

Why We Love the Refugee

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The above image shows a young refugee girl at the Suda refugee camp on the Greek island of Chios. Photograph by Mstyslav Chernov courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

My heart is breaking for the refugees about whom we have been hearing so much lately. Children, women, and men are fleeing from their homes and native lands, leaving possessions and livelihoods and human connections behind, spurred on by the threat of violence and terror. Risking their lives, they cross borders to seek a chance to live. We hear the stories of their treacherous passage across land and sea, and we hear reports that many do not survive. We have seen the photos of children's corpses washed up on the

shore, and I recall the prophetic words of the Nobel laureate Bob Dylan, “How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?”

My heart is breaking, too, because many refugees are not welcomed in the lands to which they are escaping. So often they are rounded up, put in camps, and forgotten. Some refugees are captured at the border and sent back to the death and destruction that awaits them in the land from which they fled. Sons and daughters, grandmothers and uncles, sisters, cousins, nieces and fathers are treated like criminals for no other offense than the act of self-preservation.

It seems pertinent, therefore, to highlight in this moment of crisis an aspect of Jesus’ biography that often fails to receive due recognition: Jesus himself was a refugee. According to the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus was an infant his parents were forced to flee with him from Herod’s kingdom in order to escape Herod’s order to murder every male child in Bethlehem under three years of age, an incident referred to as the Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:13-18). Like every other refugee, Jesus and Joseph and Mary were uprooted from their culture, their religious community, and their networks of support. The holy family was suddenly forced to leave everything behind, and without passports or visas they crossed into Egypt, beyond Herod’s reach. Only because the refugees—Mary, Joseph, and Jesus—found welcome in Egypt did they survive. Had they been turned back at the border, or had they been detained in refugee camps to live out their days in hopelessness, the Sermon on the Mount would never have been preached, the demoniac would never have been released from the legion of demons that enthralled him, Yair’s (Jairus’) daughter would have remained lifeless and cold, the Gospel would not have been proclaimed to Israel, and the hope of salvation would not have been extended to the Gentiles. The tomb would indeed remain empty, for Jesus would not have been laid there to rest, but there would have been no angels to ask, “Why do you seek the living among

the dead?” (Luke 24:5).

Like your native born shall the alien who is among you be, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:34

It may be that Jesus’ experience as a child refugee accounts, to some extent, for his deep solidarity and identification with the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. Jesus knew what it was to be a stranger in a strange land. He knew that the survival of refugees in their host countries depends on the kindness of those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend to the sick, and visit those who are held captive. Jesus’ status as a refugee in Egypt may be reflected in his statement, “Whatever you have done for the least of these, you have done for me” (Matthew 25:40).

...remember that at that time you were separate from the Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise without hope and without God in the world.

Ephesians 2:12

Followers of Jesus do not need to be told to love the refugee—I believe we do that already—but we do need to be reminded why we love them, so that fear and rhetoric do not lead us astray.

When fearmongers shriek that refugees will come into our neighborhoods and into our schools and use up our resources and disrupt our way of life, we will not be frightened by these words, nor will we believe them, because we have already welcomed them into our hearts. Because Jesus the refugee reigns in our hearts we will not listen to slander that scapegoats or villainizes or dehumanizes his brothers and sisters.

Why do we love the refugee? We love the refugees who plead for entry at our borders because, as children of Israel, our fathers and mothers were aliens in Egypt (Leviticus 19:34), or because as Gentiles we too were foreigners and

aliens, with no share in the covenants and promises of God (Ephesians 2:12, 19). We love refugees because the poor and dispossessed, the defenseless and vulnerable, the lost and afraid are especially close to the heart of God. We love refugees because our dear Jesus was a refugee, too.



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