

Adam & Ayako Dawson – church planters in Japan

Hello church! We really appreciate being able to speak here this morning. I'd like to open our time by asking you a question: would you like to see Japan saved?

[short pause]

Then, let me tell you about what we've been called to do to take the gospel to Japan, and how you can be a part of seeing God working to save in that country.

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Firstly, some introductions: my name is Adam Dawson, this is my wife Ayako, and our 15-month-old girl, Minori. Ayako and I met at Laidlaw College, and after getting married, we moved to Japan in 2018. Just before moving, we attended this church for half a year to prepare us for cross-cultural mission in Japan, although the time we didn't know quite now where and how God was going to lead us to do it. Once we moved to Japan, I became an Assistant English Teacher in a Japanese high school and worked in that role for 5 years. It was during that time that we attended a new church in Tokyo that was planted by Mustard Seed Network, the organisation that we've now joined as church planting workers.

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Before I talk about what we'll be doing in Japan, I'd like to tell you all more about ourselves and our motivation for doing this gospel work there. Regarding my own faith, I was raised in a Christian family and was baptised at a young age. However, I couldn't stop sinning, and I thought that even though God forgave me because of Jesus taking my sin upon him, he wasn't very happy with me. But when I was in my early twenties, another Christian reminded me that **"...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"** as stated in Romans 8. Jesus didn't just pay the price for my sins, but he also gave me his perfect record of righteousness, so that God could regard me with the same love as he regards his own son. **"We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are"** (Rom 3:22 NLT).

Before, I hadn't really understood what God's grace meant at all—I'd mistakenly assumed that it meant I was forgiven of my sins and was given the promise of being raised again after death into eternal life. I feel like this is quite neatly described by late pastor and author Timothy Keller, who stresses in one of his sermons that if salvation was just about forgiveness (as wonderful as that is), it wouldn't be

enough, because the nature of our relationship with God would still be up to us—just as the prisoner who receives a pardon still is responsible for changing their life in order to become accepted by society. We'd still feel the need to gain God's approval, to do things right. But salvation is so much more than that! As Tim Keller goes on to say, it's like a receiving a pardon, and a medal of honour that we didn't earn—because Jesus earned that honour on the cross and he then gave it to us, his perfect record of righteousness. And because we receive that perfect record, God now regards us with the same love and acceptance as his own son. We could never earn this love, but the work has been done, and Jesus Christ has earned it for us!

So, because of what Christ has done, I have been set free from the burden of never being able to measure up to God's perfection, and this made me realise just how much love God has for a sinner like me.

[For] God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

And it's this message that the people of Japan desperately need to hear, because they too are under the same impossible burden, and it is only by hearing the word of God that they have a chance to be freed from it.

Normally Ayako would share her testimony, but since our daughter Minori tends to get a bit restless on stage, she's asked me to share it on her behalf with all of you:

Ayako grew up in a household that didn't know God, and she struggled with her identity - knowing who she was as a person and whether she was valued. She also suffered from a very harsh coaching environment in her junior high school's girls' basketball team, where the students were pushed to succeed through negative reinforcement. This led her to fall into depression she was desperately seeking some hope for her life. She knew that some god or higher being probably existed, but couldn't fathom him caring about her personally, so she didn't know who to turn to for hope to go on with her life. In Japan, society tells you to just endure through the hardships and make something of yourself in it, but what are you supposed to do when the hardships are too much to endure? She thought that no-one, not even God, could see or care about the suffering she was going through.

However, Ayako was able to escape the Japanese school environment and attended high school in New Zealand, up north in Kerikeri. Although it was a huge struggle to cope with ongoing depression and not knowing much English, she got

to know many Christians during her time there, and eventually started attending the youth group and Sunday services at Kerikeri Baptist Church by invitation of her homestay family. Both through the relationships she had with her Christian homestay and the people at the church, she experienced a warmth and love that hadn't been so present back in her life in Japan. And as her English improved, she learned more about God through the gospel, and it started to bring healing and hope to her soul. Eventually, she came to a place where she could no longer deny the love and power of this God, the God of the Bible. She realised it was him who heard her cry and carried her across the Pacific Ocean to NZ, so that she could meet people who were willing to share the gospel with her. Consequently, Ayako accepted Jesus as her saviour and got baptised.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him. (Psalm 40:2-3)

When she returned to Japan, God connected Ayako to a small church of about 30 people, where she was able to be discipled in her native language about what it means to follow Jesus. God taught her that he is the Lord over all nations—even Japan—although his people there are few and are constantly feeling the pressure to conform to what most Japanese believe.

Psalm 115:2-8 says:

Why do the nations say, “Where is their God?” Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. But their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

Japan is a nation filled with idols. Trees and stones and certain places are revered as “special/divine”, and in shrines and temples, carved idols of wood and stones are devouring people’s worship and keeping them in darkness and their spiritual deadness. Many people follow influential figures and pop culture idol singers, actors, and actresses as if they could give them a sense of purpose or fulfilment, but the truth is, they never will. They won’t even know your name. Success in accumulating money, a career or academic ability are also hugely idolised in

Japan. Too many people do not know that their creator—Jesus—came to earth already to give them the true life that is abundant in joy.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. John 10:10

From being without hope and despairing that her brokenness would ever be healed, to finding the only hope in Jesus Christ, Ayako and I are grateful that God has called us together to be sent to Japan to share this same gospel of hope with the many people there who are lost in darkness. Ayako's story of faith began with her being taken out of her country to New Zealand. But we believe in faith that God will bring many Japanese to hear the gospel and come to Jesus without having to leave their country. In the past 5 years, even during the global pandemic, God has continued to advance his kingdom in Japan, and we are honoured and excited to join with what he is doing to save more souls and bring hope to the hopeless in that land.

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This is the burden that the people of Japan need to be set free from, but the vast majority are unaware of this message of freedom. So, our organisation, Mustard Seed Network, is planting churches in the middle of Japan's 12 largest cities. But why Japan, and why the cities in particular? Well, the Japanese are the second largest unreached people group in the world for the gospel—less than 1% are Christian. Most of them have never even met a Christian, let alone read the Bible or attended a church service. Their level of exposure to the gospel, even at a surface-level, is little-to-none.

Also, Japan is very urbanised—out of the 126 million people that live in Japan, most of them are in the cities. Most of these cities are much more densely populated than Auckland, so if you plant a church in the centre of one, you can potentially be within reach of millions of people who have never heard the gospel before.

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Late pastor and writer Tim Keller says, “Cities, quite literally, have more of the image of God per square inch than any other place on earth. How can we not be drawn to such masses of humanity if we care about the same things that God cares about?”

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With that in mind, it is the view of our network that the most vital and pressing need in Japan is the planting of new churches. And here are some of the reasons for this:

The church-to-population ratio is extremely low.

Also, the churches that do exist in Japan tend to be very small, with aging congregations. And it's not just the attendees that are aging—most of the Japanese pastors are already pensioners, and don't have any succession in place to take over the shepherding of their congregation when they finally retire.

Japan needs more gospel workers to do church planting in order that the word of God may be made known there, and right now that need is great. Because, as Paul says in Romans 10, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (ESV)

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To give an example of someone whose life was changed by hearing the gospel, I'd like to share with you the story of Asami: a lady who first experienced Christianity in New Zealand, then confessed faith in Jesus after attending the Mustard Seed church in Tokyo.

These are Asami's words:

"Before I came to faith, I always had feelings of self-denial, a sense of futility that I didn't know what I was living for, and a sense of guilt in my heart. Working each day was very difficult and I only looked forward to my time off. I didn't know what I was living for and each day I just wanted to disappear.

After I put my faith in Jesus, I was completely free from the feeling of futility. I began to feel a sense of security as if I were basking in the warm light of God's arms. I learned the grace of being able to pray to God. When I didn't have faith, I was always filled with anxiety and thought that I was too weak to live in this society. But now, I can surrender to God and pray. That is what gives me the most peace of mind and strength.

I can also see that God is shedding light on my sins and melting them away. I had a lot of hatred towards my father, but God dissolved that anger and I was able to feel gratitude towards him."

"My life also went from difficult to live to overwhelmingly easier to live. When I think about how God created me, it gives me peace to know that He loves me no matter how imperfect I am. It gives me a new purpose in life to think that God can use me for the salvation of others even though I am so small.

The Bible says in Timothy 1:15 that, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,' I believe this to be true and accept it wholeheartedly. I am one of those sinners, who Jesus came to save just as the Bible says.

As long as I have this life, I will continue to be grateful for God's love that saved me from my selfish and helpless ways. No matter what our past, we have the hope of the cross of Jesus, which is truly a wonderful gift."

Just like Asami, there are many others who need to be transformed by hearing the Gospel. And as people are saved and disciplined in the truth, they go on to become disciple-makers in their cities. This is how we see the love of God spread in the city.

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Now, where are we going to be doing this work? In Japan's second-largest city: Yokohama.

[Yokohama video]

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I'll quickly introduce the other team members you saw in the video. On the left are Sam & Rachel Martin—Sam is the team leader of this church plant; in the centre are Akira & Sarah Soyama; and the right is Josh Walter. And we will be going over to Japan next month to join this team.

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Located just south of Tokyo, Yokohama is a port city, and was in fact the place where one of the earliest waves of Protestant missionaries came into the country (beginning in 1859). But despite this, the gospel has yet to reach most of the population of this city.

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Yokohama has a population of around 3.7 million, within an area 30% smaller than Auckland City, yet with a population density over 3 times as large. In fact, the population of Yokohama alone is more than half that of New Zealand! Yokohama also has the largest Chinatown, where many Chinese immigrants came to start a new life in Japan. All of the residents of this city, from all nations, need to hear the message of hope that only the gospel brings. And most of those people have never heard the truth of the gospel in their lives, and probably never will, unless more churches are planted in that city with a mission to share the good news boldly.

Matthew 9:37b–38 “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

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Now that I’ve explained about the gospel need and where we’re being sent, I’ll share a bit more about the organisation. Mustard Seed Network is a network of church-planting churches in urban Japan. The goal isn’t simply to plant churches, but to make disciples through those church plants, teaching them the gospel, encouraging them to live it out day-by-day. And as they are discipled, they too will be equipped and encouraged to go forth and make disciples. That’s why our mission as a network is “to glorify God by making disciples through planting gospel-centred churches in urban Japan.”

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Let me share a brief history of the network...

In 2007, compelled by Christ’s commission and the great need for the gospel in Japan, a team of church planters moved to Japan with a vision to make disciples by planting churches in urban Japan. The first church began in December 2009 in Nagoya, Japan.

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Within two years a team was sent to Osaka to start another church plant. Since that time, five more church plants have started in Kobe, Kyoto, Tokyo, Sendai and Hiroshima.

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Mustard Seed Network endeavours to plant five more churches in Japan’s largest urban areas by 2025. Starting with Yokohama - estimated to launch in early March 2024. Saitama and Sapporo are planned to follow later this year.

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While we are being sent to Yokohama, we originally were a part of the Mustard Seed church in Tokyo and witnessed the miraculous, life-changing power of the gospel firsthand, through the lives of Asami and others. Originally, this church had only about 30 congregants back in mid-2020...but now it has grown to over 200 people attending at its peak!

We've also seen people move from being attendees to becoming members, then some becoming church staff. It's a priority of the churches in our network to identify, train, and raise up the next generation of local leaders for the gospel in Japan.

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As for my roles in the Yokohama church plant, I'll be responsible for the children's ministry (including youth), outreach events, and administrative work. We are committed to being a part of this work for the long term—potentially a lifetime in Japan.

At the beginning of the presentation, I asked you if you wanted to see Japan saved. Now I'd like to invite you to consider how can you be involved in the work that needs to be done there. We would be very excited to have you join our ministry support team so that we can do the work of taking the gospel to the city of Yokohama.

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Urban church planting in Japan is expensive, and to be able to join the rest of the team, we're responsible for raising 100% of our fundraising goals for ongoing support and our launch fund, which covers me going to language school, our moving costs, flights, etc. By God's grace we've already reached 60% of the ongoing support! Would you prayerfully consider joining in supporting us financially so that we can be sent to Japan before the church is scheduled to be planted?

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We also need a lot of prayer! Please pray that we would be bold evangelists, whenever we proclaim the good news of Jesus, and that God would open the hearts and the ears of the people of Yokohama, that they would repent and believe the gospel.

Please also pray that God would continue to work to bring us to the finish line of our fundraising goals (and then some) by early February, so that we can help the team to plant the church by March.

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We'd love to connect further with you about the work we're doing and how you can be partners with us, so please chat with us after the service. I'd also like to encourage you to visit our homepage, which you can see on the screen now, to sign up for our prayer & ministry updates newsletter, and also link to information about how to give financially as well. We've also put a sign up form on the table in the foyer, where you can write down your contact details to sign up for the newsletter—and if you'd like us to talk with you further about how you can be a part of supporting this ministry, please circle the “yes” option on the right side of the page, and we'll be in touch soon.

Thank you, church—and Pastor David—for giving us your time this Sunday and hearing about the great need for the gospel in Japan. May God bless you!