

# What Does the Bible Say About Refugees and Immigrants?

## *God's People are Sojourners*

The Bible is a story of God's intimate involvement with people as they live out their history. It is a story of movement and change as people and nations grow, mix, and take on various characteristics. It is a story of constantly renewed hopes for a better future. Yet, it is a story of God intervening and sending people out in new directions when life begins to look too settled, too full of routine, too full of pleasures, or too weighed down by sin. Hebrews 11 reviews the changes in direction experienced by the Hebrew people and affirms the people of God as "strangers and exiles on earth."

It started with Adam and Eve as they were sent from the Garden to wander, to start again in a new place. Noah and his family were also called, like Adam and Eve, to leave sin behind and begin society in new ways and in a new place. Some of the descendants of Noah built cities; and it was in the city of Ur that Abraham was born, yet God sent Abraham and Sarah out to occupy new land.

The story of the people of Israel is a story of wanderings and sojourns in many places. When Joseph was sold into Egypt, he learned to adjust to a new culture. When there was famine in the land, Jacob and his sons and their families (exiles and sojourners) went to Egypt. When their descendants had been turned into slaves in Egypt, God called Moses to lead the Israelite people out of this oppression into a new period of wandering. Moses himself had been raised in a foreign family. As the people wandered in the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea, their task was to once again try to set up a society that would insure the reign of the justice of God on earth.

In each of these periods, as the structures of society were put in place, or as prophets spoke about God's will for society, a recurrent theme was concern for the welfare of three groups unable to be self-sufficient: the sojourners (foreigners), the widows, and the orphans. Over and over, Israel was told to remember the sojourners and treat them with justice and compassion, remembering that their own ancestors had been in the same situation. Psalm 105 is one of many illustrations on the sojourning period of their ancestors, while Deuteronomy 24:17-22 is a good example of the way society was to provide for sojourners and those in need.

When we study the New Testament, we find God, once again, amidst those who are uprooted. Jesus, the incarnate God, became a refugee while still an infant, fleeing with his parents to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. As an adult, Jesus became an itinerant preacher, wandering with his disciples from place to place, living at times by gleaning from fields those extras that the ancient law ordered left for such sojourners. When Jesus described the last judgment, there was explicit identification of Jesus with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner, and the sick. It was in responding to such persons, the disciples were told that they would know they were responding to Jesus.

In Jesus' life and in the missionary work of Paul, we find both men reaching out to those defined as "strangers" by Israel and including them in the people of God. Jesus combated prejudice against Samaritans (the outcasts of his day); we see this in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-42) and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Paul's letter to the Ephesians talks particularly of how the Ephesians are no longer sojourners or strangers, because through Christ all people are one (Ephesians 2:19). Paul also talks of his own work of bringing this saving understanding of God in Christ to those who are not Jews, who are by tradition "strangers." Paul affirms the Gentiles (the strangers) as people of God, people for whose sake he is willing to go to prison.

## *God's People are Hospitable*

The culture and history of the people of the Bible led to the presence of a stranger being seen as an opportunity. The norm was hospitality and sharing of one's home and resources with strangers or sojourners. Over and over, we find stories of visitors being welcomed. Abraham welcomed the strangers by the Oaks of Mamre, who turned out to be messengers from God who blessed him with the promise of a son. In Exodus 2, Moses is welcomed into Reuel's home. God commanded Moses to set aside cities of refuge in Canaan (for both Israelites and those who sojourned among them) so that people could seek asylum from those who sought to kill them. The widow of Zarephath welcomed Elijah into her home when she had only one meal to offer, but God filled her pantry as fast as it was emptied and Elijah remained for many days. The foreigner Ruth was generously welcomed by Boaz, Naomi's kinsman. We know of the hospitality of Mary, Martha, and Zacchaeus to Jesus, and of the disciples to "the man" they met on the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion. When Jesus sent out his disciples to teach and heal in his name, he instructed them to take little with them and trust in the hospitality of those they would meet along the way.

Openness to those who needed a place to stay or a bite to eat was, in Biblical times, only the beginning. Sojourners, at times, stayed for months or even years. Moses and Jacob are examples who contributed their labor to their hosts, and each found a wife in their host's family. Hospitality involved the offering of food, drink and shelter to the stranger in need, but it was much more than that. Hospitality was an attitude of the heart, out of which such generous actions naturally flowed.

## *God's People Work with God to Meet Human Need*

In the sixth day of creation, as told in the first chapter of Genesis, God created male and female and presented them with the world. God urged the two newcomers to involve themselves with both plant and animal productivity. Chapter four in Genesis tells us there soon was division of labor. Some worked in the fields. Others worked with animals. Later, people learned to construct cities and, with God's help, devised structures for societies. The people made mistakes at times, misunderstanding God or simply diverging from God's way by following their own sinful inclinations. But the theme was clear. God and people worked together in creating society, in creating history, and in the production of the staples of daily life.

Jesus, the incarnate God, also sought human co-workers. The disciples and followers of Jesus learned from him new dimensions of obedience to God in this world. They were especially taught the depths of the meaning of love for God and, intertwining with it, love for all people. There are many passages throughout the New Testament that expound on what it means both to receive God's love and to be mediators of God's love for others. Matthew 25, the last chapter of the gospel of John, and the parable of the Good Samaritan explicitly link love of Christ with action on behalf of the needy. Jesus, himself, demonstrated his love constantly through actions: feeding hungry crowds; healing those who reached out to him; and accepting into fellowship taxpayers, women, and political dissidents – people who were marginal in the society of that time.

The early church set itself up in such a way that all who were in the community had their needs met (Acts 4:32), and Paul constantly helped the younger churches comprehend how far the love of Christ extended. I Corinthians 13, which is about love, and the preceding chapter where a variety of gifts are affirmed as appropriate ways of involvement, are examples of this kind of teaching.

## *God's People Struggle with Obedience to Authority*

The Bible challenges God's people to accept the authority of human institutions (I Peter 2:13), pray for the leaders of the land in which they live (I Timothy 2:1), and to be subject to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1). But there are many Bible stories that show God's people disobeying the governing authorities in order to be faithful to God. Reconciling the biblical stories of ultimate obedience to God with the biblical command to be subject to governing authorities is not an easy task. Throughout the Bible and throughout

history, God's people struggle to make decisions about when it is appropriate to disobey governing authorities in order to obey God.

Breaking the laws of the governing authorities is not something to be taken lightly. Paul writes that the government's authority comes from God and, therefore, those who resist that authority are resisting what God has appointed. Yet, while God appoints the institution of government, God does not appoint specific governments or specific laws. Sometimes governing authorities go beyond their role of upholding good and punishing bad conduct to demand total allegiance. They then become idolatrous against the will of God. Pharaoh exceeded his God-given authority when he ordered Hebrew babies killed (Exodus 1:16). King Nebuchadnezzar overstepped his authority when he required everyone to worship his golden statue (Daniel 3:6,15). The council surpassed its authority by demanding the Apostles not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18).

Obedying God may require disobedience of the law. God's people must make prayerful choices about breaking laws that call them to harm others, block them from efforts to protect life, and prevent them from worshiping only God.

### ***Additional Resources and Scriptures***

If you are considering becoming involved in ministries to refugees and/or immigrants, you may want to delve further into the biblical basis for your action. A resource available from Church World Service is "The Bible as the Ultimate Immigration Handbook" – on their Web site at <http://www.churchworldservice.org/Immigration/publications.html>.

The following list of biblical passages, although not exhaustive, will also help you get started. Study a few of these passages and then ask these questions:

1. What are some of the central messages conveyed in these scriptures?
2. How does God view strangers?
3. How does God expect us to treat strangers?
4. How important was it for Jesus, Joseph, and Mary to have a place such as Egypt to go to?
5. Who in the Bible was a refugee? What were they running from?
6. Who in the Bible crossed a border without permission? How were they received in the countries to which they came?
7. Jesus identified with those in need. How does Jesus expect us to respond to need?
8. How do these scriptures relate to church involvement in refugee resettlement, ministries to immigrants, and/or advocacy on behalf of refugees and immigrants?

### **Homelessness/Being Sojourners:**

Genesis 3:22-24 Adam and Eve uprooted from the garden and forced out  
Genesis 12:1 Abraham, called to leave his home and go to a new land  
Genesis 23:4 Abraham looks for a burial place for Sarah in a strange land  
Genesis 37-46 Joseph sold into slavery in a strange land  
Exodus 2:15-22 Moses as a guest in Midian  
Deuteronomy 6:10-12 Remember, you were once sojourners  
Deuteronomy 26:5 Remember, a wandering Aramean was my father  
I Samuel 23-24 David, like refugees, hides in the wilderness to escape death  
I Chronicles 29:14-15 All things come from God and we are all transient on earth  
Psalm 105 History of the migration of God's people  
Psalm 137 How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?  
Matthew 2:19-21 Jesus and his parents flee to Egypt to escape persecution  
Matthew 8:20 Son of Man has no where to lay his head  
Luke 2:7 No room at the inn  
Acts The story of God's missionaries to foreigners  
Acts 7 History of wandering of Abraham, Joseph and Moses

### **Hospitality/Receiving Strangers:**

Genesis 18:1-8 Abraham as host at Mamre Genesis 19:1-3 Abraham as host at Sodom Exodus 22:21 Remember to treat foreigners well Exodus 23:9 Remember to treat foreigners well Leviticus 19:32-34 The alien who resides with you is as the citizen Numbers 35 Cities of refuge Deuteronomy 27:19 Curse those who deny hospitality Joshua 20:1-3 Cities of refuge Joshua 21:13-38 Cities of refuge Ruth 2 Boaz receives Ruth Job 31:32 Job takes in travelers Psalms 61:1-3 God is our ultimate place of refuge Luke 10:38-42 Jesus as a guest of Mary and Martha Luke 19:1-9 Jesus as a guest of Zacchaeus Luke 24:28-3 Jesus as a guest of the disciples on the Emmaus road John 19:25-27 John takes Mary home with him after the crucifixion Romans 12:13 Practice hospitality Ephesians 2:11-22 No longer are we strangers and sojourners Hebrews 13:1-2 Those who have welcomed strangers have discovered angels

### **Meeting Human Need:**

Leviticus 19:9-17 Rules for justice toward our neighbors Leviticus 25 Jubilee year of forgiveness of debts Deuteronomy 10:18-19 Food, clothing, love for sojourner, orphan Deuteronomy 15:1-18 Seven-year release from debts Deuteronomy 24:17-22 Leave gleanings for widow, orphan, sojourner Psalm 9:7-12, 18 God forgets not the afflicted, the needy Psalm 107 God is wonderful to poor, hungry, thirsty Psalm 146 Justice for oppressed, prisoner freed Psalm 147:1-6 God uplifts downtrodden, heals brokenhearted Proverbs 14:31 To oppress a poor man insults the maker Proverbs 22:8-9, 16 Sow injustice, reap calamity; be generous, be blessed Proverbs 31:8-9 Speak for those who cannot speak for selves Isaiah 1:17 Learn to do good, seek justice, etc. Isaiah 58:6-9 God prefers service over fasting Isaiah 61:1-3 Prisoner freed, justice for oppressed, etc. Jeremiah 7:5-7 Justice will be rewarded Jeremiah 22:3-4 Don't mistreat/cheat orphan, widow, sojourner Malachi 3:5 Condemns employers cheating foreigners Matthew 25:35-46 When you did it to the least you did it to Jesus Luke 1:46-55 Exalted those of low degree Luke 4:14-21 Jesus brings good news to poor and release to captives Luke 10:25-37 Good Samaritan help man at side of road Luke 14:12-24 Get dinner guests from highways and byways Luke 18:18-22 Rich ruler, sell all, give to poor Romans 12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers II Corinthians 8:13-14 Share your abundance James 2:5-9, 15-17 Faith without works is dead I John 3:14-18 Showing God's love in action I John 4:7-21 God loves us and consequently we should love one another

### **Struggling with Obedience to Authority:**

Exodus 1:15-22 Hebrew midwives refuse Pharaoh's order to kill baby boys Exodus 23:9 Oppressing an alien is a violation of God's law Deuteronomy 29:10-29 The Covenant leaves no room for worship of gods of other nations Jeremiah 22:3-5 Doing wrong to an alien is a violation of God's law Daniel 3 Three youth thrown in fiery furnace for refusal to worship statue Daniel 6 Daniel thrown in lion's den for refusal to pray to the king Esther 4-8 Esther broke law to plead for people's safety before the king Matthew 22:15-22 Paying taxes and yet giving to God what is of God Matthew 28:18 All authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus John 19:10-11 Pilot had power to crucify Jesus because it was given from above Acts 4:13-22 Peter and John defend their faith before the authorities Acts 5:29 Apostles refused council's order to stop speaking about Jesus Romans 13:1-7 Christians must respect the rights of the state Ephesians 1:20-23 God put Christ over all in authority, power, and dominion Titus 3:1-2 Be subject to rulers and authorities I Peter 2:13-17 Accept the authority of human institutions Revelation 13 The government gives its authority over to the beast instead of God