

JERUSALEM, JUDEA, SAMARIA, THE ENDS OF THE EARTH Hugh Batty

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Reading: Acts 1:6-8

Introduction

Jesus gives us a mandate for mission: *Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, ends of the earth.*

Acts 1:8: key verse for the whole book of Acts, rest of the book is a description of how the gospel spread to these regions:

Acts Ch 2-7: gospel's progress in Jerusalem; Ch 8 Judea and Samaria: Ch 9-28 ends of the earth.

In Luke's world: Rome (capital city of the great Roman Empire) was seen as signifying "the ends of the earth",

Luke is not writing a comprehensive biography of Paul's life: for him the point is that gospel has got to Rome, the symbolic "ends of the earth".

Last chapter of Acts ends on a triumphant note. Paul may have been under house arrest, but as Paul writes in 2 Timothy: "God's word is not chained", and so Luke concludes with the words: "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."

The gospel is preached in Rome, the symbolic ends of the earth.

I want to use these four regions as models; examples of the different scope of mission today:

(Judea and Samaria are actually mentioned together in Acts 1:8, "all Judea and Samaria", since Judea and Samaria form the local region around Jerusalem, but today I want to look at them separately since there are important cultural differences between them.)

Jerusalem: Local

Judea: Regional

Samaria: Cross-cultural

Ends of the earth: Global

1. Jerusalem

Jerusalem: capital and spiritual centre of Judaism, and where the climax of Jesus' earthly ministry, and his death and resurrection occurred. Jerusalem could be described as Christianity's initial "hometown". Jesus does not tell his disciples to neglect Jerusalem and go elsewhere, but to *start* with Jerusalem.

In the early chapters of Acts, we see two important things occurring:

Firstly, gospel spread rapidly among the *residents* of Jerusalem. In Acts 5 the apostles were accused by the Sanhedrin of "filling Jerusalem with their teaching."

Secondly, on the first Pentecost, God arranged it perfectly so that when the Holy Spirit came there were Jews present "*from under every nation under heaven*", *who were able to hear Peter's message and bring it back to their own nations.* This can be the role of a city like Auckland. Many

people from all over the world come here, and as your Jerusalem, it's in an amazing position to be used to communicate the gospel to those from afar.

NB this may specifically apply to students and professionals from all over the world who are here for the short or medium term.

2. Judea

Judea: Jewish region around Jerusalem; it was the area that was inherited from "Judah", the Southern Kingdom after the split under King Rehoboam (10thC BC), and from which from "Israelites" evolved the idea of "Jews" and "Judaism". It saw itself as the region of most authentic Judaism; culturally very similar to Jerusalem, and strongly influenced by the city itself.

BUT in Acts the gospel doesn't seem to spread there straight away. As far as we know it took the persecution after the stoning of Stephen with the resultant scattering of believers for the word to spread into Judea.

Today we face a very different situation, but it's often the case that big cities have the lively churches and attract people of talent, and the traffic can often be more heavily "one-way", i.e. into the big cities, rather than the churches in the big cities being a channel of gospel blessing to the neighbouring regions.

Acts 19: Paul spent two years in Ephesus, a major city of the province of Asia, (now a part of Turkey). He held discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus; result: "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord".

Probably a great amount of flow between the countryside and the city for Paul's preaching to have such a huge impact on the surrounding area.

Challenge for the big churches in the cities to be engaging with those regions around; partnering with / supporting local churches with less resources available.

3. Samaria

Samaria: central area of Israel, between Judea and Galilee. This area had formed part of the Northern Kingdom after Jeroboam's split from Rehoboam, and the people were subsequently exiled by the Assyrians in 722BC. The area was resettled and became a mixed-race people. Over time they worshipped the one true God, Yahweh, but only recognised the Pentateuch, and not the later books of the Old Testament that recognised the supremacy and importance of Jerusalem and the temple for worship. By the time of Jesus, a strong rivalry and mutual distrust had built up between Jews and Samaritans.

Example of Jew / Samaritan type situation where I'm based in China is between the Han (majority Chinese) and the Hui (minority Muslim Chinese). Religious / dietary / cultural differences; historical baggage between the two ethnicities.

Gospel has spread strongly among the Han, but huge cultural barrier between the two in my region of China.

I believe the first step for the Han church is develop God's heart for the Hui:

"While we were still sinners Christ died for us... when we were God's enemies we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (Rom 5:8,10); "you who once were far away have been brought

near through the blood of Christ.” (Eph 2:13) Our basic response should be to offer that same grace to others, even if we don’t like them in the natural.

Challenge of Samaritan ministry: cross-cultural. Sometimes it requires us to get out of our comfort zones, overcome our prejudices, and try to engage peoples and groups more on their own cultural terms.

Auckland is a melting pot of peoples; we can divide this diversity in big cities into two categories:

First category: professionals and students coming from all over the world to work or study for short or long periods, I’ve already covered them under “Jerusalem ministry”.

Second category: immigrant communities. Today we are witnessing immigration on a massive unprecedented scale; I believe that God is using it for his purposes. Some or many peoples are from closed countries where it’s very hard to preach the gospel. God in his wisdom is bringing them to our doorsteps.

Challenge: how can the church in our multicultural cities and regions be making the most of the opportunities given to us? Specifically, who are the people groups in this city and area, that God is putting on your hearts as individuals and as a church community? Where, in some cases do you need to overcome cultural prejudice and “go the extra mile” for these groups? What active cross-cultural steps can you as individuals, small groups and as a church be making to reach these groups from all over the world that God has placed on your doorstep?

4. The Ends of the Earth

“The ends of the earth” has been my passion since I took a “Perspectives on World Mission” course with YWAM after graduating from high school. Then a few years later I was praying daily through “Operation World”, the book that lists the gospel situation in every country; when I got to Qinghai Province in West China, two people groups jumped out at me like no others did through the whole book, and I just knew that I had to go and be involved in reaching them:

The Salar and Bonan, based in Central North West China, are two of many thousands of what are commonly known as “Unreached People Groups” or “UPGs”. I want to unpack the concept of a UPG.

The New Testament Greek word “*ethne*” which is often translated as “nation” implies something more akin to ethnicity or ethnic group (and of course is what these words are derived from) than the modern idea of “nation.”

Jesus tells in the Matthew 28, to “go and make disciples of all *ethne*”; Revelation 7, John sees a picture of the redeemed standing before the throne of God, from “every nation (*ethnous*), tribe, people and language”. Working on this basis, researchers have tried to look at, for gospel purposes, two important definitions:

Firstly, how should we define these “*ethne*”, or in modern terminology, “people groups”. Secondly, what makes a people group “unreached”?

According to the Joshua Project, an organisation which focuses on the least reached peoples of the world:

a) A people group is:

A significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity with one another. For evangelization purposes, a people group is the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.

b) An Unreached People Group is:

A people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without outside assistance.

The Joshua Project estimates there are 16,560 “peoples by country” in the world (peoples by country takes into account groups that straddle national borders, so that, for example, the Kazaks in Kazakhstan count as a different people from the Kazaks in China).

Out of these 16,560, a total of 6,698 are estimated to be unreached according to the above definition. That accounts for 3.1 billion people or 42.1% of the world population.

Wherever these people are geographically, and the majority of them are based in the huge swathe of population from North Africa across to East Asia (commonly referred to as the 10/40 window), these are the peoples who now define the “ends of the earth”.

Challenge: for the church today is, as well focussing on our city, our region, and even cross-cultural ministry within our area, are we also focussing on the least reached, those with the least access to the gospel in the world?

Conclusion

I’ve used Jesus’ commission to his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, as a model for the scope of mission today:

Jerusalem (local): Here this means 1) being both involved in reaching Auckland residents for Jesus, and 2) the many who come to Auckland for a short or long time from all over the world.

Judea (regional): For the churches in Auckland to act as a channel to spread out to the towns and villages in the region, through flow to and from these regions and through connections with churches around.

Samaria (cross-cultural): Ministry to the many immigrant communities and groups represented in this city and area from all over the world.

The ends of the earth (global): to be a part of reaching those thousands of people groups still untouched by the gospel.

Finally, just because there is specialization and different callings for different people, does not mean that these areas of ministry “contradict each other”, e.g. the idea that if we invest abroad there’s not enough available for work at home.

With God there is no “scarcity of resources”, in fact it’s the opposite: all the way through the Bible we see the principle of multiplication: as we give out in money, resources, people and time, God multiplies and blesses us more so there’s more resources available to continue to give out and bless the world around.

So let us, as individuals and churches, be willing to follow the Great Commission: to fill Jerusalem with our teaching, to reach the highways and by-ways of Judea, to make risk-taking cross-cultural

ventures into Samaria, and to be involved in reaching the uttermost ends of the earth. And as we go out to whatever our particular calling is, we can be confident that, like in Acts, God's purposes will prevail, and that Jesus will be with us always, to the very end of the age.