

How to Respond to the Refugee Crisis

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The scope of today's refugee crisis is truly unprecedented, affecting nearly 60 million people. Never before have so many been displaced, put in danger, and forced from their homes. In Syria alone, more than half of 22 million people have either been displaced or killed. More than 4 million have fled to neighboring countries. I share these numbers to remind us of the sheer enormity of this crisis.

Much of our response to the refugee crisis seems to come from a foundation of fear, not faith. Much of it seems to flow from a view of the world that is far more American than biblical, far more concerned with the preservation of our country than the accomplishment of the Great Commission.

As church leaders, we have a responsibility to help people think biblically about this crisis. Perhaps more than that, we have an unprecedented opportunity to respond intentionally for the spread of the gospel among refugees.

Hell on Earth

Last year I spent time at the border between Greece and Macedonia. As my coworkers and I worked in refugee camps, we heard story after story, each of them more harrowing than the last. A Syrian woman who's now the only member of her family after bombs flattened her house. A Yazidi woman who saw seven of her family members beheaded by ISIS.

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I spoke to normal people with normal lives—professors, engineers, doctors—all of them forced to flee across Turkey where they were exploited every step of the way. To cross the Aegean Sea, they paid an exorbitant sum for a spot on a raft. Designed to hold 20 people, the raft

slowed under the weight of 60. The destination wasn't much relief: a camp built for 2,000, jam-packed with more than 15,000 refugees, huddled up in their makeshift tents.

One night I walked around the camp. I heard babies cry and children cough as freezing rain fell on these small tents, now mired in the surrounding mud. It was like walking through a semblance of hell on earth.

In light of such atrocities, what can we do? How does God's Word compel us to respond? Does it say anything? We need to know. We need to know because we need to help the church know how God's grace and his Word compels our response to this situation in the world.

Obviously, there's much one could say, but I want to frame this discussion with five brief truths that lead to five brief exhortations.

Five Biblical Truths

1. Our God reigns sovereignly over all things.

As we look around at all that's going on in the world, we must remember for ourselves and we must remind the church that God is sovereign over it all. Every day, the wind only blows at his bidding. The light of the sun only shines according to his command. Not a speck of dust on the planet exists apart from the sovereignty of our God.

He's sovereign over nature, yet we know he's also sovereign over nations. Our God charts the course of countries. He holds the rulers of the earth in the palm of his hand—and this is really good news. It's good news to know that Assad in Syria is not sovereign over all. It's good news to know that ISIS is not sovereign. It's good news that Vladimir Putin is not sovereign, and neither is Donald Trump.

Our God is sovereign over all, even the suffering in this world.

Did you know that in the Book of Job, God is called "the Almighty" 31 different times? Amid all the mystery of the book, one conclusion is clear: The power of Satan is limited by the prerogative of God. Satan cannot do anything apart from divine permission. Satan is on a leash, and God holds the reins.

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Job makes it clear: God is sovereign over comfort, and God is sovereign over calamity. Remember when he tells his wife, “Shall I receive good from God but not evil?” And the Bible tells us, in all his questions, Job did not sin with his lips.

There are entire theologies out there that have been developed in order to claim that God is simply doing the best he can under the circumstances. Ultimately, these thinkers say, he doesn’t have sovereign control over evil and suffering.

But we know the opposite is true—and we must proclaim that God is always in control, and that Satan is always controlled. God is sovereign; Satan is subordinate. We reject a kind of Star Wars dualism where good and evil forces are equally warring against one another. God does not deal in dualism. This is domination, and it’s all over Scripture.

When Job is afflicted, God is in control. When Joseph is sold into slavery, God is in control. When evil kings act in wretched ways toward Israel, God is in control. When religious leaders and Roman officials sentence Jesus to death and crucify him on a cross, God is in control. When Christians today preach the gospel to the nations and are killed in the process, God is in control. When we get to the end of the Bible and we see the cosmic battle for the souls of men and women throughout history, God is in control. He’s in control on every page of Scripture and on every page of history—including the refugee crisis that currently surrounds us.

2. Our God oversees the movement of all peoples.

This point is simply the outgrowth of the first one, most clearly explained by Paul at Mars Hill. He made one man. From one man, every nation of mankind that live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. ([Acts 17:26–27](#))

This truth is obvious throughout Old Testament as God raises up some nations, while scattering others. At the appointed time, God sent Israel to Egypt. At the appointed time, he brought Israel. He orchestrated the exiles from Jerusalem; years later, he orchestrated their return. Even in the New Testament, we see God using suffering—like the stoning of Stephen—to scatter his church from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and eventually to the ends of the earth. In his goodness, our God turns even the tragedy of forced migration into the triumph of future salvation.

So when we see the migration of peoples for a multiplicity of reasons, we must recognize that every bit is occurring under the governance of God. In Acts 17 Paul says that God is doing it all for a reason, that people might seek him and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Much more could be said on this point, but we must remind ourselves: The Lord will make no mistake. Our God aims to be sought, found, known, and enjoyed by all the peoples of the world, and he oversees their travels to that end. In his goodness, our God turns even the tragedy of forced migration into the triumph of future salvation.

3. Our God generally establishes government for the protection of all people.

We know this from [Romans 13:1-4](#):

There is no authority except from God. Those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities, resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment, for rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Governments exist under God's authority to promote good and restrain evil. In God's design, the primary purpose of government is to protect people. I mention this point since any serious thought about the refugee crisis must take into account the role of government under God.

So, yes, according to God's design, responding to the refugee crisis leads to political discussions. But as followers of Christ, we must maintain biblical foundations in these discussions, for through our elected officials we shape our own laws, and we must hold these officials accountable to do good as we pursue the good ourselves.

But let's take this one step further.

4. Though God generally establishes government for the protection of all people, he specifically commands his church to provide for his people.

Paul writes in [Galatians 6:10](#): "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of the household of faith." He's obviously *not* saying we

shouldn't care for all people. But we can't deny the priority of provision here and elsewhere in Scripture for those who are of the household of faith.

In the same way I uniquely identify with my bride—I hurt when she hurts, I rejoice when she rejoices—Jesus intimately identifies with his bride. While on the road to Damascus, the resurrected Lord Jesus asks Saul a simple question: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*” ([Acts 9:4](#))? When you persecute the church, you're persecuting Christ.

Truths like this are why we have passages on social justice, like Jesus's well-known words from [Matthew 25:34-40](#):

Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

And the righteous will answer to him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, you were thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers, you did it to me.”

We know this is not a general reference to anyone who is hungry or thirsty, a stranger or sick. Jesus is specifically referring to “my brothers” (v. 40)—that is, needy members of the family of Christ, the household of faith. Again, this care doesn't totally exclude those who aren't part of the church. We love all our neighbors, even our enemies, as we love ourselves.

It is altogether right, then, for the church to consider how to care specifically for our brothers and sisters in Christ in the middle of this refugee crisis. Not only is such care for refugees right; it's required. Why? Because of the character of God.

5. Our God seeks, shelters, serves, and showers the refugee with his grace.

Remember the Book of Ruth? Elimelech the Israelite, his wife Naomi, and their two sons are driven from their homeland due to a famine. They migrate to Moab, a foreign land full of forbidden people who originated when Lot had an incestuous relationship with his daughter.

Generations later, Moabite women seduced Israelite men into sexual immorality—and 24,000 Israelites were struck dead. The message was clear: Don't go near Moabite women.

Yet Elimelech and Naomi's sons—Mahlon and Chilion—married Moabite women. Not long after, all three men die, and Naomi is left alone with two Moabite daughters-in-law. She returns to Bethlehem and begs them to stay in Moab. One obliges, but the other, Ruth, insists: "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God."

So a Moabite woman soon finds herself in an Israelite town desperate for food and family. Sound familiar?

Enter Boaz, the lord of the harvest, who sees her working in his field. When he finds out who she is—a Moabite—he seeks her out instead of kicking her out. He goes to her, greets her, shelters her from harm, and promises her safety. Then he does the unthinkable. He stoops to serve her and invites her to his table, where she enjoys a meal of roasted grain. All this leads to a showering of grace as Boaz gives Ruth 30 to 50 pounds of food to take home—at least half a month's wages.

Why do we have a book of the Bible named after a Moabite woman? Because we have a God who cares for the outcasts and the oppressed, the strangers and the refugees.

The stage is now set for the romance of redemption that follows. Boaz eventually takes Ruth as his wife, and they have a child, whose line will one day lead to the quintessential kinsmen redeemer, Jesus Christ.

So why do we have a book of the Bible named after a Moabite woman? Here's at least one of the answers to that question: Because we have a God who wants us to know how much he cares for the outcasts and the oppressed, the strangers and the refugees. In one of the key phrases in the book, Boaz pronounces a blessing on the otherwise forbidden Moabite woman: "A full reward will be given to you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" ([Ruth 2:12](#)).

There is refuge, the book of Ruth shows us, under the wings of God. And we know Boaz isn't merely a model of goodwill. He's a mirror of God. He's the agent God uses to show how he seeks out the oppressed and shelters them under the shadow of his wings; how he serves the outcast at his table and showers the needy with his grace; and ultimately, how he is faithful to care for the forbidden foreigner.

And so, we're compelled to do the same. We're compelled to reflect our Redeemer.

Five Brief Exhortations

So what shall we do? How shall we live in light of a God who reigns sovereignly over all things, who orchestrates the movement of all peoples, who has established government as a general means for the protection of all people, who calls the church to provide for his people, and who seeks, shelters, serves, and showers the refugee with his grace?

1. Let's pray to God earnestly.

What can we do right now, today, from our prayer closets? We can pray. We must pray.

God has ordained prayer as a powerful means by which you and I can participate with him in the accomplishing of his purposes in the world. We remember Moses in Exodus 32. God's people were in dire need, but Moses didn't sit idly by saying, "God is sovereign. He'll do whatever he pleases." No, Moses acted, and his faith in God's sovereignty drove him to his knees, where he begged for God's grace. Moses's pleas for mercy became the means of God's provision for the needy.

Our prayers matter. So let's be active and pray to God earnestly and continually for his mercy to be made known among refugees. Whether they're riding on that raft in the middle of the Aegean Sea or waiting in an American airport or huddled in a tent at the border of Macedonia, let's plead for God's provision, because we know the One who hears our cries will answer according to his compassion.

2. Let's proclaim the gospel urgently.

Do we realize the unprecedented opportunity among those who have lived in countries where there's been little to no gospel access?

Many of these people have already come to us before the recent executive action to restrict the flow of refugees. Many are near gospel-preaching churches and gospel-sharing Christians. I bet there are refugees near your town and you don't even know it. Could it be that God has orchestrated the movement of specific people so that you or your family or your

church might be the means by which these refugees hear the gospel for the first time? Let's spread the gospel urgently both here and abroad.

Many in our midst are disillusioned by Islam—their hearts ache for good news. And we have the greatest news! Just consider the beauty of the gospel, the good news of a God who actually identifies with the refugee, a God who came as a baby boy. Consider the first story we have about Jesus after his birth is his exodus to Egypt, driven to a foreign country by a murderous king. This God is not distant from us—and he's not distant from the experience of the refugee. No, our God is present with us. He's no stranger to suffering, and he's familiar with our pain. He has not left the outcast and oppressed alone in a world of sin and suffering. Instead, he has come to us. He has conquered for us. He has severed the root of suffering—sin itself—and he has defeated death forever.

This is the greatest news in the world, and refugees everywhere need to hear it. We must never forget the vitally important needs of food and water, clothing and shelter. But isn't the gospel the refugee's greatest need? Friends, they won't hear it unless we proclaim it, and doors are open today for us to do just that. Doors are open that have never been open before.

Syrians, Afghans, Somalis, Iranians, Iraqis, Kurds—they're open to listening to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I've sat in tent after tent, and as I've heard their stories, I've been able to bring the greatest story to bear on their own.

One Syrian woman said to a missionary: "I'm tired of being tied to religion that doesn't offer me hope. I want to be a new person." She, her husband, and their friend all placed their faith in Christ that day and were baptized outside the camp. When her sister arrived at the camp, she shared the gospel with her, and her sister was also baptized.

I heard of two Kurdish brothers whose family had been killed by radicals in Iraq, right in front of their eyes. Upon hearing the gospel they simply responded, "We don't want to be Muslim anymore. We want to follow Jesus."

Security in this world should not be prioritized over proclamation of God's Word. As followers of Christ, self is no longer our god. Safety is no longer our ultimate concern.

I can go on with story after story. I hope the point is plain. Unprecedented opportunities abound for the spread of the gospel among people who've never heard it until now.

Now, are there risks in proclaiming the gospel to refugees? Sure there are. But where have we gotten the idea that Christianity is devoid of risk? Security in this world should not be prioritized over proclamation of God's Word. As followers of Christ, self is no longer our god. Safety is no longer our ultimate concern. So let's show this with our lives. Let's go and preach the gospel urgently, knowing others' lives depend on it, and gladly giving our own lives toward that end.

3. Let's act justly.

What does the Lord require of us? The answer isn't that we talk justice, but that we *do* justice, *love* mercy, and *walk* humbly.

May contrite lives before God produce courageous leadership in the church. Let's not forget how Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23: "For you tithe mint and dill and cummin and yet have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel."

To that end, let's not be so consumed with biblical minutiae that we forsake practical ministry. It's easy to stay focused on small things, even small things that are important. I don't use the term "biblical minutiae" as if there's anything unimportant in the Bible. It's all important. But Jesus is clearly saying, "Don't lose sight of justice and mercy and faithfulness. Tithing, according to the law, is important, but so is generous, sacrificial care for people in crisis."

4. Let's love sacrificially.

We all know the story of the Good Samaritan. He took the man in need, cared for him, provided for him, paid for him, and sacrificed for him without question or hesitation.

Jesus is saying love strangers like that. Love even your enemies like that. Lay down your life for them.

5. Let's hope confidently.

A day is coming when sin and suffering will be no more, a day when wars and crises will cease. In this, we place our confident hope.

At the same time, we know that at this moment, every follower of Christ finds him or herself in a foreign land. The witness of the New Testament tells us that we're sojourners and exiles, longing for a better country. We're seeking a homeland, a city that's to come.

We're all migrants here, a collective, multicultural citizenry of an otherworldly kingdom. So we wait and work in our day in anticipation of that day when we will gather with a great multitude from every nation—one that no one can number, one representing every tribe and people and language. And together, no longer as sojourners and exiles, but as sons and daughters, we'll give our God the glory he is due.

Editors' note: This article is adapted from an address David Platt delivered to TGC's Council in May 2016. You can [listen here](#).