here in our country. | Loretta is a dear friend, a member at the church where I served in Farmington NM. To hear her speak is to hear firsthand the change which is nothing short of amazing! As she tells her life story she tells of a time she lived in darkness. That’s how she describes it. And in the midst of it, she knew: things being done for her by the medicine man weren’t bringing peace for her soul. She said: she was going through life, but it was like she was sitting in a completely dark room with absolutely no light. But when she heard and then was brought to believe the news that Jesus lived and died to take away her sin and give her new and eternal life with Him, she said: the light was suddenly turned on for her. | She was no longer in the dark. | She now had peace.

As we each turn right here, and ask “why, why would I individually go to such lengths, the carrying of God’s truth to the ends of the earth”... Jeremiah points us to the answer. It starts with appreciating:

The *darkness to light reality* is the story of your life and my life too.

What has the Lord done for you? What has He done for me? It’s what He has done for anyone – everyone – who has been brought near to God, who is part of God’s family through faith in Jesus our Savior.

[Superimpose Jeremiah 31:7-9 over map]

Looking at our verses in Jeremiah, part of what Jeremiah was writing about was the Lord keeping a promise to bring back to a group of those carried off into captivity in Babylon. They were from among God’s Old Testament people who had lived in the land of Judah.

But there is much more included in Jeremiah’s words here. There’s much more that the Lord promised. How can we tell? Those who returned from exile in Babylon were a small number. Jeremiah references a *huge* group. And the individuals included here are coming *from the ends of the earth*, not just from the land of Babylon.

This, you see, is the Lord speaking of people from every nation, every tribe and language being brought, gathered together, into the “Jerusalem” that is the Church. It is all who believe/trust in the Lord for His salvation.

Here’s how the Lord had Isaiah record this truth:

“It is too small a thing for you” – this is talking about Jesus – “to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for all nations, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” [49:6]

Notice in our verses of Jeremiah: what are we told to call out? And to whom are we directed to call on? “Lord, save your people.”

All the action according to Jeremiah’s description – all the people who are brought into God’s family and under His care and saved – it’s the Lord that brings it all about. We were blind. We were crippled. We couldn’t find the way to God. We couldn’t come to Him. You see the point? Not a single one of us by our own figuring, or seeing, or strength could have come to the Lord.

Once again, see this same reality spoken of over in Isaiah. The Lord says there in ch.42:

“I will lead the blind on paths they have not known, along unfamiliar ways I will guide them. I will turn the darkness into light before them, and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do.”

You are part of what the Lord has done. You have a place in what Jeremiah wrote about, namely God’s truth going to *the ends of the earth*. The Lord has brought His saving news to you, if He has... brought you to admit your sin, to acknowledge your helplessness to fix this, to trust that Jesus lived and died to wash away all your sin and give you new eternal life with Him. And so He has brought you into His family. He continues to lead you (you see that truth in vs.9), and keep you safe, all by means of His truth.

And now one way He continues to fulfill His words in Jeremiah, one way He brings that saving truth to the ears of people who don’t yet know Him is through you and me and others like us whom He has made His people. We’ll hear more encouragement for that reality in our Bible Study hour today. We’ll watch a portrayal of that happening in the Christian church of the years right after Jesus’ ascension to heaven.

But while we still have these verses of Jeremiah before our eyes, they help us keep a healthy perspective. First they answer: Do you actually bring people? That is, as you set out to carry God’s truth to the ends of the earth, is it you that shatters their darkness? No. Who is bringing and gathering in all of the descriptions in Jeremiah? It’s the Lord. We get to be witnesses. We get to be clay jars, carrying the treasure that the Lord has given us, for others to see and hear spilling over. We don’t have a burden laid on us to bring results. The power to bring and gather people belongs to the Lord. We are simply tools in His hand. Take joy in serving Him in that way.

Think of a tool. It’s moved by the builder. And the builder’s strength and skill accomplishes things through it. Take joy in serving the Lord as a clay jar, carrying His treasure, wherever He places you.

The other important piece of perspective Jeremiah helps with is this...

Is *to the ends of the earth* really far away? I said at the opening you might be surprised how close this is. You see, everything between where we are and the furthest away place is part of “to the ends of earth.” And everywhere between here and there, you’ll find people who are still in the dark – who don’t call on the Lord. You and I were once in their shoes. The Lord changed that. You’re part of the gathering from the ends of the earth that Jeremiah spoke of. And the Lord’s gathering of people is still taking place.

Our prayer can be: “Lord, use my fellow believers, and me, and us collectively as a group, to share your truth, that you may bring your salvation to the ends of the earth. And help us realize, and not be surprised, when we don’t have to go far at all. Use us as mirrors in your hand, move us & position us, and enable us to reflect your saving light across the fence, over to the person at the next work station, or down to the new person moving in a few houses away. Amen.”

It’s true isn’t it? If you and I but open our eyes, we see there are people right around us *from the ends of the earth*. Amen.