Hello Friends!

We've returned from Japan - thank you so much for praying for us! Before we get to some of the “serious stuff,” we thought you might enjoy reading about some of our general impressions.

Japan is very densely populated. You would expect noise, trash, and a lot of grumpy people as a result. Nothing could be further from the truth. For example, in Tokyo, the most populous city in the world, a world record 7.6 million people travel on the subway daily.

Below you can see how very orderly they are in queueing to get on the subway car. It’s absolutely quiet—the only people we ever heard talking were foreigners.
It's also completely clean. In our two weeks, a single cigarette butt was the lone piece of trash we saw on any of the city streets, including in the subways and train stations.

While few people spoke English, everyone was very helpful and kind to us. All of this was quite remarkable!

We managed to eat every meal with chopsticks, learned to slurp our noodles, and ventured out of our comfort zones a bit by eating mackerel, eel, and different types of sushi.

We loved shopping at the 7-Elevens on every corner where we bought very yummy pastries, dumplings, and Bobby's new favorite sports drink, Pocari Sweat.

We must say that we're already missing Japanese toilets—each one with a bidet that not only cleaned and dried your backside, but also played the sound of rainwater!

The seats were all heated—even in the subway!
Burial Ground

Many have said over the years that Japan is a graveyard for missionaries. But why is that exactly?

The majority of Japanese don't consider themselves religious, yet their cultural identity and the way they live is deeply spiritual. Most identify with Buddhism (69%), but the average person practices a mixture of Buddhism, Shinto, Daoism, and Confucianism. Even the idea of a Creator God is foreign to the Japanese worldview.

But resistance to the Gospel goes beyond just the deep historical roots of eastern religions. From cradle to grave, all of life in Japan is highly ritualized—there's a set process for how to do everything. As one example, here's an article describing 10 Japanese Rituals to Give Every Child a Happy Life.

This ritualized approach to life doesn't allow much room for becoming a follower of Jesus. This would involve going against cultural norms to make a profound change—this is highly disruptive and inconceivable for most Japanese.
Pursuing the Japanese Dream

Another cultural challenge involves Japanese drivenness. They are some of the most ambitious in the world in their pursuit of achievement and success. They’re notorious for their workaholism and being competitive.

But while success is so important in Japanese culture, few people are truly happy. Overwork, isolation, and depression are rampant. Suicide is the leading cause of death in men between the ages of 20-44 and women 15-34. According to the 2023 UN World Happiness Report, Japan ranks 47th, one of the lowest in the developed world.

The felt need for connection would normally be a great opening for sharing the Gospel. But this is challenging, as the Japanese are very private and reserved—more so than other Asians. In an honor-shame culture, "negative" actions like complaining, expressing frustration/anger or sharing personal struggles are frowned upon and viewed as shameful.
Together in Fukuoka

Our staff couple, Rie and Christian, are Japanese and Korean. Even they have found all of these cultural norms to be a great challenge.

After living in the US for many years, they returned to Japan in 2017. They’ve found it very tough to make friendships and see any breakthrough in ministry. This has led to their own feelings of isolation and discouragement.

We spent time talking about their struggles and praying over them. We suggested more fun breaks as a family and encouraged them to be even more intentional about their spiritual rhythms.

We also discussed different approaches for how they could do ministry moving forward. We had extended times of praying over Fukuoka and encouraged moving to a more strategic part of the city. We also recommended partnership with other missionaries to remove some of their isolation.

It was humbling to be allowed in and a great privilege to talk with them as safe outsiders. It was such a wonderful feeling to see their countenances visibly lifted by the time we left. God was at work!

Let's Not Become Weary!

This would not have been possible without spending so much time with them in their context. We were able to get an up-close look at their lives and ministry.

We thank you, our faithful partners, for enabling us to make these types of trips with Novo! We're able to support dear people like Christian and Rie so they can continue through the hardships of ministry in challenging places.
We hope our encouragement results in Galatians 6:9 being true for them:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Will you please pray with us for Christian and Rie? Pray that...

- They’ll experience regular times of refreshment and the nearness of Jesus.
- They’ll be able to follow through on the plans we made together.
- God would open doors for them to talk about the hope and joy of knowing Jesus with many.

Only God can bring spiritual breakthrough. Pray that He would move among the Japanese, so that both individuals and Japanese society as a whole will be positively and permanently impacted by the Good News of the Kingdom.

Thank you, friends!
Bobby and Debbie

P.S. Being in Japan also provided the opportunity for Bobby to run the Tokyo Marathon. If you’d like to hear a bit more and see some pictures, please check out this link!

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