

The Bible and Refugees

A discussion resource for churches on caring for the vulnerable

Care for refugees and other vulnerable populations is a pressing current issue for many faith communities. What are our responsibilities as individuals? As churches? As citizens? What guidance does the Bible offer? What are our responsibilities to refugees among us? To people in other countries? The following Scripture passages can help you discuss the topic of refugees in your churches. We pray that God will inspire your conversations and actions and use the conflict around this issue to help us recognize and honor our neighbors.

Perfect Love Drives Out Fear

To begin the conversation, it is important to acknowledge that caring for strangers can be scary! But Scripture exhorts us to be motivated by love in all our actions.

“I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned—but if I have no love, this does me no good.” (1 Corinthians 13:3)

As we make love our driving force, it drives out our fears. Love transforms us alongside those we are serving.

“There is no fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear. So then, love has not been made perfect in anyone who is afraid, because fear has to do with punishment. We love because God first loved us. If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars. For we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love others, whom we have seen. The command that Christ has given us is this: whoever loves God must love others also. (1 John 4:18-21)

As we love others as God first loved us, we can begin to give gladly. Scripture assures us that God will not neglect our needs in the process. Rather, we are given more than enough for every good cause.

“You should each give, then, as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly. And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause. As the scripture says, ‘He gives generously to the needy; his kindness lasts forever.’” (2 Corinthians 9:7-9)

How then can we understand the plight of the foreigner and the biblical call to hospitality? Let’s take a walk through Scripture, starting at the beginning.

God’s Covenant with Israel

Beginning in the Old Testament, God formed a covenant with Abraham, promising to make his family into a great nation. This nation would be an example of God’s love and provision that would draw other nations into relationship with God.

“I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse those who curse you. And through you I will bless all the nations.” (Genesis 12:2-3)

Israel the Foreigner

A few generations after Abraham’s family settled in the Promised Land, they were displaced due to a great famine. They went to Egypt where they lived as foreigners and were eventually enslaved.

“In the course of time Joseph, his brothers, and all the rest of that generation died, but their descendants, the Israelites, had many children and became so numerous and strong that Egypt was filled with them.” (Exodus 1:6-7)

“The Egyptians came to fear the Israelites and made their lives miserable by forcing them into cruel slavery. They made them work on their building projects and in their fields, and they had no pity on them.” (Exodus 1:12b-14)

God raised up Moses to lead the Israelites back to the land promised to them—into freedom. Yet they continued to be displaced for forty years, wandering in the desert.

“The LORD became angry with the people and made them wander in the wilderness forty years until that whole generation that had displeased him was dead.” (Numbers 32:13)

Care for the Foreigner

God gave them a series of detailed commands instructing them on how to live faithfully as God’s people. This included caring for the foreigners and vulnerable among them, a command tied directly back to their own experience as foreigners in Egypt.

“The LORD your God is supreme over all gods and over all powers. He is great and mighty, and he is to be obeyed. He does not show partiality, and he does not accept bribes. He makes sure that orphans and widows are treated fairly; he loves the foreigners who live with our people, and gives them food and clothes. So then, show love for those foreigners, because you were once foreigners in Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

This command had very practical implications. The Israelites were to give them clothes and share their food to provide for the poor and foreigners.

“When you harvest your fields, do not cut the grain at the edges of the fields, and do not go back to cut the heads of grain that were left. Do not go back through your vineyard to gather the grapes that were missed or to pick up the grapes that have fallen; leave them for poor people and foreigners. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:9-10).

The Israelites were to treat the foreigners in their land as they treated other Israelites, loving them as themselves.

“Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would an Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34)

And every third year they were to give the entire tithe, taken from their own resources, to the Levites, foreigners, and vulnerable so everyone had enough to eat.

“Every third year give the tithe—a tenth of your crops—to the Levites, the foreigners, the orphans, and the widows, so that in every community they will have all they need to eat. When you have done this, say to the LORD, ‘None of the sacred tithe is left in my house; I have given it to the Levites, the foreigners, the orphans, and the widows, as you commanded me to do. I have not disobeyed or forgotten any of your commands concerning the tithe.’” (Deuteronomy 26:12-13)

God’s Call to Justice

But Israel’s leaders were not always faithful to God’s commands. Once in the promised land, they often oppressed the weak and vulnerable. They did not show hospitality to outsiders. God took this seriously. God raised up prophets to defend the vulnerable and implement God’s justice.

God declared judgment on those who took advantage of the vulnerable and foreigners.

“The LORD Almighty says, ‘I will appear among you to judge, and I will testify at once against those who practice magic, against adulterers, against those who give false testimony, those who cheat employees out of their wages, and those who take advantage of widows, orphans, and foreigners—against all who do not respect me.’” (Malachi 3:9-12)

God said Israel was stealing by not contributing to the tithe. But if they gave their resources obediently, for the benefit of others, God would provide for them abundantly.

“A curse is on all of you because the whole nation is cheating me. Bring the full amount of your tithes to the Temple, so that there will be plenty of food there. Put me to the test and you will see that I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance all kinds of good things. I will not let insects destroy your crops, and your grapevines will be loaded with grapes. Then the people of all nations will call you happy, because your land will be a good place to live.” (Malachi 3:9-12)

If Israel did not follow God’s call to repentance, continuing to mistreat and oppress the foreigners among them, their enemies would overtake them.

“I, the LORD, command you to do what is just and right. Protect the person who is being cheated from the one who is cheating him. Do not mistreat or oppress aliens, orphans, or widows; and do not kill innocent people in this holy place. If you really do as I have commanded, then David's descendants will continue to be kings. And they, together with their officials and their people, will continue to pass through the gates of this palace in chariots and on horses. But if you do not obey my commands, then I swear to you that this palace will fall into ruins. I, the LORD, have spoken.” (Jeremiah 22:3-5)

The people did not repent. So Israel was overtaken, their leaders taken into exile. Those in Jerusalem lived under foreign occupation, which was often violent and corrupt. Israel was geographically scattered and displaced and those left behind were oppressed in their own land.

“The LORD gave this message to Zechariah: ‘Long ago I gave these commands to my people: ‘You must see that justice is done, and must show kindness and mercy to one another. Do not oppress widows, orphans, foreigners who live among you, or anyone else in need. And do not plan ways of harming one another.’ But my people stubbornly refused to listen. They closed their minds and made their hearts as hard as rock. Because they would not listen to the teaching which I sent through the prophets who lived long ago, I became very angry. Because they did not listen when I spoke, I did not answer when they prayed. Like a storm I swept them away to live in foreign countries. This good land was left a desolate place, with no one living in it.” (Zechariah 7:8-14)

Jesus the Refugee

Jesus was born centuries later, but rather than coming as a powerful political figure, he was born to an ordinary Jewish family. His story begins with Mary and Joseph fleeing persecution and finding refuge in Egypt just like his ancestors before him.

“After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, ‘Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave.’ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and left during the night for Egypt, where he stayed until Herod died. This was done to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘I called my Son out of Egypt.’” (Matthew 2:13-15)

The Greatest Command

Jesus spent his adult ministry traveling from region to region—eating with, teaching, healing, and spending time with the outcasts and vulnerable. When asked what the most important commandment was, Jesus said to love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.

There were many ethnic and religious divisions during Jesus’s time. One of the major divisions was between Jews and Samaritans. But Jesus said even Jews and Samaritans were neighbors, and taught them to show one another kindness.

“Jesus answered, “There was once a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked him, stripped him, and beat him up, leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest was going down that road; but when he saw the man, he walked on by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also came there, went over and looked at the man, and then walked on by on the other side. But a Samaritan who was traveling that way came upon the man, and when he saw him, his heart was filled with pity. He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them; then he put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them

to the innkeeper. 'Take care of him,' he told the innkeeper, 'and when I come back this way, I will pay you whatever else you spend on him.'" And Jesus concluded, "In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbor toward the man attacked by the robbers?" The teacher of the Law answered, "The one who was kind to him." Jesus replied, "You go, then, and do the same." (Luke 10:29-37)

In one of Jesus's parables, he says caring for others is a way that we serve him. When we receive the stranger, and provide for their needs, we are doing this for Jesus as well.

"Then the King will say to the people on his right, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' The righteous will then answer him, 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!' (Matthew 25:31-40)

Our Call as the Church

The epistles continue to apply Jesus's command to love God and neighbor to the early church. Paul teaches us to live in peace with everyone, even our enemies.

"If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong. Try to do what everyone considers to be good. Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody. Never take revenge, my friends, but instead let God's anger do it. For the scripture says, 'I will take revenge, I will pay back, says the Lord.' Instead, as the scripture says: 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them a drink; for by doing this you will make them burn with shame.' Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good." (Romans 12:18-21)

James teaches against treating people based on their outward appearance.

"You will be doing the right thing if you obey the law of the Kingdom, which is found in the scripture, 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' But if you treat people according to their outward appearance, you are guilty of sin, and the Law condemns you as a lawbreaker. Whoever breaks one commandment is guilty of breaking them all." (James 2:8-10)

We are all God's children through Jesus. There are no longer divisions based on where we are from or what religion or situation we are born into.

"It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ

Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised.” (Galatians 3:26-29)

We are all part of one body, made up of many diverse parts. Each member serves a valuable function.

“Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts. In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit, and we have all been given the one Spirit to drink.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

We are able to love one another because God loved us first. This is how we carry out Jesus’s command.

“We love because God first loved us. If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars. For we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love others, whom we have seen. The command that Christ has given us is this: whoever loves God must love others also.” (1 John 4:20-21)

Part of loving one another is welcoming strangers into our homes. In this way we extend hospitality to those who are in need or suffering.

“Keep on loving one another as Christians. Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. Remember those who are suffering, as though you were suffering as they are.” (Hebrews 13:1-3)

A Hopeful Vision

Revelation gives us a hopeful vision of restoration, when we all live under God’s just reign. All are invited to receive eternal life and become God’s children.

“Then the one who sits on the throne said, ‘And now I make all things new!’ He also said to me, ‘Write this, because these words are true and can be trusted.’ And he said, ‘It is done! I am the first and the last, the beginning and the end. To anyone who is thirsty I will give the right to drink from the spring of the water of life without paying for it. Those who win the victory will receive this from me: I will be their God, and they will be my children.’” (Revelation 21:5-7)

This scripture portion was prepared
by Christina Miller at American Bible Society and distributed
by Unite Greater Dallas (www.unitethechurch.org)

For a Bible resource designed for refugees and immigrants themselves, visit
www.unitethechurch.org/care-for-refugees.