

## An Overview of Old Testament Principles on Reaching the Refugee in Our Midst

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*What ministry is available to Christians who have been educated about unreached people groups, and who want to somehow become actively involved in reaching them, but who are not called, as yet, to "overseas" missionary service? Brenda Thompson observes that many Christians can minister right in their own neighborhoods to refugees, many of whom represent unreached peoples. Thompson points out that refugees have always been a special object of God's care and that they should therefore be a special concern of every believer today.*

**I**n today's world more people than ever before are leaving their homelands in search of a better life. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees estimates that 20 million people are currently involved in this type of search. Almost every continent is represented if we look at the ethnic groups that make up this total: Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, Chinese, Polish, Romanian, Bulgarian, Yugoslavian, Hungarian, Ethiopian, Haitian, Iranian, Iraqi, Afghan, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Cuban, El Salvadorian, and many more.

The United States is among the leaders in the acceptance of refugees; the U.S. State Department Report on Refugee Resettlement states that more than 1,100,000 have been resettled in the U.S. since 1975. But the United States is certainly not alone in this endeavor. Dozens of other Western and non-Western nations are also opening their doors to refugees.



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The process by which a refugee applies for permanent residence within a particular country is a lengthy one. Each year millions of refugees wait in camps and temporary holding facilities to hear whether or not they have been accepted. Once the refugees have been granted permanent residence status, the complexities of living in a totally different culture begin. It is at this point that local churches and Christians can have a major role to play in the lives of refugees.

Should Christians be concerned for the refugees in their midst? The Old Testament, in particular, has much to say about this. The Hebrew word *ger*—which can be translated interchangeably as “alien,” “sojourner,” or “stranger”—always refers to a person who is neither native-born nor a foreigner, but rather one who is between these two poles of identity. In other words, the *ger* is one who is residing in a culture different from his own without the benefits of family ties or citizenship rights. Our modern understanding of the word “refugee” is an equivalent of the Biblical definition of *ger*.

God's interest in and compassion for the *ger* is very clear throughout the Old Testament. In almost every book the plight of the alien or sojourner is discussed and, through a variety of means, God reveals His will concerning the appropriate treatment of this dislocated person dwelling among His people. It is interesting to note that the *ger* is frequently mentioned with other defenseless groups, such as the poor, the widows, and the orphans (Deut. 10:18; Jer. 2:26).

#### **EVIDENCE FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Several Old Testament themes speak to the needs and obligations of the alien and sojourner. First, Israel is called to administer justice on behalf of the alien (Ex. 23:8; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 24:17) and, on the other side of the coin, continually warned to stop the oppression and mistreatment of the aliens living among them. Deuteronomy 27:19 warns that the person who withholds justice from the alien, fatherless, or widow will be cursed.

Second, Israel is called to understand and have compassion on the plight of the alien because they themselves were once aliens in Egypt (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 23:22; Deut. 23:7; cf. Acts 7:6). The people of Israel were expected to empathize with the

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struggles and hardships of the sojourner and to try to assist him, keeping in mind the hardships in their own past.

The experience of stepping into a new culture and being in the situation of an alien or foreigner is a common one for many Old Testament characters and is not limited to the years in Egypt (for example, the experiences of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Ruth). Exodus 2:15-22 describes Moses in the land of Midian years before the Exodus. He names his newborn son "Gershom," which sounds like the Hebrew words for "an alien there," and he says, "I have become an alien in a foreign land" (Ex. 2:22). Similar experience seems to be a key element in the development of godly faithfulness for many Old Testament characters. In Genesis 12 God's call to Abram to "Go..." is the beginning of his sojourn in many lands as well as the beginning of his journey of faith (cf. Heb. 11:9). The stories of Joseph, Ruth, and Daniel reveal a development of their faithfulness in the process of their travels.

Third, Israel is instructed to include the alien and sojourner in their observances of the Law (Ex. 12:19; Lev. 16:29; Deut. 5:15). Aliens living in the land were to maintain most of the restrictions outlined in the Law for dietary practices, social relations, and purifications. They also were to participate in most of the feasts and holy days.

Deuteronomy 31:12 states that the alien has the right to be taught the ways of the Lord: "Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law." The alien was not only to be included in the practices of the Law but also taught about Israel's God. From this text one may further imply that God intended the alien to hear and learn about Him in a way that would be easily understood, perhaps in his own language.

As a host nation, Israel was expected to serve as a provider and protector for the aliens living within her borders. God intended for the people of Israel to be involved in the daily lives of the foreigners among them and to reach out to meet their felt needs. Moreover, Israel's responsibility did not end with the call to meet the aliens' spiritual needs by teaching them about Yahweh (Deut. 31:12). Israel was also to minister to emotional needs: God instructed Israel to love the stranger

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in their midst (Deut. 10:19), maintain an attitude of justice toward them (Deut. 24:17), and have compassion on their situation (Ex. 22:21). Israel was also called to be involved in meeting the physical needs of the alien. The nation was to give to the aliens out of its surplus (Lev. 19:10), allocate to them a portion of the tithe (Deut. 14:28-29), and provide them with food and clothing (Deut. 10:18).

### **IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY**

From the evidence presented above, it is clear that the God of the Old Testament was a God concerned for the alien or sojourner living in the presence of Israel. But God's concern for this type of displaced person certainly did not end with the conclusion of Old Testament history. Jesus himself carried on this understanding of compassion for the stranger, especially in his parable of judgment found in Matthew 25. In this parable Jesus makes it clear that an active concern for the "stranger" (Greek *xenos*: "stranger" or "foreigner") is somehow tied into the future rewards of everlasting life. Those who would follow Jesus must have a concern for the alien or sojourner because such concern, when applied to the stranger, is somehow also care for Jesus (Mt. 25:40). Such a connection may reflect the fact that, in a sense, Jesus himself was a stranger in his ministry here on earth.

Thus, God's concern for the stranger, today in the form of the refugee, must still be shared and demonstrated by the people of God. God's intention for His people to minister to the needs of the alien and sojourner is not something that can be taken lightly. Meeting the needs of the whole person requires careful consideration of what the specific emotional, physical, and spiritual needs are and how we as God's people can help.

Of all the needs a refugee has, the emotional ones are by far the most difficult to address. Refugees face intense psychological pain because their worlds have crumbled around them and the familiar has vanished forever. They must deal with fear, distrust, impatience, loneliness, insecurity, and hopelessness. As they enter their new countries, they look for people to share their pain, understand and listen to their fears and frustrations, give them hope, and be consistently available

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to them so that a renewed sense of security and acceptance can be built up within them. Many of the trials they have faced have stripped them of their personal dignity and pride, leaving them with feelings of worthlessness and uselessness. These feelings are often compounded if they enter a country where they do not speak the language and where they have few, if any, transferable skills. Underlying all of the emotional needs is the need for consistent, committed love. God has called His people to be in relationship with the aliens in their midst, to have compassion and understanding about their circumstances, and, above all else, to love them.

When a refugee is forced to flee from his country, survival and safety are his primary goals. By the time he reaches a safe place, he is tired, hungry, and probably sick. However, as we have discussed above, reaching a "safe place" is only the beginning of his journey. When a person is finally admitted into a country of permanent residence, he faces many material and practical needs: assistance in finding housing, financial aid, food and clothing, directions for basic services, and much more.

The practical and specific needs of refugees are often overlooked by people around them who are in a position to help. It is not uncommon for newcomers to have never encountered many of the modern conveniences we take for granted. Refugees in this category need a sympathetic friend to explain how common household facilities and appliances are used. They may also need assistance in learning new systems of economical shopping. They may need to apply for public assistance, a bus pass, or a driver's license. They may need help in enrolling children in school or in finding a doctor, post office, or employment office.

Physical needs are often the most obvious and the easiest to meet at the point of initial resettlement; however, God has also called His people to be in *continuing* relationship with refugees. God asks His people to provide justice and to assure fair treatment. For example, what does the refugee do when a public assistance check does not come as scheduled, leaving his family without money for food and bills? Who should he talk to, and what should he say? What happens when a landlord arbitrarily decides to raise the rent? What recourse is

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there for justice or new housing? To whom can a refugee mother look for help when her children are victimized at school because they look different or speak with an accent? The list can go on and on. Once again, consistent and committed love needs to be the motivation for Christian involvement.

In the midst of so much hardship and change, it is common for refugees to question everything about their life and value system. Bitterness and resentment often result when no answer is able to satisfy the longings for security or outweigh the pain of their losses. The need for spiritual support and care is deeply felt. Many Christians find that refugees today are often comforted to find someone, amidst the crowd of atheists, who holds a belief and a faith in a divine being. Usually the refugee will not be a Christian, but he most often will be a person who believes in spiritual things and whose cultural heritage gives a high place to his god and religious practices. There is a great need for Christians who can sensitively share with, listen to, and pray for such a person. Christians should be open, ready to share their experiences of how God has revealed Himself to them and met their needs, and, above all, able to communicate Scriptural truth to their refugee friends in a way they can understand.

Aliens and sojourners deserve all that God has intended for them. Ministry to them is not a matter of personal preference or casual choice, but instead is a high and holy calling from God Himself. In particular, what an opportunity God has given to Christians in the West to minister to these refugees, many of whom are from unreached people groups! In the United States alone, 67,000 new refugees have arrived during this past year. Certainly they have a right to know and experience the Lord's care. We have been chosen to be the ministers of God's care to the refugees in our midst.

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*Editor's note: For more information about refugees and how Christians can become involved in ministry among them, see Edward R. Dayton and Samuel Wilson, eds., The Refugees*

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