

Refugees and the Bible

Welcoming the stranger

Introduction

Refugees fleeing for their lives from war torn areas appear almost daily on our televisions, newspapers and computers. It is hard not to feel a lurch of compassion for the people we see who have lost everything but, beyond that, how should we respond?

This four-part course invites you to spend some time studying the Bible, praying and talking about your response to refugees. There will be no easy answers to the hard questions you face – if there were someone would have provided them already – but there are some passages in the Bible which help us to think more deeply about the issue and about what we might want to say about a Christian response to the refugee crisis.

This is not to say that Christians will all automatically agree on exactly what we should do to solve the crisis but it is important to take the time to think and pray through what your attitude is and, once you've worked this out, what you are going to do about it.

You'll find a short film to accompany each of the four sessions at biblesociety.org.uk/refugeesandthebiblefilms

All Bible references are taken from the Contemporary English Version.

Paula Gooder

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Refugees and the Bible

Welcoming the stranger

Session 1: Jesus the refugee

Pray

Spend some time in prayer dedicating your discussion and reflections to God.

Watch

Part 1: Jesus the refugee

(Download from biblesociety.org.uk/refugeesandthebiblefilms)

Discuss the clip. How do you react to what was said? Do you agree with it? Is there anything you disagree with?

What difference, if any, does it make to know that Jesus had been a refugee, as child? What difference might it have made to him? Does it change how you think about him?

Read

Ask someone to read the passage out loud slowly, leaving enough gaps for reflection; you might also want to leave a few minutes for silent reflection at the end.

Matthew 25.31-46 (Contemporary English Version)

³¹ When the Son of Man comes in his glory with all of his angels, he will sit on his royal throne. ³² The people of all nations will be brought before him, and he will separate them, as shepherds separate their sheep from their goats.

³³ He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those on his right, "My father has blessed you! Come and receive the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created. ³⁵ When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, ³⁶ and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me."

³⁷ Then the ones who pleased the Lord will ask, "When did we give you something to eat or drink? ³⁸ When did we welcome you as a stranger or give you clothes to wear ³⁹ or visit you while you were sick or in jail?"

⁴⁰ The king will answer, "Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me."

⁴¹ Then the king will say to those on his left, "Get away from me! You are under God's curse. Go into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels! ⁴² I was hungry, but you did not give me anything to eat, and I was thirsty, but you did not give me anything to drink. ⁴³ I was a stranger, but you did not welcome me, and I was naked, but you did not give me any clothes to wear. I was sick and in jail, but you did not take care of me."

⁴⁴ Then the people will ask, "Lord, when did we fail to help you when you were hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in jail?"

⁴⁵ The king will say to them, "Whenever you failed to help any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you failed to do it for me."

⁴⁶ Then Jesus said, "Those people will be punished forever. But the ones who pleased God will have eternal life."

Unpack

- In Matthew 25, Jesus links the response at the throne of judgement with the way people treated those who were hungry and thirsty; strangers; those without clothes; those who were sick and those in prison. Possibly even more importantly than that, he said that whenever these actions were or were not done, it was as though they were or were not done to him.
- Did you know that Middle Eastern sheep and goats are almost identical to look at? And that they are kept together in the same flock? The only person who can tell them apart is their own shepherd. Even then they would need to come very close to the shepherd, for the shepherd to tell the difference between them. This helps to understand the image here a bit better – Jesus on the throne will recognise (or not recognise) those who come close and make a judgement about them based on this recognition.
- One of the hardest features of this passage is the implication that Jesus' judgment is based on how nice we have been to those in need rather than on the basis of faith in Jesus. There has been extensive discussion about this and no easy answers. It's worth considering this passage alongside another idea present in Scripture, that although we are saved because of our faith in Jesus, there is an expectation this will impact how we live. Even the apostle Paul expects our faith to result in changed behaviour, particularly in how we relate to others. We can claim to have faith in Jesus but the real test can be seen in what we do. Jesus' recognition of us as people who do have faith in him might be related to whether that faith does, in fact, make any difference to how we live.

Reflect

- What do Jesus' words in the passage mean for us in practice? If you were to respond to someone as 'though you were doing it to Jesus', how might you do it differently than if you were to treat them as 'just' a hungry person, or 'just' a stranger?
- Knowing that Jesus himself was a 'stranger' as a child in Egypt, does this affect the way you read his command in Matthew 25?
- The problem, of course, is that it would be nigh on impossible to help every hungry or sick person that we meet in the course of our lives. What do you think Jesus might want to say about how we choose who to help?
- Is there anything that you have explored in your discussion today that you would want to apply to the question of how we think about and/or welcome refugees?

Pray

Spend time in prayer committing what you have discussed to God. Bring to him in prayer those who are wondering whether to flee their country; those who are currently seeking safe haven and those who are in refugee camps in various places around the world. Use stories from [biblesociety.org.uk/prayertree](https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/prayertree) to help you pray.

Refugees and the Bible

Welcoming the stranger

Session 2: The gift of a stranger

Pray

Spend some time in prayer dedicating your discussion and reflections to God.

Introduction

The importance of offering hospitality to those we don't know is an important strand that runs all the way through the Bible and can be found in passages like:

'Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.' (Hebrews 13.2)

What do you think the author the Hebrews meant here and why was it important? Why do you think showing hospitality was such an important part of life for the writers of the Bible?

Why do you think we are a less hospitable culture? Are there some very good reasons for this? Have we lost anything by becoming less hospitable?

Watch

Part 2: The gift of a stranger

(Download from biblesociety.org.uk/refugeesandthebiblefilms)

Discuss the clip. How do you react to what was said? Do you agree with it? Is there anything you disagree with?

Unpack

- As mentioned in the video clip, the Moabites were ancient enemies of the Israelites: as close neighbours there were running battles between them on numerous occasions. No Israelite would expect anything good from a Moabite.
- There is a very important word in the Old Testament. In Hebrew it is the word *hesed* but as with many important biblical words it is very difficult to put into English well. The word *hesed* means love, kindness, loyalty, faithfulness, grace and steadfastness. So it can be translated as steadfast love or loving kindness.
- It is one of the most important words for the covenant. God showed loving kindness to his people and asked that they responded to him in the same way. So the word *hesed* sums up the love of God and love of neighbour that is asked of God's people
- In Ruth 3.10 Boaz exclaims that Ruth has shown *hesed*, the word in bold is translating *hesed* here, 'Boaz replied: *The Lord bless you! This shows how truly **loyal** you are to your family. You could have looked for a younger man, either rich or poor, but you didn't.*' (Ruth 3.10)

Read

Ask someone to read the passage out loud slowly, leaving enough gaps for reflection; you might also want to leave a few minutes for silent reflection at the end.

Ruth 3.10 (Contemporary English Version)

Boaz replied: The Lord bless you! This shows how truly loyal you are to your family. You could have looked for a younger man, either rich or poor, but you didn't.

Reflect

- Discuss what Boaz said in the context of the whole of the book of Ruth (you might need to skim read it to remind you of the key facts).
- What acts of Ruth in the story might be described by the word *hesed*?
- What can we learn about 'right behaviour' from the kinds of actions that Ruth displayed?
- Why do you think it is important for the story of Israel to know that Ruth, a Moabite, was an ancestress of King David?
- Some scholars think that the book of Ruth is to be seen as a 'teaching story', designed to get people to think again about their attitudes to people they view as an enemy. If you read it this way what do we learn from Ruth about our attitudes to 'outsiders' whether they be ancient enemies or simply people we don't know yet?
- Is there anything that you have explored in your discussion today that you would want to apply to the question of how we think about and/or welcome refugees?

Pray

Spend time in prayer committing what you have discussed to God. Bring to him in prayer those who are wondering whether to flee their country; those who are currently seeking safe haven and those who are in refugee camps in various places around the world. See our online prayer resources at biblesociety.org.uk/prayertree

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Session 3: The land: living in it and leaving it

Pray

Spend some time in prayer dedicating your discussion and reflections to God.

Watch

Part 3: The land: living in it and leaving it

(Download from biblesociety.org.uk/refugeesandthebiblefilms)

Discuss the clip. How do you react to what was said? Do you agree with it? Is there anything you disagree with?

What does the word 'home' mean to you? When are you deeply and contentedly 'at home' and when are you not? Is 'home' for you a place, a state or a relationship? Or something else?

The Israelites had a very particular relationship with the 'land' – it was, they believed, given to them by God and caused them great anguish when they were taken away from it during the exile.

Read

Ask someone to read the passage out loud slowly, leaving enough gaps for reflection; you might also want to leave a few minutes for silent reflection at the end (make sure you read right to the end and in your discussion you might want to talk about why verse 9 is there!)

Psalm 137 (Contemporary English Version)

*Beside the rivers of Babylon
we thought about Jerusalem,
and we sat down and cried.*

² *We hung our small harps
on the willow[a] trees.*

³ *Our enemies had brought us here
as their prisoners,
and now they wanted us to sing
and entertain them.*

They insulted us and shouted,

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Session 3: The land: living in it and leaving it

"Sing about Zion!"

*⁴ Here in a foreign land,
how can we sing
about the Lord?*

*⁵ Jerusalem, if I forget you,
let my right hand go limp.*

*⁶ Let my tongue stick
to the roof of my mouth,
if I don't think about you
above all else.*

*⁷ Our Lord, punish the Edomites!
Because the day Jerusalem fell,
they shouted,
"Completely destroy the city!
Tear down every building!"*

*⁸ Babylon, you are doomed!
I pray the Lord's blessings
on anyone who punishes you
for what you did to us.*

*⁹ May the Lord bless everyone
who beats your children
against the rocks!*

Read Jeremiah 29.7

Pray for peace in Babylonia and work hard to make it prosperous. The more successful that nation is, the better off you will be.

Notice the difference in tone and emotion in this verse, discuss the difference between the two passages.

Unpack

- In case you are unfamiliar with the exile, in the 6th century BC, Judah (the Southern part of Israel where Jerusalem was) rebelled against the Babylonian empire who during that time ruled over them. The Babylonians punished for this rebellion by invading Jerusalem, destroying the temple and carrying large numbers of the population off into Exile in Babylon. The Exile refers to the period while they were away from the Land between c598/7 and 538 BC.
- The two passages here reflect two different attitudes to the exile. Psalm 137 is an emotional response declaring an inability to praise God away from their homeland. Jeremiah, a prophetic text speaking to the people, encourages them to settle in their new homeland and to seek its welfare/peace.
- The word translated in some translations as 'welfare' and in others 'peace' is the Hebrew word *shalom*. It is a much richer word than our English word 'peace'. The word *shalom* has a resonance of wholeness, completeness and well-being. This is why welfare is a good translation – it is the peace that brings wholeness. Jeremiah's message to the exiles is that their well-being was tied up with the well-being of the place in which they found themselves. Although it was not home, they should treat it as they would home.

Reflect

- These passages resonate strongly with the experience of being a refugee or exile, but they may remind you of times in your life when you have felt like this or been in a similar situation. If you feel able to, share with the group an occasion when you have felt 'unable to sing the Lord's song in a strange land'.
- Think about the emotions you observed in Psalm 137, what might we need to bear in mind about how refugees feel as they settle in a new place?
- The command in Jeremiah to seek the 'shalom' of the place where we live is as relevant to people who feel at home there as it is to those who have arrived recently. What might it look like if we all sought the 'shalom' of the place where we lived? What might this involve us doing?
- Is there anything that you have explored in your discussion today that you would want to apply to the question of how we think about and/or welcome refugees?

Pray

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Welcoming the stranger

Session 4: Who is my neighbour?

Pray

Spend some time in prayer dedicating your discussion and reflections to God.

Watch

Part 4: Who is my neighbour?

(Download from biblesociety.org.uk/refugeesandthebiblefilms)

Discuss the clip. How do you react to what was said? Do you agree with it? Is there anything you disagree with?

Have a look at Leviticus 19.17-8:

Don't hold grudges. On the other hand, it's wrong not to correct someone who needs correcting. Stop being angry and don't try to take revenge. I am the Lord, and I command you to love others as much as you love yourself.

and Leviticus 19.33-34:

Don't mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

What do you think is meant in that context by 'love others as much as you love yourself'? And why do you think they added 'treat them [foreigners] as well as you treat citizens'? What would this have meant for them in practice?

Short note: the word translated 'alien' in the NRSV; 'stranger' in the ESV; and 'foreigner' in the NIV is a Hebrew word that means a sojourner or someone who stays somewhere temporarily (though how temporary is not defined).

Read

The story of the parable of the Good Samaritan is set in the context of a conversation between Jesus and an expert in the law. Notice the whole context of the story as you read:

Ask someone to read the passage out loud slowly, leaving enough gaps for reflection; you might also want to leave a few minutes for silent reflection at the end.

Luke 10.25-37 (Contemporary English Version)

²⁵ *An expert in the Law of Moses stood up and asked Jesus a question to see what he would say. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to have eternal life?"*

²⁶ *Jesus answered, "What is written in the Scriptures? How do you understand them?"*

²⁷ *The man replied, "The Scriptures say, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.' They also say, 'Love your neighbours as much as you love yourself.'"*

²⁸ *Jesus said, "You have given the right answer. If you do this, you will have eternal life."*

²⁹ *But the man wanted to show that he knew what he was talking about. So he asked Jesus, "Who are my neighbours?"*

³⁰ *Jesus replied:*

As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, robbers attacked him and grabbed everything he had. They beat him up and ran off, leaving him half dead.

³¹ *A priest happened to be going down the same road. But when he saw the man, he walked by on the other side. ³² Later a temple helper came to the same place. But when he saw the man who had been beaten up, he also went by on the other side.*

³³ *A man from Samaria then came traveling along that road. When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him ³⁴ and went over to him. He treated his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put him on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵ The next morning he gave the innkeeper two silver coins and said, "Please take care of the man. If you spend more than this on him, I will pay you when I return."*

³⁶ *Then Jesus asked, "Which one of these three people was a real neighbour to the man who was beaten up by robbers?"*

³⁷ *The teacher answered, "The one who showed pity."
Jesus said, "Go and do the same!"*

Unpack

- The summary of the law cited by the lawyer in this passage was a common one in the first century and can be found in a number of Jewish texts. It combines a law from Deuteronomy with one from Leviticus and emphasises the vertical and horizontal expectations of the law: towards God and towards one another.
- In the story the Priests and the Levites were officials in the temple. The Priests undertook all the official functions in the Temple, particularly the sacrifices; the Levites were Temple musicians and guards. Both Priests and Levites served one month in twelve in the temple and had to be pure (i.e. not defiled by things like dead bodies). If they thought the injured man was dead then touching him would have complicated their once-a-year service in the temple.
- Samaritans were close neighbours of the Jews. There is debate about precisely who they were but it is often thought that they were the descendants of the Jews from that part of Israel that had been conquered by the Assyrian empire in the 8th century BC, and whose population had subsequently been mixed with that of the Assyrians. They had the Torah – though no more of the Hebrew Bible. They worshiped on Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem. They still exist today, though only a few hundred remain and still sacrifice as they have always done. It was the common heritage though expressed differently that lay at the heart of the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans. The enmity was so great that most Jews would have taken a long detour to avoid travelling through their territory (though noticeably Jesus did not).

Reflect

- The commands in Leviticus and in Luke all expect us to love others as we love ourselves. The problem is that sometimes it is easier to love others than to love ourselves. What do you think it means to love yourself? How good at it are you?
- If Jesus were to tell this parable today – who might take the role of the Good Samaritan? You might have a range of answers to this question!
- What does it mean in practice to love your neighbour? Notice that Jesus' parable about 'love' involved action and didn't comment on 'attitude' – is there anything to learn from this?
- Is there anything that you have explored in your discussion today that you would want to apply to the question of how we think about and/or welcome refugees?
- As this is the final session, also spend some time reflecting back on the previous three sessions. Is there anything you will take away with you? In terms of your questions about refugees is anything unresolved or still troubling you? Discuss these as a group.

Pray

Spend time in prayer committing all that you have discussed to God. Bring to him in prayer those who are wondering whether to flee their country; those who are currently seeking safe haven and those who are in refugee camps in various places around the world. Add your prayers to our digital prayer tree at biblesociety.org.uk/prayertree