

A low-angle photograph of the Statue of Liberty, showing her head with the crown and her right arm raised holding a torch with a flame. The background is a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

HEADING TO A NEW HOME

God walks with the immigrant



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This portion was prepared by Dr. Aquiles Ernesto Martinez at the request of American Bible Society.

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God Walks with the Immigrant

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Introduction

We are strangers and pilgrims in this world. Yet we are also the masterpiece of the creator of the universe. We are passing through this earth and someday we will return to our Maker. We look forward to a better life, beyond the stars, where we will all be citizens and members of a single family. Meanwhile, each of us strives to live a noble, fair and dignified life, trying to help other people to live it also. Everyone deserves a home where happiness reigns.

For centuries, generations of immigrants of different races and cultures have left their lands to live as strangers in a strange land. The reasons that forced these people to emigrate have been largely the same—political instability in their countries of origin; unfair distribution of economic resources, which has resulted in poverty, hunger, unemployment and underemployment; repression and violence; natural disasters; religious persecution and armed conflict.

So whatever your immigration story might be, you are not alone. Each of us is part of a great crowd of sojourners. And as we seek a new and happier home, God joins us on our pilgrimage.

As an encouragement and guide on this journey, American Bible Society has created this resource, with reflections on various Bible characters who were also forced to leave their homes and live as foreigners in other lands. We hope that these experiences illuminate your path.

Open your heart and stay tuned to God's message for your life.

Your journey has been long and difficult

You left your loved ones on the other side of the border. Early in the morning you jumped the fence of concrete and wires to cross the river with others. During the day, the desert heat sapped your strength. At night, the cold numbed your bones. Sleep was stolen by the fear of being found by immigration agents or betrayed by the "coyote." Often it seemed you would never reach the new land. You thought about turning back. Hunger and thirst threatened you. Tired, sad, afraid, you deeply missed your family, friends and neighbors.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience, taking similar risks, even if you came to this country by air or sea. But you were very lucky! You have survived to tell your story, unlike many who came before you.

We mourn their loss, and yet we thank God for going with us, guiding our steps and protecting us from various evils along the way.

God did much the same thing with the pilgrim people of Israel:

... be sure that you do not become proud and forget the LORD your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves. He led you through that vast and terrifying desert where there were poisonous snakes and scorpions. In that dry and waterless land he made water flow out of solid rock for you. In the desert he gave you manna to eat, food that your ancestors had never eaten. He sent hardships on you to test you, so that in the end he could bless you with good things. So then, you must never think that you have made yourselves wealthy by your own power and strength. Remember that it is the LORD your God who gives you the power to become rich. He does this because he is still faithful today to the covenant that he made with your ancestors.

(DEUTERONOMY 8:14-18)

Thank God you are here. Welcome to this land! Your journey has just begun.

You're one of many immigrants

We are travelers searching for a life full of dreams. We walk on traces of the tears and laughter of those who preceded us in this journey. There is a long history of people who have been forced to leave their land, family, and friends, including many of your compatriots, as well as those of other races and cultures.

The Bible has many stories of people moving from one land to another, and some of these may be similar to your experiences. For instance, many of us have had to leave our homes and relatives behind, just as **Abram** was called by God to move from his homeland in Ur to the land of Canaan:

The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a land that I am going to show you. 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 12:1-3)

Moses was a foreigner in the land of Midian, but God was on his side. The names of his children remind us of that experience:

So [Jethro] came to Moses, bringing with him Moses' wife Zipporah, who had been left behind, and Gershom and Eliezer, her two sons. (Moses had said, "I have been a foreigner in a strange land"; so he had named one son Gershom [which means foreigner]. He had also said, "The God of my father helped me and saved me from being killed by the king of Egypt"; so he had named the other son Eliezer [God helps me].)

(EXODUS 18:2-4)

Israel was a nation of immigrants. After they lived in Egypt for more than 400 years, ending up in slavery, God took them to Palestine to dwell there:

"So tell the Israelites that I say to them, 'I am the LORD; I will rescue you and set you free from your slavery to the Egyptians. I will raise my mighty arm to bring terrible punishment upon them, and I will save you. I will make you my own people, and I will be your God. You will know that I am the LORD your God when I set you free from slavery in Egypt. I will bring you

to the land that I solemnly promised to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as your own possession. I am the LORD.”

(EXODUS 6:6-8)

Naomi and her family were forced to emigrate for a while to the land of Moab, because there was nothing to eat in Israel. There she lost her husband and two children. Despite these tragedies, she kept on going:

Long ago, in the days before Israel had a king, there was a famine in the land. So a man named Elimelech, who belonged to the clan of Ephrath and who lived in Bethlehem in Judah, went with his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion to live for a while in the country of Moab. While they were living there, Elimelech died, and Naomi was left alone with her two sons, who married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. About ten years later Mahlon and Chilion also died, and Naomi was left all alone, without husband or sons.

Some time later Naomi heard that the LORD had blessed his people by giving them good crops; so she got ready to leave Moab with her daughters-in-law.

(RUTH 1:1-6)

The widow **Ruth**, in loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, and with a deep faith in God, fled her country to go to Israel and start a new life there as a foreigner:

So Naomi said to her, “Ruth, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Go back home with her.”

But Ruth answered, “Don’t ask me to leave you! Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and that is where I will be buried. May the LORD’s worst punishment come upon me if I let anything but death separate me from you!”

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more.

(RUTH 1:15-18)

Like **Jesus**, many of us have been forced to leave our native land and live as refugees. With him, we know what it is like to live in the desert and in a foreign country:

After [the magi] 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.”

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go back to the land of Israel, because those who tried to kill the child are dead.”

(MATTHEW 2:13-15, 19, 20)

Also the apostle **Paul** traveled through many countries preaching the Christian faith and facing many challenges far from his home:

In union with Christ Jesus, then, I can be proud of my service for God. I will be bold and speak only about what Christ has done through me to lead the Gentiles to obey God. He has done this by means of words and deeds, by the power of miracles and wonders, and by the power of the

Spirit of God. And so, in traveling all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum, I have proclaimed fully the Good News about Christ.

(ROMANS 15:17-19)

In the first century, **early Christians** lived in various areas, in many towns throughout what we now know as Turkey, and in other parts of the world. Wherever they were, they were urged to live in a way that reflected their true identity as followers of Christ:

I appeal to you, my friends, as strangers and refugees in this world! Do not give in to bodily passions, which are always at war against the soul. Your conduct among the heathen should be so good that when they accuse you of being evildoers, they will have to recognize your good deeds and so praise God on the Day of his coming.

(1 PETER 2:11-12)

You start a new life full of challenges

Away from the land that gave us birth, life can be difficult and uncertain. Yet we know God is by our side, tearing down walls and opening doors.

Perhaps, like others before you, you've come to this nation with the idea of returning to your country someday. Or perhaps you've crossed the border to stay, and to pursue your dream in this land. Whatever the case, it has opened a new chapter in your life of faith.

The experience of **the exiled Israelites** may be similar to your own. After they were forcibly removed from their homeland, God encouraged them to start a new life in Babylon.

“The LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those people whom he allowed Nebuchadnezzar to take away as prisoners from Jerusalem to Babylonia: ‘Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what you grow in them. Marry and have children. Then let your children get married, so that they also may have children. You must increase in numbers and not decrease. Work for the good of the cities where I have made you go as prisoners. Pray to me on their behalf, because if they are prosperous, you will be prosperous too. I, the LORD, the God of Israel, warn you not to let yourselves be deceived by the prophets who live among you or by any others who claim they can predict the future. Do

not pay any attention to their dreams. They are telling you lies in my name. I did not send them. I, the LORD Almighty, have spoken.”

(JEREMIAH 29:4-9)

As you know, life on this side of the border is not easy. Learning a new language is a struggle. Finding employment can be difficult, especially when you don't have documents that let you work. Any minor infraction can get you in trouble with the police and land you in jail. Immigration agents are always looking to deport those who are here without documents. It is almost impossible to get a visa and you might be tempted to get false documents. Getting sick is really a headache, because medical services are very expensive and you cannot afford to stop working during the recovery period. Unfortunately, many use drugs or alcohol to try to alleviate the devastating effects of depression and loneliness. And on top of all that, many immigrants are victims of racism, inequality, prejudice, and violence.

In these circumstances, it is natural that you feel guilt, anger, fear, sadness, loneliness, and discouragement. And in the midst of such despair, you might cry out to God, as **David** did long ago, for urgent help:

*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
I have cried desperately for help,
but still it does not come.
During the day I call to you, my God,
but you do not answer;
I call at night,
but get no rest.*

(PSALM 22:1-2)

*Hear my prayer, LORD,
and listen to my cry;
come to my aid when I weep.
Like all my ancestors
I am only your guest for a little while.*

(PSALM 39:12)

Despite everything, do not give up. You came to this country to fight for a better life. Your family needs you. God wants the best for you. And so do we. You must find a way to legalize your immigration status and obey the laws. Press forward!

*The LORD himself will lead you and be with you.
He will not fail you or abandon you, so do not
lose courage or be afraid.*

(DEUTERONOMY 31:8)

You deserve fair and dignified treatment

Since you were created in the image and likeness of God, you have the same dignity and value as anyone else. All human beings should be equal and free—so no one has the right to marginalize you or hurt you because of your immigration status. We must also remember that this country was formed with immigrants and still depends on them economically.

Beyond all that, the Bible makes it clear that God loves the foreigner. In his great mercy, the Lord blesses them fully and invites them to his great feast. God cares for the welfare of all those on the margins of society, including immigrants like you.

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 10:18-19)

No one should abuse you or discriminate against you because of your culture, color, or nationality. In fact, God condemns the abuse of power:

*Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner;
remember that you were foreigners in Egypt.*

(EXODUS 22:21)

You have the right to be tried with fairness and impartiality. Everyone is equal before the law:

At that time I instructed them, "Listen to the disputes that come up among your people. Judge every dispute fairly, whether it concerns only your own people or involves foreigners who live among you. Show no partiality in your decisions; judge everyone on the same basis, no matter who they are. Do not be afraid of anyone, for the decisions you make come from God. If any case is too difficult for you, bring it to me, and I will decide it."

(DEUTERONOMY 1:16-17)

It is a moral duty to help poor people. God rewards generosity:

When you gather your crops and fail to bring in some of the grain that you have cut, do not go back for it; it is to be left for the foreigners, orphans, and widows, so that the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do. When you have picked your olives once, do not go

back and get those that are left; they are for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. When you have gathered your grapes once, do not go back over the vines a second time; the grapes that are left are for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. Never forget that you were slaves in Egypt; that is why I have given you this command.

(DEUTERONOMY 24:19-22)

You deserve to be treated with the same love and respect shown to all citizens and legal residents of this country. Anyone who does otherwise is going against the will of God.

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)

Finally, nobody has the right to exploit you or to withhold pay for your work, even if you don't have documents. Any worker deserves his wages.

Do not cheat poor and needy hired servants, whether they are Israelites or foreigners living in one of your towns. Each day before sunset pay

them for that day's work; they need the money and have counted on getting it. If you do not pay them, they will cry out against you to the LORD, and you will be guilty of sin.

(DEUTERONOMY 24:14-15)

Many people will open the doors of their hearts to you

Blessed are those who open their homes to pilgrims and outcasts, because they fulfill what God teaches us in his Word.

While it is true that some people don't want you to be in this country and reject you, there are also good people who greet you with open arms and a big smile. Your compatriots, neighbors, and social aid organizations will give you a helping hand. In the churches, you'll find family. Pastors and priests are here to serve you, so you can trust them. On the other hand, try to help other people, without looking at their immigrant status.

Hospitality is a core Christian duty. As people are motivated by God's grace, they will share hospitality with you:

*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)

In the same way that **Rahab**, the Moabite, risked her own life to give sanctuary to the Israelite spies, many people will defend your cause and will receive you in their homes, mostly to protect you from those who seek to do harm to immigrants like you:

*It was faith that kept the prostitute Rahab from
being killed with those who disobeyed God, for
she gave the Israelite spies a friendly welcome.*

(HEBREWS 11:31)

*It was the same with the prostitute Rahab. She
was put right with God through her actions, by
welcoming the Israelite spies and helping them to
escape by a different road.*

(JAMES 2:25)

You'll also find generous people like **Lydia**, who helped the apostle Paul. These people will welcome you into their homes and will treat you with Christian love no matter where you come from:

On the Sabbath we went out of the city to the riverside, where we thought there would be a place where Jews gathered for prayer. We sat down and talked to the women who gathered there. One of those who heard us was Lydia from Thyatira, who was a dealer in purple cloth. She was a woman who worshiped God, and the Lord opened her mind to pay attention to what Paul was saying. After she and the people of her house had been baptized, she invited us, "Come and stay in my house if you have decided that I am a true believer in the Lord." And she persuaded us to go.

(ACTS 16:13-15)

Remember that Christ fully identifies himself with people in need. Those who help struggling immigrants are actually serving Jesus:

"When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them

into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the righteous people at his right and the others at his left. 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!'"

(MATHEW 25:31-40)

Jesus opened his heart to people from other cultures and destroyed the social barriers that separated them. Because of him, we are all equal, members of the same family:

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)

When we are united with Jesus, we are all “citizens” and there are no “foreigners.” Let’s work together against social discrimination. Let’s ensure that these ideals become reality here on earth:

For Christ himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people. With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies. He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of the two races one new people in union with himself, in this way making peace. By his death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross he united both races into one body and brought them back

to God. So Christ came and preached the Good News of peace to all—to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews, who were near to him. It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father.

(EPHESIANS 2:14-19)

Trust in the God who sojourned with you

So keep going and do not stop in your daily pilgrimage. Trust in the Lord, and he will show you the path to take. When you feel distressed, fearful and weak, turn to the One who is the source and essence of your life, your Creator. In all situations, come to God by faith:

Don't you know? Haven't you heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God;

he created all the world.

He never grows tired or weary.

No one understands his thoughts.

He strengthens those who are weak and tired.

Even those who are young grow weak;

young people can fall exhausted.

But those who trust in the LORD for help

will find their strength renewed.

They will rise on wings like eagles;

*they will run and not get weary;
they will walk and not grow weak.*

(ISAIAH 40:28-31)

God is guiding you, even in the most difficult moments of your life. He is your shepherd, and you are his most cherished sheep:

*The LORD is my shepherd;
I have everything I need.
He lets me rest in fields of green grass
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.
He gives me new strength.
He guides me in the right paths,
as he has promised.
Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, LORD,
for you are with me.
Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.
You prepare a banquet for me,
where all my enemies can see me;
you welcome me as an honored guest
and fill my cup to the brim.
I know that your goodness and love will be with
me all my life;
and your house will be my home as long as
I live.*

(PSALM 23:1-6)

Jesus Christ understands how you feel. He is ready to ease your burdens and bring contentment. Place your woes upon him:

“Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light.”

(MATTHEW 11:28-30)

We are still struggling to create better conditions for everyone. In the meantime, believe and persevere. Do not lose hope. We can walk together in search of the new home that God wants for us:

But we wait for what God has promised: new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will be at home.

(2 PETER 3:13)

Organizations that defend the rights of immigrants

Esperanza para América

4261 North 5th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19140
Phone: (215) 324-0746
esperanza.us

National Council of La Raza

1126 16th Street, NW Suite 600
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 785-1670
Fax: (202) 776-1792
nclr.org

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)

1133 19th Street, NW Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20036
Teléfonos: (202) 833-6130
Fax: (202) 833-6135
www.lulac.org

**Mexican-American Legal Defense and
Educational Fund (MALDEF)**

National Headquarters
634 S. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90014
Phone: (213) 629-2512
www.maldef.org

World Relief

7 East Baltimore Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
Phone: 443-451-1900
www.wr.org

For a list of consulates in the U.S.:
www.aneke.com/consulates.html

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Some biblical references

Deuteronomy 8:14b-18

see also Deuteronomy 2:7; 29:5-6

Genesis 12.1-3

see also Genesis 18:8; 19:9; 21:23; 23:24; 28:4

Exodus 18:1-5

see also Exodus 2:22; Acts 7:29

Exodus 6:6-8

see also Psalm 105:23

Matthew 2:13-15, 19, 20

see also Luke 1:80

Deuteronomy 10:18, 19

see also Psalm 146:9

Exodus 22:21

see also Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; Psalm 94:6; Jeremiah 7:1-8; 22:1-5; Ezra 22:7-29; Zechariah 7:10

Deuteronomy 1:16-18

see also Deuteronomy 24:27, 28; 27:19

Deuteronomy 24.19-22

see also Deuteronomy 26:12-15; Leviticus 19:10; 23.22

Leviticus 19:33, 34

see also Deuteronomy 23:7

Hebrews 13:1-3

see also Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9

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