

Local Limitations – A Global Mission

From the series, “Little Psalms for Big Problems”

Message from the Master broadcast January 6, 2008 by Pastor Jeremy Mattek

Text: Psalm 67

How exciting is January compared to December? It’s kind of a letdown, isn’t it? Your Christmas tree is on the curb. The decorations are going back to the attic or basement. You’ve probably gained weight. You’ll start getting all the bills for all the stuff you bought last month. Kids have to go back to school. Adults have to go back to work. In all the places I’ve lived so far, January has consistently been the darkest, coldest, and gloomiest month of the year. January can be kind of a letdown.

Of course, discouraging and down feelings don’t limit themselves to just one month. Life can be kind of a letdown in any month, even for God’s people. Maybe especially for God’s people. Because if you’re following God, you tend to expect good things from God, all the good things we spent the Christmas season talking about and looking forward to – glory, light, joy, praise; but often even we find ourselves with muck, darkness, dread, and grumbling; not because we want those things, but because sometimes life just gives us those things.

God’s Old Testament pages are so full of examples of God’s own people feeling very let down by life. Nations attacked them, sins tempted them, strangers provoked them, and trouble surrounded them. Very often it was another nation that brought Israel into the spiritual doldrums of letdown – letdown by their enemies, who made them slaves and robbed them of their homes; but that also meant there was, to certain degrees, letdown by their leaders, letdown by their neighbors, letdown by friends, and, if all this was happening, then letdown by God wasn’t far from their minds.

It’s interesting that the Psalmist today doesn’t just come out and say, “Praise the Lord!” and “Sing for joy!” He gives us more of a request. “*May* the peoples praise you, O God. . . *May* the nations be glad and sing for joy.” Maybe he knew what we know – sometimes life is hard.

How much better is life supposed to be compared to how your life is? How much joy are you supposed to have compared to how much joy you do have? How easy should it be to lift up your eyes with joy compared to how easy that is for you right now? Where’s your star that’ll lead you like it led the Wise Men? Where is the star that is supposed to lead you to the light of your life?

It’s in the same place it has always been, the same place it was for the Wise Men, sitting in a little manger, ready to fill you with the greatest joys of life. The Magi didn’t visit the manger until long after Jesus had been born. And the reason that was ok was because Jesus never changes, and what he offers the spirit with which you travel through life never changes.

The Psalmist invites you today to get up and wipe the doldrums of life off your heart and find true joy as you follow the star that leads to a light that never stops shining for all nations.

Do you know who Tila Nguyen is? Tila is Vietnamese. She was born in Singapore and moved to the United States when she was one. She’s very popular. In fact, she’s more popular than anyone you know. Tila has over 1.5 million friends from all over the world. She gets from 3000 to 5000 people every day asking her to be their friend. Her Myspace account, her website, has been viewed more than 50 million times. The song she wrote has been downloaded over 13

million times. She is 25 years old, and is able to support herself by selling posters of herself, calendars, and her own clothing line.

Do you know why she's so popular? Most of her friends know her not as Tila Nguyen, but as Tila Tequila, a very outgoing, young, attractive woman who has posed for Playboy, modeled for car shows and auto magazines, she has been on the cover of *Maxim* magazine, and keeps making new friends because, as she says, "I'm a hot, naked chick who talks back to you."

The reason the Psalmist asks God to make his face shine on us is because we live in a very dark world that is full of human beings who have an incredible ability to love immorality, an ability to love bad things; to love attention, even if it comes by exposing your body and causing others to sin. We live in a world where human beings find pleasure by any means possible – where they find self-esteem by cutting others down, where they find an applause by cheating, where they find baseball records by taking steroids, where they find confidence by suicide, satisfaction by feeling sorry for yourself, excuses for why you don't help, encourage, and give towards others the way you should by lying to yourself.

In the book of Isaiah, he says "Darkness is over the earth," and this is the darkness he is talking about. But don't think that it's a darkness somewhere out there in a place that doesn't affect you. It is a darkness that you are very familiar with because it is a darkness that lives inside of you. Nobody had to teach you how to sin. Nobody had to teach you how to mess up your life and the lives of the people closest to you. Nobody had to teach you how to lie, how to lust, how to cheat, how to steal. Nobody had to teach you any of those things, which is why you often find yourself with muck, darkness, dread, grumbling, ignorance, sin, grief, woe, and damnation in your life; not because you want those things, not because you took a class that taught you how to get these things, not because you've gone through a 12-step program that promised you these things, but just because we are that talented at giving ourselves those things. We need God's light to shine on us because there is darkness living within us.

And the reason you should be concerned about this is because darkness is damning. The things of darkness are damning. When Jesus addressed his betrayer and those following him, Jesus referred to their evil actions as darkness. He said, "This is the hour when darkness reigns." When Jesus predicted his death to his disciples he warned them, "Stay away from the darkness." When Jesus described the place where sinners will be punished forever, he called the place "darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus hates darkness. So why does Jesus allow darkness? Why doesn't he snap his fingers and be done with darkness? Or, at least, why doesn't he send a few more angels to protect me if he's so concerned about me falling into greater darkness? I don't know. You'll have to ask him when you meet him. But one thing I do know is that light is much easier to see against a dark background. And maybe Jesus allows darkness to continue for a while so that we'll see that much more clearly how full of light he is.

Why did the Wise Men follow the star? Well, they went to find Jesus. Yea, but they had no connection to Jesus. They were Gentiles, not Jews. In fact, Gentiles did not associate with Jews. Dropping everything you have, all your work, your hobbies, your friends, your responsibilities, and taking a couple months to travel hundreds of miles to a land you're not familiar with, and bringing expensive gifts for a child you're not even sure exists was as wise back then as it is now. Why did they follow the star?

Because they realized that they lived in the same darkness we do. They suffered through the same spiritual doldrums of letdown we do. Nations attacked them, sins tempted them, strangers provoked them, trouble surrounded them, and part of the problem, they knew, was even them.

And they thought, “Is life supposed to be better than my life is?” “Am I supposed to be happier than I am and have been?” “Is it supposed to be easier to arise, lift up my eyes, and be filled with joy? Because those things are difficult.”

And so, being astronomers, when they noticed a light that hadn’t been there before, and when they attached that light to a promise in the bible of a better life full of glories unmatched, forgiveness unearned, peace unending, and eternal protection, and when they heard God in his Word invite every nation to arise, lift up your eyes, follow this light and be filled with joy, they arose, lifted up their eyes, grabbed their most valuable treasures, followed that light, and found exactly what you are looking for, joy in the middle of darkness, forgiveness in a life of sin, peace in a world of chaos, guidance on some very crooked roads, protection against some very powerful foes, confidence where you once had doubt, and joy you were once without.

In the early part of the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, God is describing to Clarence, the angel, why George Bailey needs some help. Clarence says to him, “Is he sick?” “No,” says God, “worse. He’s discouraged.”

The story is fiction, but that feeling coming from God is fact. He does not want to see you discouraged. He would rather live in the middle of a dark world than see you hurt. He would rather be assaulted by the devil than see you sad. He would rather be called a liar and blasphemer than see you struggle. He would rather stab himself with nails and hang from a tree than see you suffer in darkness for eternity.

Jesus came to give you joy. And if he enlightened the lives of three men with whom he had no connection, who lived worlds away, who even bathed in the darkness that he hates, then he will certainly not turn you away. The Psalmist invites *all* the peoples to praise him. And he encourages those who already know him to help all the other peoples praise him.

And you can do this. Even if you can’t just get up and go, like the Wise Men did, and drop everything you have, all your work, your hobbies, your friends, your responsibilities, and take a couple months to travel hundreds of miles to a land you’re not familiar with to find people you don’t know and tell them about a Jesus they don’t know. You can still help them.

This is one of the wonderful benefits of being united in a body of believers. When you use your offerings to support the work of our church body, your offerings are supporting the mission work of over 400,000 believers in cities, counties, countries, and civilizations in America, and Albania, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cameroon, the Caribbean, Central Africa, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malawi, Mexico, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Russia, Scandinavia, Taiwan, Thailand, and Zambia. And these are only the places where your offerings are currently shining light in dark places.

And the more we work together, the more we can do, and the more people we can introduce to the one true light of the world that is only found in one place. And if, to find it, you have to travel hundreds of miles riding a beast of burden, not knowing exactly where you’re going, it would be worth every step. But your light has made it much easier for you. All you have to do to find a reason to smile every day is open God’s Word and let its light lead you.