

What Scripture Says About Refugees

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A few weeks ago, I received an anonymous question left in the pulpit on a torn piece of paper. It is an important and timely question, one that I would appreciate the opportunity to make an effort to answer, not just for the one (unknown to me) who asked, but for us all.

The question was about what God has to say about refugees. The short answer is: Much. Scripture is filled with references to foreigners, strangers, asylum-seekers, and the dispossessed. While the topic is one that has become an increasingly polarizing and contention-fraught issue of late, I am of the mind that the issue need not be nearly so contentious for we who call ourselves Christians.

The scriptural voices on the topic of how we should treat and receive strangers, foreigners, refugees, and immigrants (regardless of where they are from), speak a message that is straightforward and uncompromising. That message is a clear call to extend hospitality to the stranger and to love our neighbors...all of them...not just in word, but also in deed, "for the Lord your God...loves the strangers" (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

So, let's take an in-depth look at what scripture has to say on the subject. As we do, let's remember that in the Bible when something gets repeated it's a clue we should pay attention and respond accordingly. And this topic gets repeated plenty.

A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their country because of war, famine, or natural disaster. There are many biblical characters who fit that description, including Jesus himself along with his parents when they must flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's wrath (Matthew 2:13-16). But the first refugees we encounter in the Bible appear as early as Genesis chapter three. That's right; Adam and Eve become refugees when they are *forced* out of the Garden and faced with the challenge of making a life outside of the place they had, up until that point, called home (Genesis 3:22-24).

Genesis, in fact, is a book absolutely filled with refugees. We have Noah and his family who build an ark as a place of refuge from the great flood (Genesis 7 & 8). Then Abram and Sarai, at a pretty advanced age, are called to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Living as strangers in a strange land, they try to make a life, but then a famine strikes, and they are again in search of refuge, this time in Egypt, where they enter fearful of how they will be received as foreigners (Genesis 12). Abram's nephew, Lot, and family must flee the city of Sodom (Genesis 19) because it is judged to be "arrogant, overfed and unconcerned," a city that did "not help the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). After Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah, they yet again find themselves living as strangers and aliens, this time in the land of Canaan (Genesis 23). Later in Genesis, Abraham's and Sarah's grandson, Jacob, must move his very large family to a new

place due to famine in their homeland (46:1-7). Though they are foreigners, they are met in their new home with welcome and jobs (47:1-6). So many refugees already, and we're just getting done with the first book of the Bible!

No doubt you know the story of the Exodus – how the Israelites, having been oppressed and enslaved in Egypt for many years, are eventually driven out of the land (led by Moses) with such haste that all they have time to prepare and take with them is unleavened bread (Exodus 12). At the time Moses is asked by God to lead his people into freedom, he is already living outside of Egypt as a refugee. When Pharaoh vowed to kill him, Moses fled for his life and found refuge (and a wife) in the land of Midian (Exodus 2:15-22).

Once out of Egypt, the people wander without place for years. When they receive God's law, the treatment of strangers or aliens is outlined repeatedly and with great detail: They are instructed to apply the same laws and standards to foreigners as they do to themselves; to go so far as to treat foreigners as citizens, extending the same love to strangers as they would to themselves (Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 19:33-34, 24:22; Numbers 9:14, 15:15-16; Ezekiel 47:21-22). They are told in no uncertain terms never to oppress or wrong or act violently toward the foreigners who live among them and never to deny justice to foreign workers or else they will be cursed (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 24:14,17-18, 27:19; Jeremiah22:3-5; Zechariah7:8-10).

More than just not exploiting foreigners, the people are instructed to help take care of them and provide for them: "You shall not strip your vineyards bare...leave them for the poor and the alien" (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-22). Moses is instructed to give cities of refuge to the Levites so that when the Israelites must one day flee they will in turn be given cities of refuge (Numbers 35 and Joshua 20). The people are instructed to judge fairly and justly regardless of whether one is a citizen or a resident alien (Deuteronomy 1:16). Solomon gives good jobs to foreigners, and they are instrumental in the building of the grand temple which is the dwelling place of God (II Chronicles 2:17-18). The practice of tithing is initiated with the intent that a portion of the tithes would go to benefit "resident aliens" (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-13). God promises to dwell with those who do not subjugate or persecute foreigners and outsiders (Jeremiah 7:5-7). And judgement is promised to those who disregard the plight of refugees and immigrants and who refuse mercy and compassion to them (Malachi 3:5).

Once settled in their new home with God's law to guide them, the people are reminded time and again that the land had come to them as a gift from God when they were in need of refuge (Deuteronomy 6:10-13). At nearly every turn the people are encouraged to remember that they were once strangers and foreigners, and their experience of being needy outsiders should inspire empathy for those currently living as refugees and strangers among them (Deuteronomy 6:13, 26:5; Psalm 105). God's love and care for all who are strangers/foreigners is also clearly stated: "For the Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

The entire book of Ruth is a story of refugees who must flee because of famine and settle in Moab. They find a welcome in their new home; they find love; and they find family. Both main characters, Naomi and Ruth, experience God's love and faithfulness through their experiences of being welcomed and received with hospitality when they are poor and vulnerable outsiders. The Israelites, in turn, are instructed to offer a place of refuge for the outcasts of Moab (Isaiah 16:4).

When Job retells all of the ways he has aimed to lead a life of devotion to God, he includes his commitment to welcoming strangers as evidence of his life of faithfulness to God's ways: "The stranger has not lodged in the street; I have opened my doors to the traveler" (Job 31:32).

The people of God are again forced into refugee status when the Assyrian empire invades and decimates the northern kingdom of Israel, sending the surviving residents in search of refuge. When Babylon takes over the southern kingdom of Judah, many are sent into exile for decades – forced to flee their homes and their beloved temple and eke out a life as subjects of Babylon. It's a painful, fearful, and sorrowful experience for them: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept...How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-6). They struggle and mourn and cry out for refuge and strength during the years of exile, and they find hope and comfort in placing their trust in "the Lord" who "watches over the strangers" (Psalm 146:9).

The texts of the New Testament are equally compelling on the subject of refugees. After having started out his life as a refugee (Matthew 2:13-16), Jesus begins his ministry by outlining how he understands his mission: to "bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind...let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:16-21). It is this mission that we, as the church, called to be the body of Christ in the world, are charged with continuing.

Jesus mentions the treatment of those who could be termed refugees all throughout his teaching and preaching ministry. He praises those who welcome strangers, for in so doing, they welcome Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31-46). Many refugees acquire that status because they are forced from home due to persecution or famine. Jesus teaches that the hungry and the persecuted are blessed and his followers should honor that blessedness (Luke 6:21, Matthew 5:10-11). Love of neighbor is a pervasive theme all throughout the gospels. Luke includes the parable of the good Samaritan in which Jesus illustrates that everyone, everyone, even the most unlikely, despised, and ridiculed foreigners are neighbors and deserving of our love and care (Luke 10:25-37).

The letters of the early church also communicate the expectation to welcome the stranger. In the letter to the Romans, Paul suggests that one of the marks of a true Christian is that they "extend hospitality to strangers" (Romans 12:13). The early church was called to understand that in Christ, there are "no longer strangers and

aliens, but...citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:11-22). The letter to the Hebrews encourages extending hospitality to strangers, "for by doing that some have entertained angels" (Hebrews 13:1-2). Finally, the church is reminded that love for neighbors is a top priority (Galatians 5:14), and that love is meant to find expression "not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:18).

I hope you'll forgive this lengthy listing of texts and examples, but I think it's important for us to see just how central this theme is in scripture. There's no mistaking it. There's no way around it. The message is consistent, and the call is resounding. Followers of Jesus are challenged to receive outsiders, immigrants, strangers, and refugees with understanding and hospitality; with welcome, help, and justice; with compassion, open hearts, and open doors; with the humility to remember that the gifts we have from God are meant for sharing; with the expectation that the stranger among us just may be an angel or perhaps even Jesus himself. As followers of Jesus, our motivation is not fear; rather we are moved by an uncompromising love of neighbor and by the perfect love of God which casts out all fear (1 John 4:18).

According to the latest statistics of the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, there are currently 65.3 million people around the world who have been forced from home. That number reflects the highest level of displaced peoples on record. Globally, 21.3 million people fall into the category of "refugee," meaning they have been forced to leave their country because of war, famine, or natural disaster. Over half of the world's refugees are under the age of 18. Nearly 34,000 people are forcibly displaced every day as a result of conflict or persecution.¹

How will we, the church of Jesus, respond to our call? How will we receive the weary, scared, hungry, suffering, hurting of the world who are in search of refuge and sanctuary?

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¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us>