



Far From Home



*Exploring
Migration Stories
in the Bible*

Far From Home

This study belongs to:

Start Date:

Women of Welcome

is a community dedicated to diving into the whole of Scripture to understand God's heart for the immigrant and refugee. We believe God calls us to a deep love for the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the forgotten. Together, this community is on a journey to understand biblical hospitality in an authentic way. Therefore we seek to learn, engage, and grow to be more like Christ in our welcome toward the sojourner.

This six-week study explores the most popular migration stories in the Bible, from the Old Testament accounts of Abram and Sarai all the way to the early church's missionary migration journeys in the New Testament. Today global migration experts estimate that over 84 million people are forcibly displaced from their homes. While these numbers certainly outpace the migration stories we'll revisit throughout the Bible, the reasons for migration remain the same. People desire to flourish. They don't want to simply survive, they want to live, even if that means far from home.

While all of our studies are designed with individual or group use in mind, we highly encourage you *not* to take this journey alone. All across the country, women just like you are connecting in person and in online small groups to grow in what it means to show Christ-like welcome, and *you're invited!*

To host or join a small group visit [WomenofWelcome.com/Connect](https://www.womenofwelcome.com/connect) and get plugged in!

Join the community and conversation on  & : [@womenofwelcome](https://www.instagram.com/womenofwelcome)

Women of Welcome was founded in 2017 and is a collaborative partnership between World Relief and The National Immigration Forum.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the English Standard (ESV) or New International Version (NIV) translations.

Ladies,

Millions of people across the globe are living a life far from home. Some by choice, some by force. According to data from the United Nations, over 30 million people are considered refugees or asylum seekers, and another 48 million are internally displaced in their home countries. Add in a few other people groups from destabilized nations and the total jumps to approximately 84 million people forcibly displaced from their homes. The number is astonishing and incredibly overwhelming. And as we lean into the complex spaces of Christ-like welcome, biblical hospitality, and compassion toward immigrants and refugees, we can easily become discouraged by this massive number. What could we possibly do to affect change within something so massive? When I start to feel hopeless about the numbers, I remember this beautiful quote from Mother Teresa:

“If you can’t feed a hundred people, just feed one.”

And isn’t that just what the Lord wants from us? A heart that offers whatever it has to whoever is in need. You and I aren’t going to solve the complexities of international displacement or understand all the underpinnings of global migration patterns at the end of this study. But what we’ll hopefully walk away with is a confident reconnection to God’s faithfulness through the history of his people’s migration. Whether we’ve noticed it before or not, God’s redemptive story is one of migration. Sometimes it was a journey to a promised land, other times an exodus or an exile. The reality was, the people of God were continually on the move. And when he sent his son to earth, Jesus, too, had “no place to lay his head.” So my hope is that we look into these stories with fresh eyes and open hearts, because so many of God’s people are still very far from home.

Praying for you,

Bri Stensrud

Director, Women of Welcome

Before you start ...

Whenever we connect present-day migration narratives to stories in the Bible, as with any biblical text application and teaching, context is important. Below are a few frequently asked questions and discussion points that tend to arise whenever we discuss this particular subject. We hope these answers will provide helpful context for small group discussions or deeper personal study.

In biblical times, were there formal borders around countries like there are today?

It's true that borders in the ancient Near East during the millennia that the books of the Bible were written were not the same as borders between nation-states today, as the concept of a nation-state did not develop until thousands of years later. Clearly, the individuals who crossed borders in the Bible would not have needed to first obtain a visa to be stamped into their passports. We do, however, have some evidence in the Hebrew scriptures that, in at least some situations, there were restrictions on who could cross a border into another territory. For example, Abraham determines that he must lie (or ask his wife to lie) if they are to be allowed to safely find residence in the territories ruled, respectively, by the Egyptian Pharaoh (**Genesis 12**) and by Abimelek (**Genesis 20**). The people of Israel later seek (but are denied) permission to travel through the land ruled by the King of Heshbon (**Deuteronomy 2**). The Hebrew scriptures also describe in great detail the geographic boundaries of the Promised Land (**Numbers 34**).

Notably, where we see walls described in the Old Testament (such as that which Nehemiah helped to reconstruct), the purpose is to keep out those seeking to do harm, but Israel was also explicitly commanded throughout the books of the

law to offer help to vulnerable foreigners in need. Likewise, while the situation is certainly different today than it was in the times of the Bible, we believe it is an appropriate function of government to take reasonable steps to keep out anyone whose intentions are to do harm, but also that governments should offer assistance to those fleeing persecution and requesting help, which describes how the US asylum process is supposed to work.

Migration stories in the Bible are different from present-day migration stories.

This is certainly true, as noted above. What is unchanging, despite different circumstances, is God’s character, which we see described in both the Old and the New Testaments: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (**Deuteronomy 10:17-18**). God then explicitly commands his people to emulate this character: “And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (**Deuteronomy 10:19**). The command to love our neighbors—which in Leviticus 19 was shortly followed by the command to love the foreigner in the land (**Leviticus 19:18, 33-34**)—is reiterated in the New Testament as the catch-all command that sums up all other commands. Jesus’ response to a legal scholar’s clarifying question in Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan, makes clear that the “neighbor” whom we are called to love certainly includes (among many others) vulnerable travelers of a different ethnicity and/or religious tradition.

None of that dictates a particular immigration policy, but it does govern how the church must respond to immigrants—with love. And our democratic form of government also allows each citizen to bring the values of their faith into the process of government as well, which we can do by wisely applying biblical principles, while acknowledging that Christians might disagree on the precise policy responses that are best.

Was Jesus really a refugee?

Jesus (carried by Joseph and Mary, following a divine instruction) fled the region where Herod the Great had the authority to enact his goal of murdering him—the newborn “King of the Jews” (**Matthew 2:2, 13-14**). Of course, there was no international convention at the time formally defining a refugee, but this certainly describes a situation very similar to that of many individuals in our world today who do meet the US and international legal definition of a refugee: someone who has fled his or her country of origin because of a credible fear of persecution. Some have argued that since Egypt and Bethlehem were both part of the Roman Empire, Jesus was actually an “Internally Displaced Person.” Others have noted that the better term to describe Jesus may have been “asylum seeker”—a contemporary term for someone who *claims* to meet the definition of a refugee, prior to the time that a government authority can verify the credibility of their fear of persecution—given that we do not know from the biblical text if Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had any interactions with the governing authorities over Egypt. We can’t precisely apply twenty-first century terms to the biblical story, but Jesus certainly experienced a flight from persecution into a new territory very similar to that faced by tens of millions of refugees in our world today. And he later told his disciples that whatever they did to “one of the least of these,” including strangers in need of hospitality, they did unto him (**Matthew 25:31-46**). ■

Study Outline

Week 1: Abraham and Jacob

Week 2: The Children of Israel

Week 3: Ruth and Naomi

Week 4: The Exiles

Week 5: Jesus and the Holy Family


Week 6: The Early Church

Meet the Author

Catherine McNiel is an author, editor, and speaker searching for the creative, redemptive work of God in our ordinary lives. She writes to kindle conversations that mingle theology with real life.

Catherine lives in the Chicagoland area with her husband, where they care for three kids, two jobs, and one enormous garden. She has studied and taught Intercultural Studies and Theology, has an MA in Human Service Counseling, and is working on a Master of Divinity at North Park Theological Seminary. Her books include *Fearing Bravely*, *All Shall Be Well*, and *Long Days of Small Things*.

She's on the lookout for wisdom, beauty, and iced coffee.

A large, layered rock formation in a desert landscape. The rock face is dark and shows distinct horizontal strata. In the foreground, a wide, sandy area is dotted with small, dry bushes. A group of about ten people is walking across the sand, their figures silhouetted against the bright light. The sky is a clear, deep blue.

**If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.**

Psalm 139:9-10

Week One

ABRAHAM AND JACOB

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Harran.

Genesis 12:4

DAY ONE

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

*“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”*

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. (Genesis 12:1-4a)

Human history is full of migration stories.

So it’s no surprise that the Bible is also full of migration stories.

Adam and Eve were exiled from their first home, the beautiful Garden of Eden. Their son Cain was driven out of his country, left to find home in a strange land. Noah’s children leaving the ark did the same, and chapters of genealogies describe their descendants scattering all over the world.

God’s redemptive story is a migration story too. It begins when God calls a man and woman—Abram and Sarai—and asks them to leave their home and travel to a new land.

Which new land? That would be my first question. But God didn’t offer specifics.

He simply promised to show them as they went, as they journeyed in faith. Abram and Sarai left everything they knew to follow God, betting their life, future, and family on God's faithfulness.

To me, that feels entirely overwhelming. God made a huge ask of these two ancient folks! Archaeologists tell us that Ur was a major city, one of the largest in its day. When Abram and Sarai agreed to go, they were leaving behind family and friends, home and history.

In exchange for . . . what?

Their family journey had two parts. First, they traveled from Ur to Harran. Based on ancient migration patterns, Abram's family most likely followed either the Tigris or Euphrates rivers out of Ur and up to Harran. But this was only the beginning: from Harran, God asked them to continue traveling. And again, Abram and Sarai said yes.

All that God ultimately did for us—through Israel, through Jesus, and today through the church—all of it began when Abram and Sarai said yes to God, leaving home behind to become immigrants.

Thousands of years later, after Moses, after the Promised Land, after the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, after the exile, after the prophets and the birth of Jesus, after Jesus' death and resurrection, the author of the book of Hebrews will write these words about Abram and Sarai:

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. **(Hebrews 11:8-12)***

This immigration story is where it all begins. ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Have you ever had to leave everything behind? If so, what was that like for you?**

- 2. It's easy to read about people in the Bible without considering what it was like to be in their shoes. Using the verses in Genesis and Hebrews, take another look at Abram and Sarai's life. What do you notice now?**

- 3. Were you surprised at the idea that the Bible, and God's redemption plan, are full of migration stories? Besides Abram and Sarai, which ones do you think of?**

- 4. Have you ever had to put your privileges and abilities aside to "bet your family's entire future" solely on God's faithfulness? For so many of us, we've rarely "needed to be" this dependent on God. In what areas is God asking you, your family, or your community to step forward in faith alone?**

Helpful Terms

Migration

Involves the movement of people from one place to another with the intention of settling, temporarily or permanently in a new location.

Immigration

The action of coming to live permanently in a non-native/foreign country.

Emigrate(d)

The act of leaving one's own country or region in order to settle permanently in another.

Immigrant

Someone who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.

Migrant

Someone who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions.

Refugee

Someone who has been forced to leave their country due to persecution, war, or natural disaster.

DAY TWO

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

*So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the Lord. **(Genesis 13:14-18)***

No sooner do Abram and Sarai arrive in Canaan than tragedy hits: famine.

Today, most of us cannot fully comprehend the devastation of famine. With our grocery stores filled with foods delivered from all around the globe in refrigerated semitrucks, we don't live and die by the successful harvest of our local growing season.

My family has a large garden, and we love growing our own tomatoes, lettuce, and squash—but we also shop at the store. For the past two years, our entire bed of broccoli, cabbage, and brussels sprouts have utterly failed. Not one head of broccoli survived. This was disappointing but not devastating. We just grab these items from the seemingly unlimited supply at the local grocers.

Imagine, though, if you, your family, and the animals you relied upon for work, food, and transportation all depended entirely on what you could grow.

Then imagine a year where crops were destroyed by drought, flood, storms, pests, or disease.

It's a sobering idea.

When I put myself in Abram and Sarai's shoes, this story feels . . . well, complicated. They left a bustling, prosperous city, setting out for an unknown land, believing in God's faithfulness. When they finally arrive, God declares this to be the land he intends for their home—and famine hits.

Let me be honest: I would not take this well.

For much of the rest of their story, Abram and Sarai are on the move. They travel to Egypt to escape the famine; later, they return to Canaan. Then there's conflict with his close relative Lot, so they move again. In those days, most Canaanites lived in huts and tents (unlike the bustling city of Ur where they grew up) and made their living herding goats and sheep—so they must have dealt with major culture shifts each time they moved from city to wilderness to city and back again.

But out of obedience to God, they kept moving, kept doing what they must to survive.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, God made a covenant with him, his wife, and their descendants, changing their names to Abraham and Sarah, promising his faithfulness and blessing. But after so many changes, so many decades of ups and downs, did Abraham and Sarah feel that they lived “happily ever after”? Surely their lives played out far differently than they envisioned, back in Ur.

Stepping into the unknown is a universal experience for migrants, then and now. For a hundred different reasons, men and women gather their children and step forward into the future, into the unknown, trusting that God goes before them.

And he does. God is always with us, no matter where we go. But that doesn't mean the road is easy. It doesn't mean things turn out the way we hoped.

Thousands of years later, the writer of Hebrews reflects on the tightrope Abraham and Sarah walked by faith:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16) ■



DAY THREE

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you just keep looking at each other?” He continued, “I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.” (Genesis 42:1-2)

Abraham’s descendants did eventually settle down in Canaan—at least for a while. But a few generations later, a horrible famine struck the land once again.

Egypt, the thriving nation ruled by Pharaoh, had stockpiled grain in preparation for lean years ahead (thanks to Abraham’s great-grandson, Joseph), so people flocked from all the surrounding lands to buy grain in Egypt.

Including Jacob, who also went by the name Israel. He sent his sons to Egypt, praying they could bring back food to save the family.

Can you imagine being faced with your family’s starvation? To be honest, my family is more likely to throw away food gone bad than go to bed hungry. Yet even today in the modern world, nearly one in ten people experience hunger on a daily basis.¹ When this is your reality, you don’t sit around. You look to provide. You figure out a way to feed your family. As the Bible says in 1 Timothy, people who don’t provide for their own families are worse than an unbeliever (5:8)—but we don’t need the Bible to tell us that, do we? We know that truth in our bodies. If there isn’t food in your country—well, you can’t sit back and watch your family die. You pack up, travel to another country, and find work to feed your family.

¹ <https://www.worldvision.org/hunger-news-stories/world-hunger-facts>

And so, Abraham’s descendants are on the move again. Once Jacob (Israel) learns that his son Joseph is not only alive but holds a position of influence in Egypt, the answer is clear: this is God’s sovereign provision. Once again, God directs them to leave home, to migrate to a new country. Once again, God provides food and survival far from home.

So Israel set out with all that was his, and when he reached Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.

And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, “Jacob! Jacob!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“I am God, the God of your father,” he said. “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes.”

Then Jacob left Beersheba, and Israel’s sons took their father Jacob and their children and their wives in the carts that Pharaoh had sent to transport him. So Jacob and all his offspring went to Egypt, taking with them their livestock and the possessions they had acquired in Canaan. Jacob brought with him to Egypt his sons and grandsons and his daughters and granddaughters—all his offspring. **(Genesis 46:1-7)** ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Have you ever faced true hunger? If not for food, maybe another level of deep physical need. What was or is that experience like for you (and your family)?**
- 2. If you have not experienced hunger, how do you think a lifetime of having your basic needs met formed your worldview, reality, and ethics? How would these be formed differently if you struggled to feed your family?**
- 3. In Genesis 46, God appears to Jacob in a dream and tells him not to be afraid to go to Egypt for food. Why do you think Jacob might have felt afraid?**
- 4. Have you ever had to move your family across the country to start a new job? Have you ever moved just on faith alone, without the promise of a job? When we think about migrants who are coming to the US to seek flourishing for their families, what fears might they face when deciding to immigrate to the US?**

DAY FOUR

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”

(Exodus 1:6-16)

There were seventy of them who immigrated during the famine (Genesis 46:27b).

They were given land and provisions and began working to support themselves. They were surviving. It was a struggle, but eventually the Bible tells us they began to prosper—and have a lot of babies. Their community grew and grew . . . and grew.

When the new Egyptian king rose to power, he wasn't happy about this ever-expanding group of outsiders taking valuable land. This king took away the rights of these second- and third-generation immigrants, oppressing them, making them work as slaves.

They were treated horribly. They were forced to work, doing "harsh labor" and treated "ruthlessly." Their baby boys were taken and killed, lest their people grow too strong and overthrow the Egyptians.

Just as migration is a universal story that spans from the beginning of history until today, so is the frequent oppression of immigrants. Jacob's descendants came to Egypt to survive; they were starving in their home country. Yet the long-term impact on their family was devastating.

Oppression. Slavery. Generations of suffering.

Many of us today still view immigrants suspiciously, don't we? We're familiar with the questions or perhaps asking them ourselves: Why couldn't they stay in their own country—and what if they bring their problems here? What if they take over our culture or harm us?

The narrative of Joseph's family still plays out in countries around the world, likely in our own towns and neighborhoods: economically vulnerable migrants seeking to feed their family, at risk of exploitation and abuse. ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Advocates who live and work in destabilized countries and communities often testify to the hope and love parents have for their families that motivate them to migrate for a better life. Do you ever think migrants feel disappointed or sad about the new life they settle into?**

- 2. Have you ever heard powerful people in your own country speaking fearfully of immigrants taking over, as Pharaoh worried about the Israelites? Why do you think we (long ago in Egypt and still today) tend to view outsiders with suspicion?**

- 3. Is there anything that you can think of (a system, narrative, or common cultural expression) that oppresses or mistreats immigrants?**

DAY FIVE: GOING DEEPER

Leaving Home for Economic Opportunity

There are many reasons why people—then and now—leave everything behind to seek their future in a new country. Often these reasons relate to caring for their family’s urgent needs. As the organization Bread for the World says, “Immigration is a hunger issue.”²

This week, we’ve seen both Abraham and Jacob migrate because they could not feed their families at home. But society was different then. For much of human history, people traveled where they needed to go to find food and provision, safety and community.

But today, if you cannot feed or care for your family at home, the way forward is hard. There may be food and jobs aplenty in a neighboring country but no efficient or legal way for you to cross the border.

Furthermore, the more impoverished you are, the harder it is to cross a border. I have a graduate degree; my passport is from a powerful and prosperous country. So, when I want to travel, I can. The borders (in most cases) are open for me, with very little time or trouble. I’ve even been employed to work in other countries, with only a bit of paperwork required. Most of the world extends hospitality to me, because I bring education, wealth, and power with me wherever I go.

But what if I was from a rural village in an impoverished country? What if I had little formal education, and only agricultural work experience? Opportunities—and borders—simply don’t open as easily for these people.

If they do find a way to move their families to a country with food and job opportunities, statistics show that, like Joseph’s family in Egypt, immigrants face a host of new vulnerabilities and dangers in their new nation.

² <https://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/immigration-and-hunger-march-2017.pdf>



As I read the ancient stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis, I realize that God is all too familiar with these patterns and needs. And I realize how often God is working on behalf of the hungry, the poor, the traveler, and the outsider. In the Old Testament, the foreigner is specifically grouped with the orphan, widow, and the poor as a protected class that God wants his people to look out and care for. In the New Testament, Jesus continues this theme of care and compassion for the vulnerable. Parable after parable implores his followers to seek the flourishing of their neighbors. And when we do so, Jesus tells us we're serving Christ himself.

The question is, Will we join God in this work of protection, welcome, and compassion? ■

STORIES FAR FROM HOME



Graciously shared from Erin W. in our Women of Welcome community:

When I was eight years old, my parents stepped out in faith to answer the Lord's call for our family of five to serve as missionaries overseas. I remember, even as a young child, feeling so many emotions: fear of the unknown; anxiety over what to expect; sadness over leaving the only home, friends, or church I had ever known; excitement for a new adventure, and more. We would be moving from our home in the United States to Hong Kong.

The year was 1985. It was a much different time back then in terms of communication and its availability. With no internet or cell phones at our fingertips, we couldn't Google every question we had or do hours of research to learn about our new home. We relied on the few pictures other missionaries had snail-mailed to us or books that my parents had bought, but these were not really geared for an elementary school-aged audience. Long-distance calling was still super expensive, and the time difference of thirteen hours also made it tricky to talk on the phone before our move.

We were stepping into so many unknowns! We were moving from a very small town in Northern California to a huge metropolitan city of more than six million people. It was nothing my brain could even comprehend at the time. I wondered what my new school would be like. Would I make friends? Would I be able to communicate? We only knew one other family that was already serving as missionaries in Hong Kong. They were the lifeline I was holding onto, as they also had three girls all the same ages as my sisters and me.

We trained for months. We prepared. We said so many goodbyes to friends and families. Our departure was delayed by several weeks waiting for our visas to be approved and issued. But we finally reached the day in August when we would leave our home and move to Hong Kong.

I remember how excited my sisters and I were to fly on the airplane for thirteen hours. My mom packed hours of activities for us to keep us entertained, since the planes didn't have nonstop entertainment like they do today.

We arrived in Hong Kong at night, and I remember seeing thousands upon thousands of lights from the towering skyscrapers as we flew over the city to land. I was in awe. As we stepped off the plane, we were met with a blast of heat and humidity at 9 p.m., unlike anything I had ever experienced before. So many new sights, sounds, and smells filled our senses just in those first few moments of arriving. We finally located our ten huge suitcases in baggage claim, maneuvered our way through immigration and customs, and made our way to the arrival hall.

What happened next still stands out to me today, thirty-six years later, as a highlight of my life. I had no idea what to expect. Who would greet us? Perhaps just the family that we knew?

When we walked out of the doors from customs, we were greeted with the most amazing welcome! A large number of other missionary families, probably thirty to forty people from our mission agency, were all there to greet us. They welcomed us with such joy and warmth. After hours and hours of travel and months of planning and preparation, to be met this way was such a gift. We immediately felt so welcomed and accepted by these people who would genuinely become not just friends, but our family away from home. It was truly a picture of the body of Christ being such a unifying bond. It was an unforgettable moment in my life about welcome and how to make others feel welcome.

In the ten years my family and I lived there, we had the privilege and joy to do the same for so many other arriving missionary families: welcoming them with joyful celebration as they arrived in their new home and into our extended family. What a privilege to extend the welcome we received to others! ■

Week Two

THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL

He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Exodus 3:12

DAY ONE

God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And God said, “I will be with you. . .” **(Exodus 3:4b-12a)**

Have you ever faced a terrifying task and felt paralyzed by “impostor syndrome”? Or have you stood up to a bully or an abuser, knowing it was the right thing to do but scared to death they might retaliate?

Imagine yourself in Moses’ shoes. God has commanded him to approach

Pharaoh and demand that the Israelites, the descendants of Jacob (also called Israel) be set free from slavery and allowed to leave the country.

There are several terrifying challenges with God's plan. First, Pharaoh believed himself to be a god, the physical representation of divinity on earth. He won't take lightly the idea that the real God is confronting him.

Second, freeing the slaves will mean Pharaoh would lose the free labor that powers his success and comfort. And it will mean that the thousands of people he has misused and oppressed will be free to retaliate against him if they choose.

Growing up in the hallways of Pharaoh's palace, Moses must have known how impossible this ask would be. He knew this family—how this society, this king worked. No one made these kinds of demands. No wonder Moses shied away from the job.

Last week, we saw the beginning of God's redemption story unfolding with generations of family migration. The patriarchs followed God across boundaries and borders for different reasons. Some were searching for food during a time of desperate need. Others were moving to reunite with influential family who could protect and provide for them. Others were simply open to God's invitation to a new adventure.

We saw the heart of God to protect and provide for those who could not live safely and securely in their own country. This week, we hear God command Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, the land of their suffering, the land of oppression. God heard the voices of the slaves crying out in misery.

God's redemption story is about to take a major turn. And right now, the ball is in Moses' court. ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Imagine if God asked you to do something you knew was right—like advocate for the oppressed and mistreated—but you also knew it would cost you something. What would you do?**
- 2. Why do you think it's significant that God identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?**
- 3. If you're familiar with Moses' story, you know he already has a fascinating testimony, even at this point in the story. In what ways is he the perfect man for the job (even though he doesn't feel like it)?**
- 4. Are there areas where God is inviting you to be brave and stand up for what is right, even though influential or powerful voices are saying otherwise?**

DAY TWO

Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt. Because the Lord kept vigil that night to bring them out of Egypt, on this night all the Israelites are to keep vigil to honor the Lord for the generations to come.
(Exodus 12:40-42)

The power struggle between Moses and Pharaoh goes on for days.

We know Moses is going to win, but Pharaoh sure does try to give him a run for his money. Yet God uses Pharaoh's stubborn heart to make two points abundantly clear: One, the true God is above all other powers on earth and heaven; and two, God fights on the side of the oppressed.

God's particular care for the poor, vulnerable, marginalized and oppressed is woven all throughout the Bible. It's a scandalous, disruptive idea. Since the beginning of civilization, strong, wealthy, powerful rulers have declared that they speak for God, that they represent God's will and work on earth. If people believe you hold not only political, economic, and military power but also divine power, you are all but unstoppable. You're free to control and manipulate (mostly vulnerable) people to feed your own lusts and comforts.

But over and over again, God contradicts those that hold worldly power. The Bible demonstrates repeatedly that God resists the proud, the violent, the self-seeking. Instead, God is looking out for those who are being crushed by the powers of this world, those who mourn, weep and struggle.

And so, on the sacred night still celebrated today as Passover, God wins. The Israelites, led by Moses, grab their bags and go, fleeing out of the city that oppressed them and into the unknown.

Powerful men like Pharaoh make the news and the history books, but most of life is lived by the rest of us, the normal people. I'm intrigued by the everyday Egyptians, friends and neighbors of the fleeing slaves. They rummaged in their homes for silver, gold, and clothes, providing the Israelites with getaway bags to help them survive the journey (Exodus 11:2-3).

Most of us will never wield the power of a kingdom like Pharaoh did. Most of us will never flee slavery either. We're more likely to be cast as the Egyptian neighbors in this story, caught somewhere in the middle between a powerful government and the vulnerable people God is providing for and protecting. I wonder what sort of help we might be asked to give. Would we pack a getaway bag of our own money and resources, if we were asked? ■



Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Look back to God's promise in Genesis 46. How did God fulfill that promise to go with them, and stay with them, and bring them back? How do you think the slaves felt about this, during the hundreds of years they were in captivity?**

- 2. What do you know about God's commitment to care for the poor and vulnerable, and his command that his people do as well? Look up a few of these verses: Psalm 82:3-4, Proverbs 31:8-9, Isaiah 1:17, Isaiah 58:6-7, Zechariah 7:10. (These are just a few of many! Feel free to add your own.)**

- 3. Do you have neighbors in your community who are vulnerable to poverty or oppression? You probably do, even if you don't know them personally. How could you, like the Egyptian neighbors, act favorably toward them? Are there any resources you hesitate to be generous with? If so, what might those things be and why?**

DAY THREE

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:

*“I will sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.*

*Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.*

*“The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.*

*He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.”(Exodus 15:1-2)*

What a celebration! Through Moses’ brave obedience, God led the children of Israel (now numbering in the hundreds of thousands!) out of slavery and toward home.

No longer will they be strangers and foreigners. Now they will be free, living in their own land. God is making a new people, his people.

But first, they have a long, long journey. God’s redemption story is once again a migration story.

A few months ago, my family went on a hike. Based on our reading of the map, we anticipated four hours of walking. This was stretching it for our young family, but we packed snacks and water. There was a beach we figured we’d reach around the halfway point, which sounded like a nice spot for a break. And we’d make it home in plenty of time for dinner.

Except, we misread the map. It was an eight-hour hike—twice as long as we expected.

We didn't have nearly enough snacks and water for a day-long endeavor. The beach we dreamed of reaching was overrun with biting flies that drove us away before we had a chance to rest or cool down. Exhausted, cranky, itchy, hangry, and overwhelmed, we barely made it home before dark.

I can't imagine taking my children on a hike through the desert for days and weeks, only to have the journey extend for years, decades . . . a generation.

But migration journeys—then and now—rarely go as planned. It wasn't long before the Israelites were sobbing in the wilderness, longing to return to slavery, anything but wandering in the desert. How exhausted they must have been to long for the cruel predictability of being a slave.

Exodus 12:37 says over 600,000 men fled Egypt with their families and their livestock. Can you imagine fleeing in a caravan like this with over a million people? You have no idea exactly where you're going, but you can't stay where you are. The Lord has provided a way out, thousands of people are leaving together, and so you simply grab what you can carry and go before the window of opportunity closes.

Appearing as a cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night, God was before them. They didn't know—and couldn't control—where he was leading. But he was with them. ■

DAY FOUR

“Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

“Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the innocent.

“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.

“For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

*“Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed.” **(Exodus 23:6-12)***

Here’s one thing about their long, long journey through the wilderness: the children of Israel were a captive audience.

As years and decades became a generation, God used Moses to teach this new nation his laws, his heart, his values, his intention for the new society he was building through them.

In fact, much of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy tell the story of the migration of God's people from Egypt to their new home (which was also the land given to Abraham after his own migration journey so long ago) and the laws God gave them as they traveled.

I found an old cookbook in my grandmother's basement a few years back. It was probably a hundred years old. I was so excited to dig in and find old family recipes—but it was nearly incomprehensible to me. The English words themselves were strange and hard to decipher. Many of the ingredients I had never heard of or could never find in the store today. It called for kitchen tools we no longer use. And the health advice was, shall we say, out of date.

If this is true for an old family cookbook, how much more so the laws and customs of a society that existed thousands of years ago?

It's easy to get bogged down reading the pages of law God gave this community. Most of us don't have donkeys or goats. We don't celebrate these festivals. We don't worship with these rituals. Most of us don't make our living primarily through subsistence agriculture, or wear those sorts of clothes, or build those sorts of buildings, or expect society or marriage to look anything like these laws describe.

But put into context, we see what God intended to do with these laws.

In Egypt, God clarified that he didn't side with the powerful oppressors (even though, then and now, powerful oppressors sometimes claim to represent God). Now, having freed his people from oppression, he is forming a new kind of society. In his society, there will be protection for the vulnerable and oppressed. When these former slaves have their own power, they must use it to provide protection and provision for all.

These words will become part of the foundation of God's people: "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt." ■

DAY FIVE: GOING DEEPER

Fleeing Oppression & Exploitation

We celebrate when God frees the slaves from Egypt, but it's hard to picture the people enslaved in our world today. Harder still for us to recognize the ways our daily comforts—like those of the Egyptians—rely on exploited workers.

While slavery is illegal in every country of the world today, an estimated forty million people are still enslaved, the majority of them women or girls. Many more people (including young children) work under unjust and unsafe conditions. Unfortunately, making the practice illegal doesn't make it uncommon—it just means it goes underground, becoming invisible to most of us.

One example hits close to home: It's been known for years that the minerals used to power our cell phones come from countries and industries notorious for exploiting forced labor and child labor in dangerous conditions.

Another example: Much of the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and the items we buy for our homes are harvested, or sewn, or assembled in faraway places. We choose these products because they are affordable. But sometimes the low price means that local companies mistreat their workers, paying low wages and overlooking unsafe conditions.

Tragically, migrants fleeing danger in their homelands are at the highest risk of being trafficked, sometimes running right into the mouth of the lion, so to speak. Traveling with minimal resources, without reliable housing, local connections or status, they are easily identified and targeted. Kidnapped, they can be forced into forced labor or other kinds of slavery.

Wherever migration happens, exploitation and human trafficking is inevitably present.

Most of us don't see any of these things happening in our daily lives, so it's easy to forget or overlook. But just as God heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt, he hears the cries of the forty million forced laborers and modern-day slaves today. Just as God led the Israelites to freedom and commanded them to create a society that protects rather than exploits the vulnerable, God asks that of us too.

Take some time today to pray for those who are trapped in hopeless and exploitative circumstances. Pray for those who are fleeing oppressive communities only to find themselves in other frightening and unsafe circumstances. While we may feel helpless to change all of the dynamics at play, we know someone who can. ■



Lynn's Story

STORIES FAR FROM HOME



Graciously shared by Lynn from our Women of Welcome community:

On September 1, 2001, our family of four (me; my husband, Larry; our four-year-old son; and our one-month-old daughter) moved from Boston, MA to Manila, Philippines, to serve as missionaries. A few months earlier a fellow missionary couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham, had been kidnapped and were still being held captive by terrorists.

We didn't speak the language and we didn't understand the way of life in this new country. And then, just ten days after we arrived, the 9/11 terrorist attack took place in the US. In the days following 9/11, warnings began circulating around the globe of other planned attacks against Americans living abroad, which prompted our mission agency to begin regular training to prepare for emergency evacuations. We planned an escape route if leaving through our windows was our only option of getting out of our fourth floor apartment. We prepared backpacks. We kept cash on hand. And we were instructed never to stop at a roadblock, a common tactic for kidnappers to capture victims at night.

In the midst of all this, we were trying to meet new people and be good neighbors. We were praying for God to open doors for friendships. Fast-forward six weeks, when Larry and I were driving home one night. Two men standing in the middle of the road began waving us down. With all that we had been warned about, we worried about what to do. We slowed down carefully, prayed for safety, and rolled down the window just a crack. The men in the road approached our car and said they had hit a motorcyclist who was now lying in the road and needed a ride to the hospital. We saw the motorcyclist on the road, severely injured and bleeding out. So we loaded him into our car and headed off to the hospital.

Once there, one of the men who waved us down introduced himself to Larry. His name was Robert. He was so grateful that we had stopped to help that he invited us to attend an office Christmas party he and his wife Nene were hosting in a few weeks. Larry took the address for the party, and we looked forward to getting to know Robert and Nene better. (We found out later the motorcyclist survived.)

The night of the Christmas party, Larry and I arrived to find almost a thousand people dancing outside to loud music and having a great time. We were escorted up to the front of the crowd where we were seated with the VIPs.

After a few minutes, a man walked up to the platform and introduced the host of the company's Christmas party. As he announced Robert's name, we realized Robert was the president and CEO of this clothing manufacturing company, and this was the factory Christmas party.

Robert then introduced the special guests in attendance. The chief of police, who was sitting on my right, stood up and waved to the crowd. Next, the mayor of the city, sitting to the left of Larry, stood up and smiled. Then Robert began telling the story of the car accident he had been in a few weeks before. He told the crowd that while no one else stopped, an American couple, the Bollingers, had stopped to help and that we were there at the party. He asked us to stand up. As we stood and turned around, the crowd began jumping up and down and cheering our names, "Woohoo! The Bollingers!"

We looked at each other and just began laughing. You have to be careful what you pray for! Over the following three years, Robert and Nene invited us to their home nearly every month for parties and dinners and family celebrations. We went on vacation with them and met their neighbors. We sang karaoke in their backyard together. We met their siblings. We went to Robert's mother's ninetieth birthday and to her funeral. We invited them to our apartment for dinner. They met our kids and loved them. We celebrated holidays together and life moments together. They had become our friends.

We experienced hospitality and welcome in Robert and Nene, in the cheers of the factory workers, in the homes of their extended family members, and in the conversations with their neighbors. All of them expressed to us in multiple ways that we had found a place where, even as strangers, we belonged. ■

Week Three

RUTH AND NAOMI

But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

Ruth 1:16

DAY ONE

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. (Ruth 1:1-2)

When we think about the book of Ruth, the story of two women who bond together and find protection through Boaz, it's easy to just remember the high points.

The friendship, the provision, the kinsman redeemer that carries us into the lineage of Jesus. But there's so much more going on. Ruth is a beautifully hard story of famine, faith, loyalty and love.

The story begins with a touch of irony. We meet a man and his family who are leaving their home in Bethlehem because of famine. Bethlehem means "house of bread," so the writer is setting up the subtle art of tragedy: there is no bread to live on, even in the house of bread.

Bethlehem isn't the only name with a double meaning in this story. Naomi's two sons, who die within the first few verses, have names which mean something like "sickness" and "spent." Orpah, who ultimately decides to turn around and stay in Moab, means "back of the neck." Naomi draws attention to her own name, which means "pleasant" and, for a time, asks to be called Mara instead, or "bitter."

In fact, Naomi’s transition from pleasant to bitter back to pleasant is the scaffolding this entire story builds upon.

And our two main characters? Some scholars believe the name Ruth is similar to a word meaning “companion” while Boaz means “in him is strength.”³

In other words, we can read almost the entire story in the names of the setting and main characters.

Why point out all these underpinnings? Because the book of Ruth initially looks like a short, straightforward love story. But the writer explains a deeper context from the beginning: much more is going on under the surface than meets the eye.

This family—husband, wife, and two sons—move to Moab, taking a page out of so many other stories in the Bible, in history, and in our world today. To survive a local crisis, a food shortage, they leave their home to find a better chance at survival elsewhere. Their migration is almost a footnote in Ruth, but it sets up a deeper narrative for us to notice. This family had to leave home and become strangers in a land that was in those days hostile to their belief in God (YHWH) and their way of life. It was a 10-day trip through mountainous terrain to get to Moab. I wonder if everyone in their family was able to make the journey? Did they leave anyone behind? How long would they be gone? What all did they take?

The desperation and the pain of hunger was too much to bear.

But as we have seen, this is the story of humanity.

Today, 9% of the world population—around 697 million people—are severely food insecure.

When the worst options simply become your only options, you accept what you must and if you’re able, you leave to survive. ■

³ Attridge, Harold W, and Wayne A Meeks. “Ruth.” Essay. In *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books with Concordance*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

Thoughtful Questions

1. What do you think about the foreshadowing names in this story?

2. Have you ever had to make a big move? What made you decide to do it? What did the move entail? How did it change your life?

3. Take a moment to imagine what it was like for Naomi to leave her home and homeland, with her children, to find provision in a land that she knew wouldn't welcome her. How do you think these dynamics shaped and impacted her as a woman and a mother?

DAY TWO

But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has turned against me!”

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

*But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. **(Ruth 1:11-18)***

How do you go on when you’ve lost everything?

No wonder Naomi wants to change her name to “bitter.” Her family was starving; they had to leave their home behind and move to a place where they were most likely unwelcome. The risk pays off for them initially—but there is trouble waiting too.



The Bible isn't specific about how much time passes, but having already lost home and community, now Naomi loses her husband. He dies there in Moab, leaving her and her children far from home.

Then her sons, who married Moabite women, die too.

Can you take a moment to imagine what this felt like? To lose the companionship and security of your spouse and then the safety and protection your sons provided after his passing.

Losing your husband and children in such a short span of time would be an unbearable tragedy in any time and place. But Naomi is far from home. As one biblical commentator puts it, Naomi now “hovers precariously on the brink of extinction.”⁴ In her male-oriented world, women had little to no legal identity of their own. Without close male family members, Naomi could not provide for herself, earn a living, own property, or even claim a place in society. She could not simply go out and get a job and an apartment.

The woman who left everything in hopes of being filled has been left entirely empty.

⁴ Hubbard, Robert. *The Book of Ruth*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988.

Naomi makes the only decision she has left: return to her original homeland of Bethlehem. Of course, there is little hope for her there. Her parents have likely passed, so she cannot return to their home. She herself is beyond childbearing years, therefore too old to seek a new husband and children. Now that her sons are dead, Naomi is childless. She sees no hope for the future.

Her daughters-in-law, on the other hand, could return to their father's homes. They could remarry, gain new homes and bear children. They could have a future in their own land.

But Ruth refuses. She will not leave her mother-in-law destitute. Though she, too, is a woman without a way to earn money to support them, she is young enough to provide for Naomi in another way: remarry and give Naomi a home and family. So they gather their collective courage and journey together, making the trek back to Bethlehem. And now Ruth is the immigrant headed to a foreign land and culture with her mother-in-law. ■

Ruth must have experienced something different, being grafted into a family that served YHWH. She grew up a Moabite, in a pagan enemy nation that didn't worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Judges 3:28, 10:6). When Naomi's family moved into the land of Moab I wonder if she worried about the future her sons would have in the community. She'd need to raise them in a culture hostile to their faith and lifestyle. And when her sons grew up and married Moabite women, I wonder how the family dynamics shifted. When your family lineage and the worship of YHWH were the primary things that anchored and protected a family in those days, I'm sure these realities were weighty things for Naomi to ponder. But the way of these Israelites must have shifted something in Ruth, as she refused to go back to her family after her husband's death. Her future must have seemed hopeless, but there was something to this God that Naomi served (Ruth 1:16-18), and she would become an immigrant to rely on him as Naomi did so many years ago.

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. What do you know about the plight of women in the ancient world? What is Naomi's reality, given that she has no father, husband, or son—nor any hope of gaining one?**

- 2. Place yourself in Ruth's shoes for a moment. She was a Moabite woman, with family connections and community in Moab. What sort of courage do you think it took to leave her homeland in such a precarious position, rather than return to her father and mother?**

- 3. In this part of history, the Moabites and Israelites were not a compatible people. Scripture tells us these two people groups were enemies, living different lifestyles and serving different Gods. How does this make the story more complicated for Ruth? And what does it tell us about God, that he chose a foreigner, a Moabite, a widow to be the hero of this story?**

DAY THREE

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.”

*Naomi said to her, “Go ahead, my daughter.” So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek. **(Ruth 2:2-3)***

When my friend’s husband died suddenly in his thirties, leaving her alone with small children, it was a tragedy we could hardly grasp.

She took a job working part time, but even stretching herself thin she struggled to find enough time and money to raise and feed four kids on her own.

But in his loving mercy, God provided for her needs, filling in the gaps with food stamps and subsidized healthcare, neighborhood volunteers, meal trains, and church benevolent funds. Her community—both church and tax-payer-funded—was there to support her family. Day by day, they got by.

Most societies have a strategy for providing the basics to those who, for whatever reason, cannot provide for themselves. As we saw last week, God cares deeply that we provide care for people who are vulnerable, impoverished, or oppressed. And so, Israel had laws to do just that.

In Leviticus 19, sandwiched between no-brainer commands like “Do not worship idols” and “Do not steal” comes this command:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.” (v. 9-10)

The poor and the foreigner would not have access to their own land to harvest or connections to landowners who might hire them. In the gleaning system, economically vulnerable people—like widows, orphans, and foreigners, each of whom are mentioned dozens of times in the Bible as being special to God—would not be left destitute. There would be work for them. They could provide for themselves.

Practically speaking, Ruth fits into all three categories. She has no father to care for her. She is a widow. And she is a foreigner.

Israel also had laws compelling relatives of a deceased husband to marry his widow, providing her with a home and livelihood, legal and social identity, children and future. These marriage laws ensured that families would not disintegrate, that property and descendants could be redeemed.

Does this sort of marriage sound traumatic to you? It does to me. But I can see it for what it was in that ancient culture: a way to protect vulnerable women and children from poverty and death, since their only access to legal status was through a man.

Naomi, knowing these dynamics among her people, encourages Ruth to assimilate into these given provisions for the vulnerable. And so Ruth gets right to work. She couldn’t have known what God was about to do. But God saw her loyalty and care for Naomi. He heard her claim that he was now her God too. And God honored this steadfastness and reliance on him. In their desperation and vulnerability, he made a way. ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. As women it can be extremely hard to ask for help. When have you relied on others to meet a major and urgent need? What was that experience like for you? Or when did God use you to provide for someone else?**
- 2. What laws does your state or country have in place to protect and provide for the vulnerable? Have you ever needed to use any of those provisions? What policies or practices does your church community have for those who are in need?**
- 3. Where else in the Bible can you find mention of God's laws to protect the foreigner, the widow, the poor, and the orphan? (Hint: If you need help, look at Zechariah 7:10, Psalm 146:9, Deuteronomy 10:19, and Malachi 3:5. But there are dozens more for you to find!)**
- 4. Why do you think laws like "Do not steal" or "Do not worship idols" seem obviously universal to us, yet we easily overlook God's commands to sacrificially care for people in poverty or vulnerable circumstances?**

DAY FOUR

One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

*"I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. **(Ruth 3:1-6)***

When I read today's verses in Ruth 3, I teared up a bit.

Not because the story felt so romantic but because I caught a glimpse of how this night must have felt from Ruth's perspective. I wonder what she was thinking while she washed up and picked out the best clothes. Did she take deep breaths and give herself a pep talk? How terrifying, remaining in the fields full of men after nightfall. How frightening, approaching a man in the darkness. Remember, she had no flashlight. She had to remember where he laid down and do her best to find her way to him (and not someone else).

And then—if all went well to that point—she was to uncover his feet and lay down beside him.

What could go wrong?!

History is full of stories of women in vulnerable situations where everything does go wrong. Desperately trying to care for their families, they take risks that end in more trauma, more suffering, more abuse, more loss. This is often the way life goes for women, especially women on a migration journey. Especially immigrants in a foreign land.

That's why I teared up, watching Ruth prepare to do as Naomi asked her with her life, with her body.

But this time, the story does not end in tragedy. In fact, if you take the time to read Ruth 3 & 4, you'll find that this is indeed a beautiful love story.

Boaz is a good man, faithful to God and known for his integrity throughout the community. He does not take advantage of Ruth's vulnerability. Instead, he sees her risk-taking as a sign of her loving-kindness (*hesed*: see side note) toward Naomi and her trust in God.

In response, Boaz goes above and beyond what the law demands in order to care for them both.



It's hard to know

exact figures, but various international migration studies suggest that 60-80% of female migrants traveling up from Central America to the US are victims of sexual assault at the hands of criminal groups, smugglers, or corrupt officials during the journey. Those who work in the dozens of migrants shelters throughout the borderlands say the same thing, "Everyone has to pay to cross." No one crosses without paying something (to the cartel, a smuggler, a government agency). Thousands of stories recount the same thread of violence, "If you don't have money, you have to pay with your body."

The Hebrew word hesed is used throughout the story of Ruth. Translated into English it means loving-kindness.

In a time of suffering and loss, Ruth loved deeply, more than she was required to love. Boaz provided more than he was required to give as well. As a result, through these acts of hesed, God’s own hesed shines through. Not only were the daily cares and needs of these women met and then redeemed, but through them King David was born, providing for all Israel. And then through David, Jesus was born—providing a redeemer for the whole world.

The ancestry of King David and King Jesus hinges on an immigrant woman and a man who took notice of her vulnerability in his community. Boaz advocated for Ruth (chapter 4) and ensured her future and well-being. He didn’t hesitate to care for her as family. It was these acts of integrity and faithfulness that are recorded for generations to read and reflect. It was these very things that brought about the lineage of our Savior. ■



Thoughtful Questions

- 1. In what ways is Ruth a classic love story, and in what ways is it not?**
- 2. When it comes to caring for strangers and immigrants in your own community, do you, like Boaz, look for ways to do more than is required of you (by law or by God's law,) or does caring for immigrants cross your mind? (No judgment or worries if this is you! Most of us start here.)**
- 3. What are some first steps you could take to find out where newcomers are and what they might need in your local area? *Hint: Often the best way to begin is to simply become curious about other people's stories. A quick Google search for immigrant churches or ministry services in your city is a helpful start as well.***
- 4. Take the time to read all four chapters of Ruth, if you can. What's your biggest takeaway?**

DAY FIVE: GOING DEEPER

Family Reunification

Ruth was the first person to follow in Naomi's footsteps, but she wasn't the last. In the thousands of years since Naomi and Ruth moved back to seek family in Bethlehem, innumerable people have traveled from their homelands to reunite with family members far away.

In the United States, family reunification is the most common designation for immigrants legally entering the country. Under US law, immediate family members who are citizens or legal permanent residents are eligible to apply for family reunification. But "immediate family" is defined as a child, spouse, or parent. Cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents are not eligible; neither are siblings.

When Naomi had nowhere to turn, she knew her greatest chance of survival was back in Bethlehem, where extended family might remember her and might fulfill their duties as required by law and custom. And she was right. Thanks to the faithfulness and courage of Ruth and Boaz, Naomi was received back into the family, provided for, and given a future.

When crisis hits, the first place most of us look for support is family—even if that family lives on the other side of the world. Nearly every immigrant I know is caring for extended family members here in the USA as well as somewhere in a country far away, through their hard work and the sacrifices of time, energy, and money.

But even though most countries agree on the need to reunite families, it gets difficult when the rubber meets the road. In the past few years, thousands of families have been separated at the US/Mexico border alone. All around the world there are families like Ruth and Naomi's. They can no longer go home, but they are praying to make it safely to family who will care about them and connect them to a community where they can flourish. ■

Ruth's Story

STORIES FAR FROM HOME



Graciously shared by Ruth (and her family) from our Women of Welcome community:

**Names have been changed*

When I married my Haitian husband, he had two children: a four-year-old daughter, Rebecca, and a seven-year-old son, Gerald. They came to live with us when they were eleven and fourteen. They were with us until they graduated from high school and then moved out to continue on with their futures. Several years later, my husband left home to build a business. After three years, he decided not to come home.

I was able to remain in touch with my stepchildren even after their father and I were no longer married. I've been welcomed for special events in their lives, like their weddings, their grandparents' funerals, and their mother's remarriage, and I became Grandma to their own children. I was welcomed into the hospital room when Gerald and his wife, Donna, suffered the devastation of a stillbirth at six months gestation, and again a year later when a second child, Johnny, was born at six months gestation.

Two years ago, Gerald and Donna celebrated his December birthday by going out to dinner. She wasn't feeling well so she didn't finish her dinner. The next day she went to the doctor and then to the hospital. She was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disorder and bile duct cancer. In January, I spent a week with six-year-old Johnny as she had extensive abdominal surgery. After surgery recovery, she went through chemotherapy and radiation therapy and seemed to be responding well. We were all rejoicing!

Only four to five months later, the abdominal pain returned. After more trips to the hospital, we learned the cancer returned, but this time it wasn't treatable. Johnny came to live with me while Donna was hospitalized.

In the middle of this journey, Gerald and Rebecca's mother passed away suddenly. One morning, she just didn't wake up. This loss was crushing to the family. I was the first call that Rebecca made. I didn't leave their side for days. I was welcomed into their pain.

When Donna finally returned home from the hospital, I felt strongly that Johnny needed to be home. He was missing his parents and his home so much. I offered to make the forty-minute trip from Chicago's West Side to the South Side every day for several weeks to care for him, help with their household needs, and administer Donna's IV antibiotics. A couple nights a week, I would spend the night. I was welcomed into their home.

Three months ago, Donna became very weak and fatigued. She returned to the hospital where she passed away a week later. I moved into their home that day and have stayed ever since. I return to my home on the weekends, sometimes with Johnny, and other times alone.

This road has been hard. I run between two households. I have lived out of a suitcase for weeks. I miss my bed. I miss my home. I try not to disturb how Donna did things, how she organized. But when Johnny crawls into my bed to snuggle, or tells me that he misses his mommy, or worries about how he will celebrate Mother's Day without a mommy, I know I am in the right place.

My heart breaks for Gerald. He is devastated by the dual losses of his wife and his mother. He is overwhelmed by all he has to do without his wife. He holds the weight of caring for a young son who lost his mommy. It breaks Gerald's heart. And mine. They have invited me in and welcomed me as Gerald weathered his first anniversary without his beloved wife, his first Thanksgiving, his first birthday being reminded of her diagnosis, his first time decorating for Christmas, experiencing Christmas Eve without her to wrap Johnny's gifts and Christmas morning as Johnny opened presents without his beloved mommy. All of this in three months' time.

God has allowed me to be in these very raw places in their lives. My journey is hard, but it's nothing compared to theirs. Often when we hear stories of leaving home and being welcomed somewhere new, the story involves moving to a new state or a new country, with joyful expectation of what lies ahead. But sometimes we leave home because we are deeply needed. And sometimes being welcomed doesn't involve sweet celebrations but instead is a welcome into the hardest places. But what an honor it is to be trusted on such holy ground. ■



Week Four

THE EXILES

“Build houses and settle down . . . Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

Jeremiah 29:4-7

DAY ONE

On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon. But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields. (2 Kings 25: 8-12)

When my children were small, my husband and I would lead them in gratitude prayers. You know, the normal things: Thank you for our family. Thank you for this food. Thank you for our warm home.

Then my husband would add one more “thanksgiving” that seemed a bit out of place: Thank you that I live in a country of peace.

This felt odd to me because I’ve always lived in a country of peace. I took it for granted. Waking up to not enough food, needing a place to live, or moving far away from family are problems I’ve seen friends face. A war-torn country, though? That I couldn’t imagine.

But so many people around the world today, and throughout history, know exactly what this means.

The end of 2 Kings describes Babylon destroying Jerusalem. The writer tells the story as though he is witnessing the end of all things. Take a moment to read chapter 25 in full. Can you feel the emotion, the despair, the loss?

The walls of the city are destroyed. The palace and all the houses have been burned to the ground. The people have been killed in the streets. And the temple, the holy place of God, the home where God lived among us? The enemy who did all this stood in the holy place and took it all. Every sacred, holy, precious piece was taken for their own evil use or destroyed. Those who survived to watch it all happen—would you even want to survive such a day?—were chained and taken as slaves and exiles of the enemy.

Can you even imagine this happening in your own community? In your church? Among your family and friends? If you can, try and sit with that grief for a moment because this kind of circumstance becomes the catalyst for God's people to flee their homes and become immigrants in a foreign land once again.

Where can they go? What can they do?

Again we see that God's redemptive story is a migration story. ■

Thoughtful Questions

1. Read through the whole chapter of 2 Kings 25 or Jeremiah 52. What strikes you the most about these accounts of the destruction of Jerusalem?

2. When you imagine stepping into the experiences of the people who survived these days, what do you think? What do you feel?

3. Have you ever lived in a war-torn country or lost a loved one to war or violence? If so, how does this impact you today?

DAY TWO

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?*

(Psalm 137:1-4)

I first read Psalm 137 when I was a kid, before I knew the details of the exile. I was confused and skeptical. Why would it be harder to sing at this river than any other river?

Of course, that was before I knew the trauma the writers had lived through. Because here they are: the exiles, in Babylon. They have watched everything dear to them violently destroyed. They have been chained and taken away from home. Now they live not only in a foreign land but in a city ruled by their enemies.

Researchers today study the impact that living through this sort of all-encompassing trauma has, especially on children. In studying people who have survived similar experiences as the ancient Jews in exiles—armed conflict, loss of friends and family, displacement from homeland—they find a wide range of psychological, emotional, and social struggles, including anxiety, depression, difficulty coping, socializing, and attaching.



Babylon was one of the wonders of the ancient world, so the riverside flanked with poplar trees was probably beautiful. But what is beauty when you are a slave, when it belongs to the empire that destroyed your family, your home, your everything?

Even if they were allowed to return home, home has been destroyed. There is nowhere to go back to. There is no dream of redemption. There is only loss.

So when their captors and tormentors ask them to sing the songs they knew from childhood, how could they? How could they sing the songs they learned in the temple of God, here, in the enemy's hometown?

This psalm is the specific cry of a unique people in a particular place and time. But it is also the universal cry of people who have lost everything to war and crisis. They may find new homes in a safer, peaceful country—but this can never replace all they have lost or heal their wounds. ■

Thoughtful Questions

1. Why do you think this song was included in the Psalms? What value does recounting such tragedy have in worship?

2. Have you ever lost something that couldn't be replaced? How did that experience shape and form you?

3. Is there a grief or loss that you need to lament today?

DAY THREE

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

(Jeremiah 29:4-7)

There are few verses in scripture more popular than Jeremiah 29:11. You know the one: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

You’ll find it on pillows and mugs, wall hangings and note cards. We use it like a spiritual Tylenol, a boost of hope to ease our short-term problems.

But unfortunately, these words were written to mean the exact opposite of a quick fix. The prophet Jeremiah spoke them to the exiles in Babylon, and rather than meaning “Hey, everything will be okay!” God was gently communicating a painful message. This exile, he explains in the passage, will last for seventy years—an entire human lifetime. The people hearing Jeremiah understood that they would never see home again. Redemption would come, but not for them.

It is with this devastating news that the Lord says: My plans are to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a hope and a future.

Wow. That's a blow, to be honest. I'm not sure how I would carry on, living through all they lived through, learning that no relief would come in my lifetime or my children's.

But God's faithfulness was still central, still the foundation. God hadn't forgotten them. God could see them, and he was in control of the future ahead—and it was hopeful.

It was just a long, long way off.

So, what were they to do in the meantime? Well, that's the point of this chapter. God asked the exiles, settling into the bad news of captivity, to live.

Listen to these instructions and all the life and hope they entail: build houses, plant gardens, enjoy the produce you grow, get married, have babies and grandbabies.

And while you're at it? As you try to live full, hopeful, verdant lives in this place? Seek the peace of this city. The word for peace here is the Hebrew word *shalom*. It means more than the absence of conflict; according to Strong's Concordance it also means completeness, soundness, and welfare.

But ladies, this city is Babylon. The people they're being asked to bless with *shalom* are their enemies. These aren't people they simply dislike; this is an empire of people that horrifically destroyed their whole world. What a hard word from Jeremiah.

But you know what's interesting? The last twenty-five hundred years of Judaism, and Christianity itself exists because the exiles persisted. It's been carried on from generation to generation—in part—because they chose life and *shalom*. They chose God even in the darkest of times. They sought not only their own peace, but the well-being of their captors and enemies. Because of their faithfulness in exile, God's redemption keeps moving forward.

Today, migrants fleeing war and displacement are still contributing to the *shalom* of the countries that take them in. They may have little hope of healing, but they are building lives, investing in local communities, and finding their footing. They are taking baby steps toward life, and as the people of God we should join together with them in this kind of flourishing. ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Throughout this study, we've encountered a number of people who trusted their lives to God's faithfulness, even though they wouldn't see redemption come to pass in their lifetimes. How does that strike you? How does that compare to your own experience of faith and trust?**

- 2. Have you ever worked to bring peace and prosperity to your enemies? Why do you think God commands this of the exiles?**

- 3. What is something you notice that is chaotic or unsettled in your community? What practical steps can you, your family, or your church take to bring peace to the situation or your city?**

- 4. Do you know anyone in your city who is healing from a war-torn past? Is there a way you can help?**

DAY FOUR

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah:

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. (Daniel 1:3-7)

One of the most well-known Babylonian exiles was a man named Daniel.

In his story, we put a face and personality to the people weeping by the river, to the people trying to obey God and create a life in this foreign land—a life to benefit not only themselves but bless and prosper their enemies as well.

Daniel's life is quite an adventure. I'm sure most of the exiles spent their years in obscurity, but as many of us know, Daniel's life has blockbuster-worthy twists and turns.

Thanks to his handsome looks, good health, and social status, this young man was chosen to serve in the king's court. He and a few others would be educated, fed from the king's table. It sounds a bit like a fairy tale . . . well, almost.

Daniel and his friends were still slaves. They didn't have choices or autonomy. They lived at the whim of the king. When his friends refused to worship the king's idols, they were thrown into a furnace of fire. When Daniel prayed to his own God, he was thrown into a den of lions.

That's when this blockbuster gets really crazy: the lions don't attack Daniel; the fire doesn't incinerate his friends. The king and the community are astonished. Who are these men? Who is their God?

These were the questions that flooded their enemies' homes and were likely the topic of all family meal discussions for years. God used these tragedies of war and displacement, the realities of migration and exile, to send the world a startling message: God's kingdom does not have borders. Wherever his people go, he goes with them.

Yes, Jerusalem is leveled. Yes, the temple is destroyed. Every sacred place God's people had for worship is gone, gone, gone . . . and yet, God himself is still alive, active, and present. Even in Babylon, Israel's God is at work. Not only is he working, he is proving himself stronger than the other gods. Not only is he present, he is sovereign, he is king.

Israel and the Holy City have fallen, but God is not dead, not even weakened. God has no limits. God is Lord over Israel and her enemies, sovereign over kings and kingdoms, ruling over the past and the future.

There is no kingdom, nor country, nor border that can stiff-arm the purposes of God.

He remains with his people. This is the surprising message of the exile. ■

Thoughtful Questions

1. The exiles must have assumed that when they left their country and their temple, they were leaving their God behind as well. But they—and all Babylon—learned that God is everywhere and over all. When have you felt that God must surely have abandoned you, only to discover he had been near to you all along?

2. Christians do not believe that God incites evil, but that God transforms evil into redemption. In what ways do we see God using even the horrors of war to bring redemption to the world in the exiles? What about today?

3. Are there countries or powers today that believe themselves more powerful than God? Are you ever tempted to submit to these earthly forces out of fear, rather than keep your eyes on the provision and power that comes from God?

DAY FIVE: GOING DEEPER

War and Political Displacement

The Bible eloquently tells the tragic story of a nation displaced by war long ago—but thousands of men, women, and children today live a similar story.

Here's one example: Over 37 million people have been displaced by the wars fought by the United States in the twenty years since (and in response to) 9/11. This is a conservative estimate looking at only a handful of countries with the high rates of displacement. Add them all together, and the real number grows to nearly twice that, including people from several continents: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Niger, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.⁵

Most of these millions of displaced people are civilians, fleeing home because their houses and neighborhoods were bombed, or because long-term war eroded the infrastructure of education, business, healthcare, and economy to the degree that they could not provide for or protect their families.

In Somalia alone, nearly half the population has been displaced in the past twenty years.

Like the exiles in Babylon, many of these people long to return home—and some of them do. Some venture back home willingly, hoping to find a safer future than the one they fled, though they are often met instead by continued violence and instability. Many more are returned unwillingly, deported from the countries in which they sought safety.

⁵ Costs of War, Watson Institute, International and Political Affairs, Brown University. *Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the United States' Post-9/11 Wars*. September 2020 https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2020/Displacement_Vine%20et%20al_Costs%20of%20War%202020%2009%2008.pdf

Sometimes, when America fights in a war, we respond by opening our borders to larger than typical numbers of displaced people from the areas we have destabilized. But at other times, America has not chosen to do this.

The numbers we've looked at today only account for men, women, and children displaced by wars related to 9/11. But around the globe, other wars and trauma send people fleeing as well. All in all, the UN reported 82.4 million displaced at the end of 2020.⁶

Merely stating these unfathomable numbers does little to demonstrate the actual day-to-day trauma and impact on the men, women, and children who—like the biblical exiles—have survived the destruction of their home and country. We'll look at that a bit more next week. ■

⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>



Sherene's Story

STORIES FAR FROM HOME



Graciously shared by Sherene from our Women of Welcome community:

Everything in my new country was unfamiliar, strange, and scary. I was twenty-six years old, a wife, and a mother of a twenty-month-old when I moved to the United States from India. In our first two years in Michigan, the small Indian community we found in our mission outreach church supported us. But it was only after we moved to Dallas, Texas, that I got my first taste of American hospitality.

I was asked to be a table leader at the Bible study I had joined at a local church. A group of us leaders was also connected to a mentor leader who would encourage us and check in with us throughout the semester. That was my first introduction to my friend Joy. As her name suggests, Joy was a delight to be around. She was kind and welcoming.

She invited us to her home for lunch, and there I had my first introduction to Hawaiian ham and Swiss sliders. What made my relationship with her grow so deep was her genuine interest in me, my background, story, and life. She was curious, asked good questions, and was eager to share her life and family with me.

As we navigated moving from our apartment to our first home, she prayed for our family to find the right house. Once we moved, she introduced me to her friends who lived on the same street. Our children were close in age, so she included mine every time she took her kids to the park. I got to know the town we lived in and all of its delights through her.

Our older sons would go on to become close friends who could talk about video games, sing in the choir together, and even discuss their faith journeys. Joy included my family in many of her family gatherings—birthdays, Fourth of July sailing, backyard barbecues. In the last fifteen years, we have shared our highs and lows, and there is a comfort in our friendship which neither of us expected when we first met. Our family has also grown close to her extended family, which has been a sweet blessing to us.

Over the years, there have been conversations about faith, racial reconciliation, struggles in marriage, and parenting. Yes, we have seen the good and ugly sides of each other. However, when a friendship sharpens you like iron, it can go to a deeper level of authenticity and love and hold you accountable on your spiritual journey.

When my family moved to the same church Joy and her family attended, I was unsure and nervous about the change. Joy kept telling me we would find our place quickly. It took us only a month or so to get connected to multiple ministries and areas of service.

What I have found in my friendship with her has been a willingness to learn about my culture, to understand that while we share similar values as Christians, we have different cultural values. It is challenging for us immigrants to live by our culture in a foreign land when everything tells us it's easier to assimilate and forget what we were raised with. Joy has always been respectful and sensitive to our cultural values, and they have made my family and me feel at ease.

We often talk about a time when I will be able to take her to India for a holiday to see the sights and sounds of a country and culture that she has heard so much of. Joy often tells me that when we both grow old, we will sit on the rocking chairs on her front porch, drink lemonade, and visit with each other and the people walking by. That, to me, is a precious thing to look forward to. If God wills it, someday we will make that porch dream a reality. ■

Week Five

JESUS AND THE HOLY FAMILY

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

“Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.”

Matthew 2:13b

DAY ONE

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. **(Luke 2:8-12, 16-20)***

My house exploded with noise, and I ran outside to see what was making such a racket.

Helicopter after helicopter was flying over my house; huge military choppers. As soon as I saw them, I understood: the president of the United States was coming to my city (Chicago). All this hullabaloo was part of the extensive preparation for his coming.

Imagine how much more if our visitor had been a king! Imagine if the arrival was for a god!

The mythology of the Greeks and Romans had stories of gods coming to earth. And yes, they created a ruckus. Athena, for example, was believed to have been born fully grown and armed for battle.

But when God came to earth—a celestial migration of sorts—he chose a different story for himself. In writing Jesus’ birth stories, Matthew and Luke go out of their way to show just how different this story is.

Jesus was born a baby—a tiny, helpless, vulnerable infant. His mother, not a wealthy queen but instead an unwed mother who nearly lost her fiancé to the scandal. Jesus’ extended family were part of an occupied, terrorized nation. When Mary’s birth pains began, she and Joseph were traveling far from home, reliant on the hospitality of strangers for a safe place to labor, a warm shelter where the newborn baby Jesus could sleep.

As one writer puts it, “The message of Christmas is that in Jesus Christ God enters into the midst of human poverty and vulnerability. God makes himself small and vulnerable in order to give power to the small and weak.”⁷

In the old hymn, *Lord I Lift Your Name on High*, the lyrics go like this:

*You came from heaven to earth to show the way
From the earth to the cross, my debt to pay
From the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky
Lord I lift Your name on high*

Have you ever thought of Jesus’ coming to earth as a migration story?

Jesus left the heavenly realms to come walk alongside people on earth. He left his protection and privileges behind, relying solely on the Father as he journeyed through his life, death, and resurrection.

When we think about the Son of God coming to us in this way, we start to understand why our Savior always welcomes the vulnerable in his midst. ■

⁷ Gruber, Judith, and Sigrid Rettenbacher. *Migration as a Sign of the Times*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Rodopi, 2015.

Thoughtful Questions

1. Have you ever thought about God's coming to earth as a baby as a celestial migration?

2. Why does it matter that the Creator of the world came to earth not in power and glory but in weakness and humility? What does this teach us about his character? What does this mean for those of us who follow him?

3. If Jesus were born today, where and how do you think he would arrive? What sort of family, community, or country would he choose? Why?

DAY TWO

. . . an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

*When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. **(Matthew 2:13b-16)***

As I write this, my house is decorated for Christmas.

On the table next to me is a nativity scene I’ve had since childhood: Mary and Joseph gazing at baby Jesus in the manger, surrounded by a motley crew of shepherds, magi, farm animals, and an angel.

We know this is a fictionalized picture of Jesus’ birth. The magi didn’t come the same night (or the same year) as the shepherds, for one thing. Mary probably wasn’t sitting up, looking like a model for ancient fashion and beauty hours after giving birth, for another.

But whatever we get wrong in retelling the birth story, we skip the next scene entirely. And no wonder! Jesus’ scandalous birth is followed by a horror story.

When the magi came from the East, following the star and looking for the

newborn king, they went first to Herod's palace in the royal city of Jerusalem. Of course they did! Where else to find a new king? No one was expecting royalty—not to mention deity—to be born in Bethlehem.

How did the king take the news that a new king had been born, and not in his own household? Matthew tells us that “he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3), a poetic way of reminding us that when powerful rulers feel unhappy, the people suffer.

Sure enough, when the magi fail to bring this particular boy to Herod, Herod goes out in search of all the baby boys. In one of the most gruesome moments in the Gospels, he kills every boy aged two or younger in the area of Bethlehem.

It's no wonder we don't include this scene in our nativities or advent calendars. For me, this is too horrible to think about. How many children were murdered that day? How many fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles were left terrified, devastated, and utterly bereft?

As for baby Jesus and his family, they must have been terrified too. Obeying instructions from God, they fled their home, their country, their families and jobs and everything they knew.

Because of a terrible leader who would rather murder countless innocent babies than risk losing his own power, Jesus and his family became refugees. ■

Thoughtful Questions

1. Have you ever known (or known of) a person who keeps relational or political power through fear and violence? How is this an evil yet effective way of keeping one's position?

2. How is God's way of holding power different?

3. The idea of Jesus and his parents being refugees is new to many people. Is this something you've thought about, or been taught about, before? Why is this an important part of the story?

DAY THREE

Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20)

When I was a child, my family abruptly left our hometown.

The reasons are complicated, and the story is long, but suffice to say, I suddenly lost my childhood home and community and have never really had a chance to return or reconnect. And though I’ve had the chance to travel the world, I’ve always looked longingly at people who spend their entire lives in the same place. I have a longing for the home I lost and never fully regained.

Yesterday, I described Jesus and his family as refugees. The United Nations describes a refugee this way:

Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.⁸

This sounds like what we read in Matthew. As baby boys were systematically murdered all over the countryside by their government, Joseph and Mary packed up their family and fled, crossing out of their country and into Egypt.

But “refugee” is a technical and legal term related to modern ideas and laws that did not exist when Joseph and Mary had to leave their homes. Like many of their ancestors whose stories we have explored—Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his children, the Israelites leaving Egypt, Ruth and Naomi, and so, so many more—this family didn’t need to fill out a visa request at the border or undergo a thorough vetting process with background checks.

⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/what-is-a-refugee.html>

The idea that countries should have carefully drawn lines and protected borders is a new idea; very new, in fact. My own great-great-grandparents arrived in this country without any sort of application. For most of history, migration was the norm. It was hard to leave home behind, of course. Suffering flanked most journeys from start to finish. But in many cases, no barriers existed between countries to keep people in or out. If you could get there, you could be there.

So when Joseph took his family to Egypt for their protection, he didn't need to request asylum or show papers. He simply needed to find a safe place to live and enough work that they could buy food. I'm sure this was hard enough.

We know that Jesus' parents struggled to find a place to stay for his birth in Bethlehem. Then a few years later, they were forced to flee the country entirely. After spending some time in Egypt, an angel told them to head back to Israel, but when Joseph heard that members of Herod's family were still in power he became afraid. An angel then redirected their travel and they withdrew back to Nazareth. There's no doubt that Jesus' childhood was marked by this ongoing upheaval, this unsettled migratory lifestyle.

It's a fascinating idea that God came to earth as a vulnerable infant, into a poor family and an occupied country. But how much more when we meditate on part of Jesus' childhood spent as a refugee, migrating from one safe haven to the next! ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Based on our modern definitions, do you agree that Jesus and his parents were refugees? Why or why not?**
- 2. Does imagining Jesus as a refugee change the way you view migrants and refugees today? Why or why not?**
- 3. We've seen throughout the Bible that God goes out of his way to express solidarity with people in poverty and vulnerable situations. What aspects of Jesus' birth and childhood fit into the picture God has been painting of himself all along? How does it fit with the ways you view God?**

DAY FOUR

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 to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

*So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene. **(Matthew 2:19-23)***

Every year, from December 16-24, many Latin American countries celebrate Las Posadas, which can be translated as “lodgings.”

The nine days represent the nine months of Mary’s pregnancy and the journey Mary and Joseph made to Bethlehem. During each night of the celebration, a procession goes from home to home, carrying candles and singing songs, looking for a place of shelter and safety—reenacting Mary and Joseph’s search for a place to stay in Bethlehem. A man playing Joseph sings at each door, asking for hospitality for his wife who is soon to give birth. The homeowners respond with their own songs of refusal.

On the final night, Christmas Eve, a safe place is finally “found” (often the church), and the Christmas celebration begins with feasting, carols, and gifts.

I wonder how my own understanding of Jesus would grow if, instead of reenacting him sleeping soundly in a warm stable each Christmas, we spent days

imagining his family looking for shelter and safe accommodations? What if we spent nine days each year remembering that when God came to earth, he chose to come and live not as a king in a wealthy family, or even as someone with a normal home—but as a migrant?

Author Karen Gonzalez takes this imagination exercise one step further, envisioning the procession happening along the borderlines between countries, Joseph and Mary looking for a safe country to raise their baby, Jesus, who is not safe in his homeland. What if he wasn't allowed to enter other countries either?⁹

I wonder how Joseph felt when he had a second dream, this time telling him to return to his own country. Whatever he may have felt, he obeyed. Just as he married his pregnant fiancée Mary, agreeing to raise Jesus as his son, just as he fled the country to keep Jesus safe, now again an angel is delivering a hard message for him to obey.

Once more, they leave everything behind. At least this time, they are heading toward home. But even now, home is not safe. Joseph settles his family not in Jesus' early childhood home of Bethlehem but in Nazareth in Galilee.

This is where Jesus will finish growing up, where he will begin his ministry, and then set off once more in obedience to travel and teach without a home.

All along, we've seen how God's redemption story is a migration story. Turns out, God's salvation story is a migration story, too. ■

⁹ González, Karen. *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong*. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 2019.

Thoughtful Questions

1. When we think of God's redemptive story being one of migration, does it make a difference in how you view God, God's work in the world, and Christian living in today's world?

2. Have you considered what these years were like for Joseph? What do you suppose he wrestled with, stressed about, and feared during these early years?

3. Look at Matthew 2. Are there details in the Christmas story you haven't noticed before?

DAY FIVE: GOING DEEPER

Refugees Fleeing Violence

It's important to include Jesus' family fleeing for their lives when we tell his story. When we acknowledge the refugee experience as part of our Savior's life on earth, we grow more compassionate toward real-life neighbors who share a similar life story.

The Christian organization World Relief estimates that 80 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. This number increases by 44,000 people each day.¹⁰ The UN Refugee Agency estimates that 1 out of every 95 people on earth has fled their home.¹¹ More than half are under the age of 18.

Two-thirds of all refugees in 2021 came from five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. They fled violence, war, hunger, famine, economic collapse, and climate crisis. The primary host countries that received refugees in 2021 were Turkey (3.7 million), Colombia (1.7 million), Pakistan and Uganda (1.4 million each), and Germany (1.2 million). In that same year, the United States opened the door to receive 11,411 refugees.

The number of men, women, and children searching for safe harbor far outweighs the willingness of host countries to welcome them. So, millions of people spend years and decades surviving and waiting in refugee camps. Every year, more than a quarter million babies are born in refugee camps, never having known the safety of having their own home, their own country.

¹⁰ <https://worldrelief.org/refugees-immigrants-and-displaced-people/>

¹¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

The International Rescue Committee exists to help refugees around the world, and that’s how they met Yasser.¹² Yasser and his family fled their Syrian home when he was just seven years old and have lived in refugee camps ever since. But though this camp is safer than home was at the end, it is still a place of danger and suffering and the ongoing struggle to survive. The camps are crowded. Families lack access to adequate shelter or provisions to meet the most basic needs.

Yasser longs to be a “normal kid.”

He remembers crying when his family was forced to flee their home, neighborhood, school, and community. He says “I’d like to return to my town and live in our house comfortably again and go back to school. I miss my friends and my neighborhood and everything about home.” ■

¹² <https://www.rescue.org/article/voices-crises-world-cant-ignore-2022>



Melanie's Story

STORIES FAR FROM HOME



Graciously shared by Melanie from our Women of Welcome community:

Welcome helped me not only survive but thrive when I moved to a foreign country. I could not have fathomed navigating two international moves to two separate parts of the world on my own as a single woman. Thankfully, when I did move, I was received by expatriate friends and made national friends who welcomed me. The support they provided logistically, emotionally, and spiritually were genuine gifts. I am confident I would not have adjusted successfully to my surroundings otherwise.

There are so many logistics to consider when welcoming someone arriving from a foreign land. It was a blessing to be provided with some food and clean bedsheets on my first night in my new country. Having arrived in a new place with no knowledge of the language, I had no idea how to do things like pay bills, go to the post office, find groceries, and make sure my visa was up to date. It took time and people willing to help me to navigate these things. Those who welcomed me let me know I needed to weigh my fruits and vegetables before I paid for them in the checkout line and showed me many other ways I needed to do things around town. Sure, it was not easy at first, and I still struggle to do things that a national can do with ease. But being welcomed well by others gave me a sense of independence that allowed me to do things I needed and wanted to do to stay in the country long-term.

Any move is stressful, but the stress is multiplied when moving abroad. Those who welcomed me were patient as I learned the new currency and how to order

taxi. They were there for me when I was homesick or in the throes of culture shock. Having someone to walk alongside me helped relieve some of that stress. Because of their emotional support, I enjoyed being in my new city.

I had just begun visiting a new church a few weeks before the pandemic hit. Being welcomed by the church helped me feel connected to the body of Christ while in lockdown thousands of miles away from my homeland. The church provided me with a place to grow spiritually and use my spiritual gifts. Since moving abroad, I've gleaned more from Scripture about how to treat the foreigners and strangers among us. Welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us brings glory to God (Romans 15:7) as we help one another grow stronger in our relationship with Jesus. Perhaps one often overlooked element of a welcome is that it is a catalyst for growing in Christ and helping others grow in their faith.

Knowing how important a welcome can be to a person's overall well-being, I am more sympathetic to newly arrived people, whether in my host country or home country. As I write this, I'm helping someone who recently arrived secure housing and set up a home. I am grateful for the time people took to do this for me because it equipped me to do the same for others. At some point, we'll have the chance to provide logistical, emotional, or spiritual support as we welcome others. When we do, I hope we'll remember that we can be a catalyst for helping people not just survive but thrive in a foreign land. ■

**Melanie has lived in Eastern Europe and now lives in the Middle East.*

Week Six

THE EARLY CHURCH

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Acts 8:4

DAY ONE

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:1-12)

All that Jesus said and did while he was alive—including his death and resurrection—must have been on the minds of his disciples in their last hours together.

One of his final commands was to go. To spread around the countryside, even around the world, telling the good news.

Specifically, Jesus said:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18b-20)

That seems clear enough. But Jesus also told them to wait:

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.” (Acts 1:4b)

So, after a truly unbelievable year, the disciples were in Jerusalem, waiting.

It was the season of Pentecost. During this Jewish harvest festival, Jews from all over the world traveled back to their homeland to celebrate. These men and women and children were members of the Jewish diaspora who through generations of migration and exile were scattered all over the world. They shared a religion and ethnicity but lived in different cultures and spoke different languages. In fact, at least fifteen different regions are listed in this passage.

It surely wasn't a coincidence that God chose this moment to send his promised gift, the Holy Spirit.

Suddenly, the sound of wind filled the area—appropriate, as the Hebrew word for Spirit is “wind” or “breath.” God's breath is filling the area, filling them. What looks like fire is resting upon them—and they begin to speak in languages they don't know and have never studied.

In fact, they are spontaneously speaking in all the languages of the Jews visiting from all over the known world.

In this moment, Jesus' friends understood what was happening. The Spirit inspires Peter to speak to the crowd, from the prophet Joel:

*“In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy . . .
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

(Acts 2:17-18, 21)

When these thousands of Jews return to their homes around the world, they will tell of what happened in Jerusalem, what they saw and heard: their long-awaited future hope is happening now. God's Spirit is being poured out upon all people.

His redemptive migration story was bringing the region together in an unprecedented way and no one would be able to stop “the Way” from spreading to every part of the globe. ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. Imagine yourself in the shoes of the disciples in Jerusalem. Or in the shoes of the visitors from far away. What do you imagine this day was like? What do you imagine feeling, thinking, saying, or doing?**
- 2. Why do you think God chose this moment to release his Spirit on Jesus' followers?**
- 3. We have been tracking God's long-term promises for weeks (in our time) and thousands of years (in their time). How are these not-yet-fulfilled promises beginning to come true now, finally, in this story?**
- 4. How does the human reality of migration play a central role in the spreading of God's good news—in this story from Acts, but also still today?**

DAY TWO

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" **(Acts 6:8-7:1)**

The church was growing. Since that first wild week of Pentecost, the good news of Jesus had been spreading near and far.

The believers came together to build a strong community that cared for each other. But also, the believers were going out, teaching the good news.

Stephen was one of those teachers. Acts describes him as “a man full of God’s grace and power, [who] performed great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). But change is almost always controversial. So are claims about God that don’t fit the tradition you’re used to. There were many, many in Jerusalem who did not view Jesus as the Messiah. It was blasphemous and dangerous to declare a mere man Lord and God.

So they began to spread rumors, to persecute and oppress Stephen and the other Christian believers. They seized Stephen, pressing false charges against him.

For his defense, Stephen told his testimony, the story of his faith. Going all the way back to Abraham, Stephen anchored his personal story—and the gospel story—in their shared history, their nation, their faith in God. Woven throughout Stephen’s story is an excellent summary of all the ways God has brought about redemption through people on the move.

Stephen begins with Abraham’s journey to Harran, then to this land, their own country. He tells the story of Jacob’s family migrating to Egypt in search of food, the centuries they spent in slavery, and their escape through God’s liberation and Moses’ leading. Stephen tells of the laws God gave his people at Mount Sinai, of the new nation they built, and of their eventual exile.

Stephen gives the summary of God’s people from the beginning to his present day. Just as we have seen in this study, their history and their identity was a people on the move. On the surface they were traveling for urgent, practical, human needs; but looking back, they can see clearly how God’s redemptive plan expanded and built as they migrated. In the details, Stephen demonstrates that God has never been limited to one temple, one country. God has been traveling across the nations and borders from the beginning.

And the people of God have never been limited to one set of borders either. This family spreads all across the world.

When Stephen began to speak of Jesus, now standing at the right hand of God, his listeners had had enough. They stoned him to death and Stephen died with both praise and forgiveness on his lips. Stephen knew Jesus was the Messiah and he was persecuted for it. Persecuted unto death. ■

Thoughtful Questions

1. Look through Stephen's full speech in Acts 7. What stories that we've studied in the past five weeks do you see included here? What else do you see?

2. Do you feel any sympathy for the people who arrested Stephen? Why or why not?

3. Are there situations in your life that felt mundane at the time, but looking back you can see that God was at work all along? Reflect on these or share them.

DAY THREE

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. (Acts 8:1-4)

The doors burst open to our church sanctuary in the middle of a worship service, and two men I knew from the community ran in shouting, interrupting everything.

I was very young, playing with blocks and books on the floor in the back, but I remember *everything*. They shouted that the USA had fallen, that we had to choose now to deny Christ or be killed.

Looking back, I realize everyone else in the room understood this was a skit. Even if our nation were to fall to our enemies, it's unlikely they would demand we renounce our faith or die. But even if they did, it would take a long, long time before they reached my small country church in rural Wisconsin. At the very least, we could make a run for it.

But I didn't know. I was terrified.

For the early Christians in Jerusalem, this was not a drill. Stephen's death, and the threats that followed, were all too real. Men and women were being dragged out of their homes and thrown into prison.

What would you do in their shoes?

These early Christians did what I imagine most of us would do: they ran.

Many from this growing community of believers took to the road, spreading all over Judea, Samaria, and beyond. At the time, they were probably only thinking about survival, protecting their families, and staying alive. But looking back, we can see what happened to them from a different perspective.

If you have dandelions growing in your yard, you've likely felt the urge to pick a fluffy white one, make a wish, and blow! The sight of seeds dancing on the wind as the sun shines down upon them is idyllic.

You also know the long-term result of this happy moment: a hundred more deeply rooted dandelions growing all over the yard next year.

In this terrible, terrifying moment, the small, newborn church is being scattered on the wind to all the corners of their world. But like seeds blown on the wind, they will land, lay down deep roots, and thrive, spreading the church everywhere they go.

Scholars of migration point out something important in Acts: Because many of the new believers in Jerusalem were visiting from all around the world, when they scattered again, they went back to their home countries, taking something world-changing with them—the gospel of Jesus *and* an understanding of their cultures and language. Who better to send as missionaries to Asia, Egypt, and Rome than the new believers from Asia, Egypt, and Rome?

Because of persecution-fueled migration, the gospel went all over the Roman Empire and beyond, into places we now call Europe, Africa, India. And from there it just kept spreading. The name of Jesus and the good news of God's love and redemption were spoken—in the local language—everywhere these men and women could reach.

God is still playing the long game. He sent them out, brought them together again generations later, then sent them out once more—this time with the good news of Jesus. ■

Thoughtful Questions

1. Think of a time when you were mistreated because of something you believe. If your life had been in danger, would you have fled? Why or why not?

2. How does God take this act of evil and turn it into good? How do you think the world would be different today if the early Christians had been comfortable and secure, and never scattered?

3. Christians are right to worry about their own safety but often overlook the ways we ourselves make people from other religions unsafe. Can you think of ways that Christians have contributed to (or failed to confront) persecution toward other people?

DAY FOUR

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

“About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

“‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

“‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

“A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

“Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his

witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’

“When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me. ‘Quick!’ he said. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.’

“‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

(Acts 22:3-21)

While Christians are spreading across the world like seeds on the wind, back in Jerusalem an incredible miracle has taken place: Saul, the great persecutor himself, has been converted. No longer is he chasing down Christians to imprison and kill them. Saul follows Jesus now.

But this doesn’t mean the Christians live happily (and safely) ever after. The Lord warns Saul that he can never be safe working in Jerusalem; after all, Christians are still persecuted there, even without Saul at the helm. Jesus changes Saul’s name to Paul and announces that he, too, needs to flee. He must go to the Gentile world and preach the gospel there.

And so, Saul-now-Paul spends the rest of his adult life on the road. He lives his life as a migrant, often persecuted for his devotion to Jesus, staying in one place until he’s driven out—then travels to a new destination. As a result, over the decades he visits at least fifty cities, planting churches and discipling new Christians in every place he lands.

I wonder: How many of the people he grows to love in these cities are the same people he scattered through persecution years before?

Paul may have initially headed to the Gentile world seeking safety, but he doesn't seem to have found it for long. Over and over Paul is persecuted, threatened, arrested, and imprisoned for teaching the gospel. So, he stays on the move. Finally, near the end of his life and ministry, Paul is arrested (again) and hauled back to Jerusalem to stand trial. Like Stephen, his defense is his testimony, the gospel.

No one seems to know exactly what to do with Paul, so his trial goes on for chapters. Once again, he is transferred from one city to the next. Each time he is moved to a new powerful leader, his defense is the same: he preaches the gospel.

The entire book of Acts is full of on-the-move language. So many stories—from Saul to Philip and more—include the phrase “on the road” or “on the way.” It is during long walks or journeys that people bump into each other and spread the word. One has questions, another has an answer—and in God's omniscience, they find each other in the most unlikely places.

Once more, we find that God is mobile—and so are God's people. Once more, God's plan is being fulfilled by the natural migration of people.

Humans use religious persecution for evil. But in the case of Paul and the early Christians, God turned this evil into something incredibly, wonderfully good. Because people fearing for their lives crossed borders into other, safer countries, the word of Jesus spread like wildfire. ■

Thoughtful Questions

- 1. We tend to think that God will bless his people—meaning, allow our lives to go just the way we hope. But a major theme in this study has been that, while God does bless his people, they still face suffering, trouble, and loss. What do you notice in Paul’s suffering? What do you notice in the early church’s suffering? How does this change your own theology of suffering?**

- 2. Putting together all that we’ve explored over the past few weeks, how do you see the many migration stories in the Bible coming together to fit into God’s plan to save and redeem the world? How does this impact your theology of migration? How does this impact your view of migrants today?**

- 3. What are some practical ways that you and your friends or church can join God in caring for immigrants, refugees, and migrants in your own community and around the world?**

DAY FIVE: GOING DEEPER

Religious Persecution

Whether or not the United States should accept refugees—and if so, how many—is an ongoing debate. There are many reasons why Christians might vote “Yes!” and “As many as possible!” and we’ve explored some of those reasons in this study.

But here’s another factor: sometimes the people fleeing persecution are our own Christian brothers and sisters. We’ve seen how God’s kingdom transcends the boundaries of earthly kingdoms; at the very least, Christians should do what we can to take care of our own.

Of course, many of the people fleeing are not our Christian brothers and sisters. Some are from religions we might consider strange or even dangerous. It’s easy to think of them as our enemies.

But here’s the thing: Jesus taught us not only to love our own family but to care for strangers, and even to love and care for our enemies. So, part of practicing Christian faith is to sacrifice for those outside our religious family, even those we might consider enemies.

That is a hard teaching, ladies.

This isn’t easy for us to do on a personal level. It doesn’t get easier on an international or global level. And let’s be honest: we can’t expect a country’s government to submit itself to the teachings of Jesus or the doctrines of historic Christianity.

But as Christians ourselves, and as Christian communities, we can and must show up. We can be the hands and feet of Jesus to the refugees, immigrants, and migrants in our midst, loving and welcoming them.

Are they family, or strangers, or enemies? For followers of Jesus, it doesn’t matter what the answer is. Every single person in all three of those categories are people we are called to love and pray for. ■

STORIES FAR FROM HOME



Graciously shared by Marilyn from our Women of Welcome community:

My husband and I moved to the Kurdish region of Iraq when the ground was still dry and barren, and the winter rains had not yet come. We moved with eight suitcases, some cash from a retirement account, and what we thought was a lot of faith and generosity of spirit. It turned out that it wasn't much at all.

We were still recovering from jetlag and had been in the city of Ranya, located a half hour from the border of Iran, for just twenty-four hours when we received our first invitation to dinner.

This initial invitation was an unforgettable moment of humility and what it was to be offered extravagant hospitality. Taking our shoes off at the door, we entered into a warm and spice-filled kitchen. A plastic tablecloth lined the floor, filled with large platters of food. There was rice, and more rice, chicken cooked in yogurt, cabbage stuffed with beef, vegetables cooked with pungent spices, brightly colored salads, and bread. Each setting had several plates and bowls. Cushions surrounded the table so that we could comfortably lean against them. After greeting everyone present, we were invited to take our places. Within minutes, our plates were filled to overflowing and silence had ensued. All you could hear were the contented sounds of eating and murmurs of appreciation—something understood across linguistic barriers. Despite our protests of being full, the food kept on coming.

The meal was followed by tea, long conversation, and finally fruit—a sign that it would soon be time to give our thanks and leave.

This was the first of what would end up being hundreds of invitations to homes in the area. We learned early on that invitations to meals were not only invitations to eat—they were invitations to share life.

When we arrived in Kurdistan, we did not know where to buy food or how to heat our houses; we did not know how to purchase gas canisters for our stove or where to get kebabs. In an area of 800,000 people, we were only two of seven other expatriates. We were alone and we did not know how to do anything.

We relied on our Kurdish friends not only for all of our basic needs but also for friendship during times of loneliness and missing family who were miles away.

It was our Muslim friends in Kurdistan who taught me what it means to live out of abundance rather than scarcity. No matter the time of day or night, if we needed them, our friends were there. I remember being sick with a cold. A few hours later there was a knock on our apartment door from a friend who arrived with juice and medicine. Another time we were curled up in robes, shivering uncontrollably, naïve to how cold a concrete apartment could get. Our friends showed up with two heaters and taught us how to use them. All of these actions were invitations to deep friendships that transcended faith and culture, making our stay in a hard place the gift of a lifetime.

As a Christian, too often I have subconsciously qualified my giving and invitations to others, thinking of what they could give back instead of opening my home and heart unconditionally, without reservation. I have invited others when it fit my schedule and when I was sure I would have enough time, enough space, and enough money. I have offered friendship based on what I would get, not what I could give.

It is through these friends of a different faith that I learned more of what it means to live generously and abundantly, putting aside scarcity for a better way. ■

Far From Home

Exploring Migration Stories in the Bible

