

### Neesima with the Doshisha

When Neesima Shimeta was a young man, Japan was a closed country. To leave Japan was a crime punishable by death. Neesima's knowledge of the world was limited. However, he had learned of the United States through books in Chinese written by missionaries to China. For the first time he heard of Christianity, too. He admired what he read about the United States and wanted the Japanese to enjoy similar liberties.

Neesima planned a way of escape. In 1864, when he was 21, he went to Hakodate, a port in the far north of Japan which was open to foreigners. There he helped Nicholai, chaplain to the Russian consulate, learn Japanese. (Nicholai later founded the Russian Orthodox Church in Japan.) Neesima boarded an American ship to Shanghai. In China, he persuaded an American captain to take him to the United States. Neesima worked as a cabin boy and the captain taught him English and navigation. When the ship stopped in Hong Kong, Neesima sold his samurai sword to obtain money for a Chinese New Testament. He didn't understand everything he read, but the words of John 3:16 made a strong impression on his soul: "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him might have eternal life."

Neesima reached Boston in 1865. He had no idea how he was to learn more about the God and United States he had read about in the missionary writings. But from reading *Robinson Crusoe* he learned to pray to God. Neesima prayed that God would direct him. Alpheus Hardy, a wealthy businessman and owner of the ship which brought Neesima to America, took a strong interest in the young man. Hardy paid his way through Phillips Academy, Amherst College, and Andover Theological Seminary. While at Phillips Academy, Neesima was converted to Christianity and baptized.

Changes were sweeping across Japan -- the western calendar was adopted, railroads built, an army and navy developed along western lines. The leaders of this new Japan were from the elite samurai class, and Neesima believed Christianity would become accepted most rapidly among the people if first adopted by the prestigious samurais. This group could best be reached through Christian schools.

At the 1874 annual meeting of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, Neesima was commissioned to return to Japan as a missionary. With great emotion he arose and said, "I cannot go back to Japan without the money to found a Christian college, and I am going to stand here until I get it." Despite the considerable skepticism of his American friends almost \$5,000 was raised to carry out Neesima's dream.

Once back in Japan, Neesima found that his father, family, and the people from many surrounding towns were eager to hear of Christianity. The prominence of Neesima's family and the uniqueness of his experiences abroad attracted much attention. In June, 1875, Neesima bought 5 1/2 acres of land in Kyoto, not far from the imperial palace, for a school. He called it Doshisha, meaning the one endeavor or the one purpose company. It was a purely Japanese association with no foreigners in its administration.

Thirty young samurai from Kumamoto on the island of Kyushu entered the school. They had become Christians under an American who had been instructing them in English and in western science. They studied at Doshisha for three years, and many went on to become the Christian leaders of Japan.

Neesima dreamed big for Japan. But ill health and weakness plagued and slowed him down. In 1884 he had to sail to the west to recuperate his health. He never really recovered. He was not yet forty-seven, when he died on this day, January 23, 1890. His final words were "peace, joy, heaven."