

GOD'S HEART FOR REFUGEES with ROSIE BUTTON



GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
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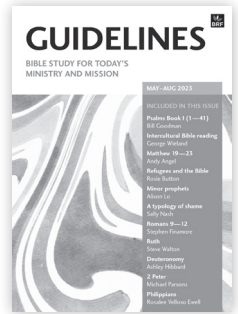
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Periodically, we produce free sampler excerpts from our Bible reading notes to give people a taster of the rich and diverse content they can expect from our contributors and editors, but also to highlight important situations or issues.

Between 19 and 25 June, it is **Refugee Week**, with **World Refugee Day** on Wednesday 20 June. Rosie Button has written a week-long series of biblical reflections based on refugees, God's heart for them and how we, as the body of Christ, can enable the stranger to belong in our communities.

Although this week of reflections has been taken from the May–August 2023 issue of *Guidelines*, we want to encourage you to engage with this material throughout the year. Care and concern for others is a central tenet of the Christian faith and Jesus reminds us that however we treat those around us, including the stranger, is also how we are treating him (Matthew 25:34–46). *Guidelines* is our Bible reading notes aimed at church leaders, students and those who seek to interpret and apply the biblical text with confidence in today's world.

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Refugees and the Bible

Rosie Button

This week of notes has been timed to fall in Refugee Month. World Refugee Day is on 20 June (**UNHCR, see [unhcr.org/uk/world-refugee-day.html](https://www.unhcr.org/uk/world-refugee-day.html)**) and the nearest Sunday is recognised by many churches as Refugee Sunday: a time when refugees are honoured and their plight highlighted. At the time of writing, there are an estimated 89 million refugees across the world (**[unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html](https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html)**) including at the moment many thousands of Ukrainians. The number of people in Britain who have opened their homes to Ukrainian families is heart-warming. It seems it should be a non-issue that Christians would welcome, love and seek to help refugees, yet sometimes this statement is viewed as controversial. The so-called 'refugee crisis' is a complex topic which has sadly, but perhaps inevitably, been politicised. But what does the Bible say about refugees, and does it have anything to say about a Christian response? In this week's Bible readings, we will look at passages which speak into this – both directly and indirectly.

The well-known parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is a powerful lesson in loving our neighbour. Jesus calls us not to be like the priest and the Levite who walked by on the other side, but to emulate the Samaritan, the unlikely hero of the story – an outsider himself – who stopped and helped a person in trouble. The injured man was a stranger to him, and supposedly his political enemy, yet the Samaritan saw him as a neighbour whom he could help and went out of his way to do so. This would be one obvious place to start. Another would be Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:31–46: 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in' (v. 35). Whatever we do to welcome and show love and hospitality to refugees, we do to him. An honour, surely; but is it a nice 'added extra' – or a must of Christian living?

Starting in the Pentateuch with God's instructions to his covenant people to welcome the foreigner in their midst, this week we will look at passages throughout the Bible that show us God's heart for refugees.

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NIV.

1 Love the foreigner as your own

Deuteronomy 24:10–22; 26:1–11

In Deuteronomy, Moses' final words to the Israelites remind them of the law and guidance given by God at Sinai, in preparation for beginning life as a nation in the land of Canaan. Although they are to understand that they are God's unique, special people, who should therefore live differently than the nations around them, this was not supposed to mean they should be exclusive and inhospitable. On the contrary, God had told them in Leviticus 19:34: 'The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.'

Commands about loving orphans, widows and aliens occur 92 times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word translated by the NIV as 'foreigner' is *ger*, which means foreigner, stranger, sojourner, temporary resident, resident alien or immigrant. Refugees in various ways fit these descriptions. God's people are told to treat the *ger* as one of their own, as kin.

In today's verses, Moses illustrates how they are to do this. Deuteronomy 24:12–15 talks about showing simple, decent justice and kindness to people in need and insists that the foreigner is to be treated with this same fairness as a fellow Israelite. Verses 19–21 show that they are to share their excess with those in need: especially foreigners, orphans and widows. In other words, they are to regard the sojourners among them as being the same as their own people in need who had no family to provide for them. While gleaning is not a practice we use today, we can think of modern equivalents; it doesn't mean giving away our rubbish (think, worn-out clothes), but of using only the resources we need (whether money or time) and being generous with the rest.

In 26:11 the Israelites were told to include the foreigners with them in their festival, in essence to treat them as members of their community and households. This was countercultural. But God wanted his people to draw the outsiders in, to love them as their own and give them a home and community to belong to. As motivation, they are reminded that they themselves had been homeless as a people, more than once (vv. 5–9), and God had given them homes and provision: they should be willing to pass on this blessing. This injunction, to demonstrate in these ways the heart of God for wanderers, is surely just as relevant for us today.

2 He led them to a city where they could settle

Psalm 107:1–17, 23–32, 43

This beautiful psalm shows us God's heart for the lost, the scared, the hungry and the homeless. Think for a moment: who are the wandering people in this psalm? Is it remembering when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt? Or is it when the Jews had been scattered in exile from their homeland and God brought them back?

There are four different scenarios in the psalm. It seems most likely it was written after the return from the Babylonian exile, celebrating that, but not only referring to that specific event in the history of the Jewish people. Rather, a range of situations, not necessarily about the whole people of Israel, are described: in verses 2–3 some were rescued from an enemy, being gathered from east, west, north and south; in verse 4 some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no city to settle in; in verses 5 and 10 some were thirsty and hungry or in utter darkness; in verse 23–25 some set out on the sea as merchants but became lost and endangered when a storm arose. In each case, God rescued them, provided for them and brought them to a safe place. Metaphors perhaps for God's response to people who are lost and afraid and in need of a haven.

Significantly, notice that verses 10–14 and verse 17 suggest that the people in these scenarios brought their suffering upon themselves, yet still when they cried out to God, his heart was for them and he saved them. It hardly needs saying, I don't mean this is true of refugees. But notice, God doesn't save the people in this psalm because they deserved it, or because they were innocent sufferers. He rescues them because of his compassion and love; when they cry out to him, he responds. I have heard people sometimes say about refugees, 'they shouldn't have left their own countries,' or 'they knew it would be dangerous to get here', as if their situation was their own fault. Would that be God's response to them? No, this psalm shows us that God's desire for us humans is to have what we call 'home': a safe haven (v. 30). He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things (v. 9). As God's people, Christians are his body here on earth. Do we have this same heart for those who come among us? Are we being his hands and feet to them?

3 The God who sees

Genesis 16:1–14; 21:9–19

Today's verses continue the theme of God's heart for the homeless and rejected, in a surprisingly powerful story full of twists and turns. In many ways, the narrative in the first section you read has so much awfulness in it, describing a messy family situation where nobody behaves well. But Hagar ends up being the victim, fleeing the home (v. 6) having lost the protection of Abram by whom she is pregnant. (Note that Hagar would have had no say in any of this, as a foreign slave.) But the angel of the Lord found Hagar in the desert and asked her, 'Where have you come from, and where are you going?' (v. 8) Even though Hagar's pregnancy was outside of God's plan for Israel, even though she was 'surplus to requirements', even though her pregnancy was the result of Sarai and Abram's impatience and lack of trust in God's promise, even though Hagar herself had been guilty of a bit of pride... God didn't let her flee unnoticed into the desert to die. He found her, approached her and spoke to her: 'Where have you come from, and where are you going?' He is the 'God who sees'. Hagar says, 'You are the God who sees me... I have now seen the One who sees me' (v. 13). I find this awesome in the true sense of the word. God sees us, even when nobody else does. God sees refugees when they are alone, rejected, on the road and fleeing for their lives. Do we?

The second section of the Hagar narrative, in chapter 21, tells how Hagar was once again ejected from the home, this time after Ishmael and Isaac were born. Again she finds herself in the desert and facing death, the death of her son. God did not abandon her this time either: he kept an eye on her, spoke to her again, gave her hope for her and her son's future and provided the water she needed to survive.

This is not to say that God rescues every single refugee. Clearly, he doesn't, just as he doesn't heal every sick person. But this story gives us an incredibly intimate insight into God's heart for a rejected woman and mother in desperate trouble. How did he view her? What did he do? How should we respond?

4 Refuge under God's wings

Ruth 1:1–22, 2:11–12

The book of Ruth tells of two movements of people across borders. It starts with the story of Elimelek's family, who were forced to leave Judah because of famine, becoming what we would today call economic migrants, moving to Moab (Glanville in *Refuge Reimagined* calls them 'survival migrants', p. 60). They settled in and their sons married local girls there. Years later, the second movement happened, when after all three men of the family had died, Naomi returned home with her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. Picture these two brave women arriving in Bethlehem. Naomi is an elderly widow and returnee who has lost everything; as she herself expresses it, 'The Lord has brought me back empty' (v. 21). Ruth is a foreigner who has left behind all her blood relations, familiar home culture and religion. They are starting from scratch, at the bottom of the heap. I imagine this is how many refugees feel.

The gleaning rule mentioned in our Deuteronomy reading from three days ago helps them, as Ruth is allowed to work in the fields of Boaz, who is from Elimelek's clan. Ruth's hard work is noticed. Boaz gives her his protection, but also prays God's blessing on her in 2:12: 'May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.' It is a beautiful image of God's wings extending to cover and draw in an outsider who is in need of a home. As we know, eventually their marriage ensues and Ruth, the impoverished, once-widowed migrant, enters the heart of salvation history, as the great-grandmother of David and an ancestor of Jesus.

Obviously, Ruth's story and its outcome is unique and very special! But the underlying truths are there for us to learn from. Those who seek refuge in God, as Ruth did, will be embraced and blessed by him. Refugees are not outside of God's plans; he has a role in his kingdom for every one of us who believe. Welcoming refugees might start with obedience to Christian principles, but often leads to wonderful bonds of friendship and fellowship where we become family. Let's be encouraged to be God's blessing to refugees, and let's pray that many will become believers – maybe even through our welcome and the friendships we make.

5 God's plan for the nations

Acts 17:16–34

At the beginning of Acts, we read Jesus' well-known commissioning of the disciples: 'You will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth' (1:8). The section for today from chapter 17 is a classic example of Paul carrying this out, in a contextualised way, to the philosophers of Athens. It is a model for us of reaching non-Christians with the gospel, by meeting them on familiar territory (the altar 'to an unknown god' in their case) and going on to explain how our God is the one true creator God and the true fulfilment of all religious belief.

Verses 26 to 28 are especially intriguing for us thinking about refugees, when you picture Paul in the cross-cultural setting he was in: a Jewish travelling preacher in the heart of the cultured Greek philosophical world. First, he says that we are all descended from one man (Adam). Then he states that it is God who planned the times and boundaries of the nations, with the purpose that all peoples in every nation should seek him and somehow come to know him. Then he points out that God is actually not far from any of us, no matter where we are in the world.

This all might raise a few questions, but for the sake of this short reflection, there are some key points that speak into our topic. First, it is a great reminder that although we are from different cultures, possibly dressing, eating and interacting differently from one another, we are all one family and all created by the same God who longs for us all to know him. Second, God is close to refugees: where they came from and on their journeys, and he is with them now, as he is with us.

On the one hand, refugees coming to live in our neighbourhood gives us an opportunity to share the gospel 'with the nations', so to speak, to obey Jesus' commission, so that people may hear the gospel who might otherwise not have in their homeland. And on the other hand, just as often, refugees come to us as Christians who bring a new, fresh and vibrant faith to enrich our churches. We are certainly seeing both these things happening in churches in my hometown and it is very exciting. God has a plan for the nations and he is using the refugee situation to further it: hallelujah!

6 Welcome the stranger

Romans 12:1–16

This chapter spells out how we should live in light of the truths about God just described ('Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!', Romans 11:33–36). In worshipful response, we are to give over our lives in every way, not acting as the world does, but counterculturally, in obedience to God's will.

We are urged to live as one body, each contributing our particular gifts (vv. 4–8). Universal commands follow (vv. 9–16): we are to show one another love, care and support. And we are told to 'practise hospitality'. (This same command is given to Timothy and Titus as essential aspects of their roles as church leaders; compare 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:8.) We can misunderstand this word in British culture, thinking of it as inviting some friends for dinner, or keeping the spare room clean just in case. But the New Testament word is diametrically different, *philoxenia*, meaning 'love of stranger (or foreigner)', with the opposite meaning to xenophobia. Opening our hearts and homes to friends is one thing, but doing so to strangers takes a bolder step of faith, openness and love.

Frequently, when we were missionaries, we were welcomed in and fed generously by people who barely knew us, whether in Uganda where hospitality is an extremely high value and the words 'You are welcome!' are often heard, or on church visits in our home countries. Gratitude, comfort and relief were engendered in me as the recipient: it was such a tangible sign of love and being part of the body of Christ. Matthew Soerens in the foreword to Glanville and Glanville's *Refuge Reimagined* says, 'When we welcome strangers well, they do not remain strangers: we quickly recognise them as neighbours and ultimately embrace them as part of us' (p. ix).

Philoxenia is a perfect picture of welcoming refugees and making them our friends. The instructions in verse 15, to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, is a beautiful picture of the solidarity and oneness which God wants us to have with those we are living alongside. In my hometown, there is a wonderful community 'World Café' (now called 'Unity Community') where local Christians befriend and share meals with refugees and other immigrants in the area: they truly do rejoice and mourn alongside each other, and close friendships are made. It is an inspiring example of hospitality.

Guidelines:

I hope this week of Bible readings has inspired you to engage with the people living among us who need our welcome, hospitality and friendship.

In these kinds of conversations, it is often said as the clinching argument, 'Jesus was a refugee!' But why does that mean we should help refugees? You could spend some time considering that question.

We have also seen this week how God loves refugees, desires us all to have a home and has repeatedly given refugees a place in his plan of salvation. We have thought about Hagar and Ruth, but in the Bible there are many people who are refugees. Many had to flee persecution from governments who wanted to do them harm. The nation of Judah was deported en masse. God provided in different ways in their times of desperate need.

You could look up some of their stories and review how God provided for them in their journeys and worked through the events of their lives. Does reading their stories through the lens of refugees teach you anything more about how God views refugees, and what response God might be asking you to make to the Bible readings this week?

Conclude this week by spending time in prayer for refugees. Spend a few minutes praying for the following categories: those who have fled from war; those who as Christians have fled from religious persecution; those who have lost children or other family members along the way; those who have settled in your home area, that they might find the welcome and haven they need. Also pray for the work of refugee settlement agencies, and pray for governments to have wisdom and compassion in making decisions on behalf of their nations regarding people seeking refuge there.

FURTHER READING

Samuel George and Miriam Adeney (eds.), *Refugee Diaspora: Missions amid the greatest humanitarian crisis of the world* (William Carey Publishers, 2018).

Mark R. Glanville and Luke Glanville, *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical kinship in global politics* (IVP, 2021).

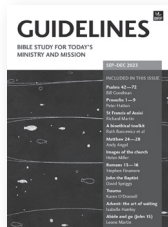
Krish Kandiah, *God is Stranger: Finding God in unexpected places* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2017).

The Centre for Mission Mobilisation, Xplore: 'Welcoming the Nations among us: engaging with your cross-cultural neighbours for the sake of the gospel' (resources@mobilization.org), 2019.

Guidelines

We hope you have found these Bible reflections about God's heart for refugees helpful. For more information on how you can help support refugees in the UK or in your local area please visit the Sanctuary Foundation, founded by Krish Kandiah, at sanctuaryfoundation.org.uk and Welcome Churches at welcomechurches.org.

The upcoming September issue of *Guidelines* brings us a feast of good things as we start the journey towards Advent and Christmas.



We are continuing a number of our current series, with Stephen Finamore rounding off his four-part series on Romans – ‘Riding with Romans’ – which takes us through the final three chapters of the book. Andy Angel also closes out his series on Matthew as we experience once again Jesus’ death, resurrection and commission to his disciples. Bill Goodman, whose series on the Psalms started in the May issue, will continue with Book 2 of the Psalms (42–72), investigating God’s message to the world.

Our Old Testament series for the upcoming issue is on Proverbs, with Peter Hatton showing how much the first nine chapters of Proverbs can teach us, especially in our ‘beautiful but troubled’ world. Meanwhile Leoné Martin, a new contributor, takes a deep dive into the famous John 15 passage in which Jesus gives us the beautiful metaphor of the ‘true vine’.

Helen Miller brings us a fascinating series on images of the church in the New Testament, while Richard Martin explores Franciscan to coincide with the Feast of St Francis at the beginning of October. New writer Karen O’Donnell will also bring us a week of notes on reading the Bible through the lens of trauma. Ruth Bancewicz and her team of scientists, who previously wrote about creation in *Guidelines*, return with a bioethical toolkit to help us think about how biblical principles apply to a Christian understanding of bioethics.

Our Advent series will kick off alongside David Spriggs, as he takes a look at the biblical witness to John the Baptist, whose extraordinary birth preceded Jesus’. Taking us up to Christmas Day, Isabelle Hamley will encourage us to think about Advent and the art of waiting

We hope you will join with us in reading our September–December 2023 issue. May God bless you in your continued reading.

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