



5-DAY DEVOTIONAL: BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS FOR REFUGEE WEEK

Hillsong UK
17 -23 JUNE 2024

INTRODUCTION

From 17 - 23 June 2024 the annual Refugee Week takes place in the UK and starts with the global World Refugee Day on Thursday the 20th of June. Both initiatives honour and celebrate the strength, contributions and courage of people who have been forced to flee their home country to escape conflict or persecution.

The theme of this year's Refugee Week is 'Our Home' and as a church we believe that we are uniquely positioned to provide a new home. We believe that we are called to welcome the strangers in our cities and support refugees and asylum seekers with a warm welcome, caring community and provide practical empowerment.

We pray that this short devotional will help you reflect on the biblical approach to the refugee and stranger in our country and prayerfully consider what our response could be.

For more information on our refugee initiatives and projects see hillsong.co.uk/refugeeweek

DAY 1: REFUGEES & THE PEOPLE OF GOD (PART 1)

Reading:

Exodus 2:23-25

"Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them."

Devotional

When considering how we in the West can think biblically about refugees, one of the most helpful places to start is in the Old Testament, and the people of God, Israel. While the people of Israel were originally promised a land of their own, in the course of time they found themselves in Egypt, as slaves and refugees. At first the Israelites were welcomed into Egypt by the King himself and given a place to settle. However, over time attitudes changed and eventually the Israelites were oppressed by the Egyptians and then ultimately enslaved. Their response was to cry out to God.

This brings us to today's passage, where we read of God hearing their cries, seeing their suffering, and being moved to action.

Today God still hears the cries of those who have been displaced and he still sees their suffering. There are many people who have had to flee their homes, whether for economic or political reasons or due to religious persecution. They often encounter many hardships on the road and struggle to find a place to settle. Even when countries or organisations do take them in, they are strangers in a foreign land and are often greeted with suspicion. Many experience negative attitudes towards them and some are even exploited and abused. In the case of Israel, God answered their prayer by raising up Moses. God appointed Moses as his representative and worked through him to deliver them (foreshadowing the ultimate deliverance which came through Christ). Today God is calling us, his church, to be his representatives to the world and is wanting to work through us to outwork that deliverance that Christ has won for us. He's calling us to hear the cry of the refugee, to see their suffering and to be moved to action.

Call To Action

Read through Exodus 1-2 and consider the experience of the Israelite people being taken into slavery in Egypt. Think about what it means for us to know that the story of refugees is built into God's history with his people. Spend time praying for those who are refugees in our world today, and look for opportunities to play your part in supporting them, whether it be financial or through initiatives such as our church's 'Refugee Response'.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I pray today that my eyes would be opened to the plight of those around me. I pray that my heart would be opened that I would have compassion to act and that my ears would be opened to hear how you would ask me to act. Amen.

DAY 2: REFUGEES & THE PEOPLE OF GOD (PART 2)

Reading:

Ezra 9:8-9

"But now we have been given a brief moment of grace, for the Lord our God has allowed a few of us to survive as a remnant. He has given us security in this holy place. Our God has brightened our eyes and granted us some relief from our slavery. For we were slaves, but in his unfailing love our God did not abandon us in our slavery. Instead, he caused the kings of Persia to treat us favourably. He revived us so we could rebuild the Temple of our God and repair its ruins. He has given us a protective wall in Judah and Jerusalem."

Devotional:

While God's people were eventually rescued from Egypt and did eventually make it to their promised land, later on in the Old Testament we read that the Israelite people were exiled from this land and found themselves again in a foreign country, in Babylon. They were forced to leave behind their beloved city, Jerusalem, and the Temple of the Lord which was in complete desolation, having been burned down by the Babylonians. It was a time of debilitating grief and pain beyond description. But then, after 70 years of exile, Cyrus, King of Persia, who had defeated the Babylonians, wrote an edict allowing the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild their lives there. He also generously commissioned them to rebuild the Lord's Temple so worship could resume. To the Jews this news was a tangible manifestation of God's favour and faithfulness to them through a nation that did not know him like they did.

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we know we are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Wouldn't it be mind-blowing if centuries from now history recorded that we, the people of God, outdid the Persians in showing God's favour and generosity to refugees in our midst who have lost everything? Showing this kind of favour and generosity to others starts from the heart. And prayer connects our hearts to God's and moves us to act according to His will. Let's pray that the Lord does a work in our hearts so that we will be his faithful instruments on earth even today.

Call to Action:

Take a few minutes today to meditate on the following Scriptures and to offer your thoughts to God in prayer: Romans 12:1-5 and Hosea 10:12. Think about the response that these passages could bring about in your own life.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that we are yours because of your rich favour and generosity towards us. We pray that you will work on our hearts so we can compassionately extend your favour and generosity to those in need around us. Lord, we also pray that today's Scripture will become the reality and the testimony of refugees in our world today. Through our actions may they see you and your heart for them. Amen.

DAY 3: JESUS THE REFUGEE

Reading:

Matthew 2:13-15

"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Devotional:

Today's passage is found in the broader chapter of Matthew 2, which is a passage that is often told around Christmas time. It's the story of the wise men who came to see Jesus and laid gifts at his feet, and as such we tend to only read it when we want to bring our attention to what took place at the birth of Jesus. But this passage tells a story which is so much more than simply a nice Christmas message. It's a story of family strife, displacement and murder. It's a story in which Jesus and his parents become refugees.

Jesus and his parents were from the land of Israel, but due to persecution and threats over their lives they were forced from their homeland, to Egypt, where they would be outside of Herod's jurisdiction. We see in v.13 that it was only when Herod died that Joseph and Mary would be able to safely return to the land of Israel, and so they were displaced for a lengthy period of time. While Jesus did return to Israel and spent his life there, it's important for us to remember that when he was young he was a refugee in a foreign land. This can help us to "see Jesus" in the refugees that exist today. Each person who finds themselves displaced from their homeland as a refugee has dignity and worth, and we must remember to see them as Jesus, for he too was in their place.

Call to Action:

Spend time considering your own attitude to the refugee crisis and how you see refugees in the world around us. Where can you choose to “see Jesus” in the refugee crisis today, and what difference would this make to your attitude towards refugees? Read through Matthew 2 in your own time and consider what the experience of fleeing to Egypt must have been like for Mary and Joseph.

Prayer:

God, we remember today that you are not detached or separate from refugees, but rather that when you came to earth in Jesus Christ you took on the form of a refugee yourself. Help us to remember to see the dignity and worth that you have given every human being on the planet. Amen.

DAY 4: THE CHURCH AS SOJOURNERS IN A FOREIGN LAND

Reading:

1 Peter 2:11-12

“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”

Devotional:

While we can read of others in the Bible who have experienced what it means to be a refugee, today we focus on a passage that includes us, as the church, and which identifies us as strangers in a foreign land. In this passage Peter is writing to Christians who he says are on a journey to their eternal future and, as such, are not living in their homelands. Peter refers to us as “sojourners and exiles” (ESV), “sojourners and pilgrims” (NKJV), or “foreigners and exiles” (NIV). A “sojourner” is a person who resides temporarily in a place, which suggests that we as Christians are not to consider the kingdom of man to be our true home. Rather, we are to set our sights on the kingdom of God, which will be our eternal place of belonging and rest.

Responding to the Gospel is not the end of the Christian journey; rather, it is just the beginning. And the journey is lived out in a world and a culture which is very different from the one that Jesus came to establish. In many ways we are strangers in a foreign land, in every sense we are “sojourners”. We reside in a temporary place - this world is not our final destination. On the way to our resting place, the kingdom of God, there are things to abstain from and things to embrace, for there is a battle for the welfare of souls. But we also have an opportunity for our lives, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to point others to Jesus. Whilst our sojourning is spiritual in nature, we must always be mindful that there are many today whose sojourning is physical; those who have been displaced from their physical homeland. Let us always remember that we too are sojourners and aliens in a foreign land.

Call to Action:

Think about the areas in your life where you are tempted to blend in with the unbelieving world. What steps can you take to change this? Where have you become more like a friend of the world rather than a sojourner and foreigner?

Prayer:

Lord, as we think at this time about refugees and issues that lead them to leave their own country and travel to a place they hope will provide a better future, may we also remember that our life now is actually part of a journey to an eternal future with you. May we stand out, in a good way, and point others to Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Amen.

DAY 5: A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Reading:

Leviticus 23:22

“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.”

Devotional:

Whether it be from the teachings of Jesus or from the law of Moses, we see throughout Scripture that God’s heart is extended towards the downtrodden in society; those who are poor, oppressed and displaced. In today’s reading we read about an ancient principle that God gave to the people of Israel, in which they were to remember the “sojourner” when they took up their harvest. At this time, the fruits of the harvest would have been the method by which the Israelites lived and supported their families, so it must have been tempting for them to gather up all that they could! But God instructed them to leave some of their produce, to bless those who were sojourning in their land. On face value this must have been a difficult commandment to follow, but it would have been one which communicated clearly the responsibility of the believers to remember those less fortunate than them.

Today’s Scripture is an old commandment which contextually is removed from our world today, as we don’t all tend to be out harvesting fields on a daily basis! But the principle is one that can and should continue to challenge us – where are the opportunities for us to remember those less fortunate, especially when it comes to our own “fields”; our resource, our wealth, our time, our belongings? As a church and as believers, we must remember that we have a responsibility to always be looking out for those on the outer edges of society, and looking for opportunities to love and bless them with the gospel message. Ultimately, our response should be not just prayerful but also practical. It should be both spiritual and material.

A Call to Action:

Spend some time thinking about what you have in your hands today, and how you could steward your resources for the benefit of others. Even if you don’t think you have much, where are the areas that you can remember to bless those who are less fortunate and continue to fulfil this ancient commandment?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I come to you today mindful of those in my world who have far less than me. I bring before you my all, my time, my resources, my belongings and my wealth. God, would you challenge me to remember those in my world who have less, and would you help me to find ways to bless those around me. Thank you that you have promised to always be my provider. Amen.