



Can the nations be changed?

1 Tim 2:1-7

TITLE

READING

TITLE

It's been a dramatic week in world politics.

HOMS

The Syrian army has pounded the city of Homs in an attempt to wipe out rebels – but innocent people have been killed and injured.

AFGHANISTAN

American soldiers burnt copies of the Koran in Afghanistan. It precipitated violence and anger.

IRAN

The Iranians were showing off their latest missile which can penetrate as far as Israel and Europe – what if it can carry a nuclear warhead?

GREECE

Greece received a bailout from the Eurozone, but can the country be saved from slipping into financial disaster and anarchy?

And we haven't even got to our own country yet!

Just four stories from the nations this week. But look through the news and there are no shortage of horror stories from around the world. They upset us, frighten us, concern us, horrify us. Sometimes we feel powerless don't we, when we see all these things happening. What can we do about it? Anything? Well, yes: this is what today's sermon is about.

2012 – A TIPPING POINT?

When Rachel Hickson was with us a few weeks ago, she pointed out that 2012 is a significant year. Now some people see some significance in the year – particularly those who watched the film called 2012. Some people who are into end times also find significance in the date with a 12 in it, although I don't as our calendar is not God-appointed, but man made as Pope Gregory, whom our calendar is named after, got the dating wrong. We found out since from other historical studies that his dating of the birth of Jesus was incorrect – about 6-8 years late – so 2012 years after the birth of Christ was in either 2004, 2005 or 2006!

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

It's not the date that's significant, but what we know to be going on. In any year, about 30 countries either re-elect a President or vote in a parliament – or what passes for one. Significantly, up to 70 countries are having presidential elections this year. Here's the list

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

And about 70 are electing a parliament. That's really unusually – it rarely happens. And even more significant, they many are influential and powerful countries and others are in states that are critically unstable. Whoever gets in in many of these countries could either bring peace and blessing or catastrophe. That's why I put the question: is 2012 a tipping point? We'll know the answer to that in a year's time!

EGYPT

One significant place where this is being played out is in the Middle East. Countries that once were dictatorships are now going through revolutions leading to democracy. Egypt is one of those countries. It has meant that Christians have made themselves more noticed. Up to 30% of people in Egypt are registered as Christians.

EGYPT PRAYER MEETING

Yet it's illegal for Christians to meet outside of church buildings. So this meeting of 70,000 Christians to pray was illegal. Illegal, but it still made the news. Looks promising? Maybe but in elections so far, extreme Islamist groups are getting the majority of votes. It's a tipping point – kingdom opportunity, or descent into darkness?

IRAN

The same could be said of Iran. It also has elections this year. The previous one was rigged so that president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad got back in. What will happen this time? As you know Muslims are divided into two broad groups, the moderate Sunnis and the more militant Shi'ites. But there are many sub-groups within each. The Iranian government in power under Ahmadinejad are from a group called the Twelvers. They have an end times philosophy whereby an Islamic golden age will start when what they regard as evil empires, America and Israel are destroyed. They even have a theology of a messianic figure doing that – and guess who thinks he's that. He believes it's his God-given destiny to destroy Israel and America. Why is he so keen to develop nuclear weapons? Not for protection as no-one is threatening them.

SYRIA

And then there's Syria a key ally of Iran. They are run by Bashir Al-Assad. He is also a Shi'ite in a country where the majority are Sunnis but he is an Alawite Muslim – another extreme group, not unlike the Twelvers. What will happen to Syria? Will it fall like Libya did? Or will it become an even more hard-line state? 2012 is a tipping point for Syria.

Rachel encouraged leaders to be a people who pray for the nations, that out of change in 2012, the politics of nations like these are such that God's people will be able to share Good News more freely.

For many Christians, prayer for the nations seems such a big thing that they don't do it. Then there are those that say issues in our own land are more important. Or I know others that don't pray for the nations because God has already determined the end times so why bother? So what does the Bible say we should do? Well, not surprisingly we find ourselves being commanded to pray and reach the nations for Christ.

So ...

WHY PRAY FOR THE NATIONS?

■ BECAUSE GOD LOVES THEM

Now what do I mean by nations? Whenever we see the word nation in the Bible, it usually means a people rather than a political entity. That's important because God's heart is for the nations and their redemption. He's no time for democracy, or dictatorship, or sovereignty, or statehood. He's a people God. That's what the whole of redemption is about - people. This is what we read: *3 This is good and it pleases God our Saviour, 4 who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth. 5 For there is one God, and there is one who brings God and human beings together, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself to redeem everyone.*

God has a heart for each man and woman in this world and the proof of that is in the finished work of Jesus. Jesus died for all, Jew and Gentile. All have the same value to Him. They are all loved. And each has the same offer of life and hope in Christ. If you look up God's promises call the nations you'll find a huge list. Here's one that's typical.

IS 45:22

22 "Turn to me now and be saved, people all over the world! I am the only God there is." That's the invitation to men and women.

■ BECAUSE WE ARE COMMANDED TO

The reason to pray for the nations is more definitive than that. Here's the command.

1 TIM 2:1-4

First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, requests, and thanksgivings be offered to God for all people; for kings and all others who are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all reverence toward God and with proper conduct. This is good and it pleases God our Saviour, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth.

Our prayers aren't just for any people but for all people, and that includes praying for the ones in power. I'll say more about that in a minute.

■ BECAUSE IT'S OUR JOB TO REACH THEM

The command is more proactive than that. We are called to make disciples of all nations.

MATT 28:18-20

"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. 19 Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, 20 and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age."

The Great Commission – Jesus' last words. Our business is the nations and making disciples of them. It's our calling, it's our task. It's our job. He is with us so right central to that task is prayer.

So having established that God wants us to pray and commands us to pray for the nations and make disciples, then what should we pray for as far as the nations are concerned.

WHAT DO WE PRAY FOR?

◆ FOR THE MAKING OF DISCIPLES

Let's pick up the last point. Our prayer for nations should be that people will come to Christ. VERSES *This is good and it pleases God our Saviour, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth.*

Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples

3 This is good and it pleases God our Saviour, 4 who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth. 5 For there is one God, and there is one who brings God and human beings together, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself to redeem everyone.

What is the ultimate purpose for praying for the nations, be that in prayer meetings where we lift nations and their leaders before God, or where we pray for missions close to our heart? To see people become disciples of Jesus Christ.

The piece of advice I was given when playing ball games as a boy was “keep your eye on the ball” because in doing so, I could catch it or kick it, otherwise it would miss the mark. I encourage each of us to pray for the nations. Never think it a waste of time because God commands us to do it, so it matters and it makes a difference. But we need to keep our eye on the ball. At the heart of all Christian ministry and mission is that men and women become followers of Jesus. If it isn't then we've taken our eyes off the ball.

Therefore if we are praying regularly for Christian mission – good. Don't forget to pray for the people they minister to and those in authority in their country. People need to know Jesus.

◆ FOR PEACE

Why pray that nations that are currently in conflict, or countries that are in a state of civil war enter into a time of peace. For the reason why Paul calls on us to pray for those in authority.

That we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all reverence toward God and with proper conduct. This is good and it pleases God our Saviour, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth.

It's much easier to speak out the Good News when people are not being persecuted. Whereas Christians who are persecuted often don't ask that it stops, just that they will stand a good witness and not fall, it is still incumbent to pray that *we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all reverence toward God and with proper conduct.* Why? Because the Good News can spread more easily. One characteristic of countries that were once persecutors and now free is a huge growth in faith in Christ – Russia, Eastern Europe, Albania, China. Don't stop praying. Persevere because it does make a difference.

Actually if we pray this for our own land, we often miss out the second sentence. We are all for the peace that gives us freedom to worship, but we ignore the bit about people coming to know the truth. I don't find it surprising that the Christian faith is under attack in our own country. We boast the freedom of religion, but the church has in many ways failed to use that freedom to ensure that people come to know the truth. It's our failure and it will continue to hurt us until we do something about it – more next time. But I will say this as we consider the nations:

◆ FOR THE HEALING OF THE LAND

Praying for our people and our leaders isn't just about peace and freedom to preach. A land prayed for and where people take God seriously, is a blessed land: *if they pray to me and repent and turn away from the evil they have been doing, then I will hear them in heaven, forgive their sins, and make their land prosperous again.* It's a promise to the nation. I'll expand on that next time, but I hope that I have emphasised enough that we are called to pray, not just for our land but for the nations. In a time like this when information is so available, we are able to know about almost anywhere. What do we do with that information? We pray!

Let's finish by trying to be practical.

PRACTICAL HINTS

➔ PRAY AS GOD BURDENS YOU

Do you find the news depressing as you hear about the worlds hot spots? Feel like switching the telly off or not looking at the news – then pray. Pray for Syria, that this evil regime might be halted and that there will be a fair and equitable society. Pray for change in Iran, that the evil lot in power might not hijack the elections there. Pray for Egypt, that it may not slip into hard-line Islam. We are called to pray for the nations, so pray. We thought the overthrow of Communism impossible 30 years ago.

Take an interest in mission. Many of you regularly pray for mission in other lands – good. Keep it up as God burdens you. Expand it.

➔ TAKE OPPORTUNITY TO PRAY WITH OTHERS

As I've said in previous weeks, we are called to pray with others, not just by ourselves. We have many opportunities for prayer. Tonight is going to be one of them! There are opportunities to link with other churches and larger groups for prayer. Let's take them.

➔ PERSEVERE IN PRAYER – GREAT THINGS TO HAPPEN

Remember. Things do happen. What we have to do is keep praying. I've given you many examples in recent weeks and Rachel gave a few about persevering in prayer. Let's pray expectantly and not give up. Whole nations can be changed. It's happening now in China, India, Nigeria, Ghana, Korea and other places. It happened here in previous centuries. Someone once said that all great moves of God can be traced to praying people. I have no reason to think that's not true.

As our response to this we're going to listen to a song by Matt Redman. It's a prayer. And I believe it should be ours to as we consider this question for our nation and others *Can a nation be changed?*

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