



I was a Stranger
For use on World Refugee Sabbath
June 16, 2018

After a long famine, the rains had finally returned to the land of Judea. The crops of barley and wheat were growing again and it was harvest time in the fields around Bethlehem.

A wealthy land owner by the name of Boaz had arrived at his field where his workers were busy harvesting. He noticed a young woman following behind his workers, picking up stalks of barley that they left behind. He thought that he knew almost everyone who lived around Bethlehem, but he had not seen this woman before. He could tell right away that she looked a little different than most of the women of Judea, and realized that she was probably a foreigner.

Boaz went to his foreman and asked about the woman. Who was she? Where did she come from? Who did she belong to? The foreman replied, “This is Ruth. She has come from the land of Moab. She is a Moabite. She is the daughter-in-law of Naomi who has recently returned from living there. She came today and asked if she could glean behind our harvesters. I thought you wouldn’t mind. She is a hard worker and has hardly stopped working all morning!”

Most of us know the wonderful story of Ruth, found in the Old Testament. Ruth was not an Israelite. She was not born in the Kingdom of Judea. She was born in the land of Moab, a small kingdom on the other side of the Dead Sea, in part of what is today the country of Jordan. The Moabites trace their lineage back to Lot and so were somewhat distantly related to the children of Israel. But they were distant enough to be considered foreigners if they ever crossed over the Jordan river to visit Judea. Ruth had married a young man from Judea, who had come to live in Moab with his family. They had moved to Moab because of a long drought in Judea. Recently her husband had died and she was now a widow, living at a time when it was very difficult to be a widow.

It was not like today when a woman can simply go out and get a job to support herself after losing a husband. Women didn’t have careers, hold property, or get full time work. There was no insurance policy to cover her needs. If you did not fall under the protection of another male family member, being a widow during this time was much like becoming a beggar. Widows were often abused or exploited. With no one to protect them, they had little voice.

Having just moved to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, with only a few things she could carry on her back, Ruth had three strikes against her that would make life very difficult for her. She was poor, she was a widow, and she was a foreigner.

When Naomi and Ruth first arrived in Bethlehem, the Bible says they “caused quite a stir.” Two women, traveling alone, with no men in their lives. Widows. One a foreigner. Where would they live? Who would look after them? Who would protect them? Who would feed them?



Fortunately for Naomi and Ruth, there were certain traditions built right into the religion and culture of Judea that would help them survive, traditions that reached back to the time of Moses. They were built right in to the laws and regulations that God gave Moses during the very formation of their nation.

Through Moses, God revealed His character and His desire that His people be like Him.

Let's turn together in our Bibles and notice what God said to the people through Moses. Let's turn to Deuteronomy 10:17-19.

“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. ¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. ¹⁹ And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” (NIV)

One of the ways that God provided for the orphans, widows, and foreigners was through the establishment of the tradition of gleaning.

He instructed the people through Moses:

“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. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 23:22, NIV)

Our Lord God says that He loves the foreigner and that we are to love them, too, through acts of kindness, compassion, and generosity. From the harvest of our prosperity, we are to share with the poor among us.

When the people of Bethlehem looked on Ruth, they may have wondered about her value. When they looked at her they saw a woman with few prospects. They saw a woman who was desperately poor, a widow, a foreigner, a stranger. This woman moving into their community was likely to become a liability, someone who would have to rely on the good will of their village to survive. There may have even been a little prejudice and suspicion. Why was this foreigner moving into our community? Why didn't she just stay with her people? Why didn't she just go home?

But when God looked down on Ruth that day as she gleaned in the fields of Boaz, He didn't see a foreigner. He didn't see a widow, a person of no value. He saw a woman of immeasurable worth! As God looked upon Ruth, He saw the great grandmother of King David, a woman who would be in the very lineage of Christ!

How wonderful it was that Boaz was a man of God, steeped in the traditions of hospitality, love, and kindness to strangers. Taking compassion on her, he made it very easy for Ruth to gather all



the food that she and Naomi would need. He arranged for her protection and eventually fell in love with her and married her, bringing her and Naomi into his family and care.

This story of Ruth, and the kindness that Boaz showed to her, is a demonstration of the kind of love and compassion that God calls every one of us to show in our daily lives. The passage that we read in Deuteronomy is not just some isolated statement buried deep in the laws of Moses. Throughout the entire scripture, both the Old and New testaments, God's people are called to show compassion and kindness to the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the "strangers," or "foreigners".

When the prophet Malachi warns us about some of the issues that will be important in the judgement, he specifically points out that it will be a difficult day for those who have not dealt justly with widows, orphans, and foreigners.

Let's turn to Malachi 3:5.

"So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty." (NIV)

Jesus put the message on a more positive note. In His last sermon Jesus also talked about that great judgement day, when the Son of Man will come in glory with all His angels with Him. All the nations will gather before Him and He will separate people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep on His right, the goats on His left.

Let's turn to Matthew 25:34-36 to hear what Jesus says to the people on His right.

If you have ever wondered what will be the important issues on the great Day of Judgement, this passage in Matthew gives us the answer.

"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'" (NIV)

The people are shocked to hear this. They ask, "**Lord, when did we do these things to you?**" Jesus replies, in verse 40:

"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (NIV)



This morning I would like for us to focus in on “the stranger.” “I was a stranger, and you invited me in.”

Everyone knows about how we can help the poor, how we can feed the hungry, clothe the naked, look after the sick, visit those in prison. What about the stranger? How can we welcome the stranger? In American culture, especially in some of our cities, we have become quite cautious of strangers. We teach our children about “stranger danger.”

Beyond security issues, our lives have become so complex, so busy, we hardly have time to meet our neighbors, let alone welcome strangers. How can we, living in our frantic American culture, return to the Biblical mandate to welcome and care for strangers? Let’s take a few moments today and think about Biblical culture, and see if we can discover what the Bible means when it talks about “the stranger.”

During Bible times, when people travelled, they moved by donkey or camel or on foot. They were not able to go very far each day. As the sun would start to set they would have to stop wherever they were and make camp for the night. This left them extremely vulnerable to being attacked by robbers or wild animals in the dark of the night. The fortunate traveler would find himself passing by a home or tent of a family that believed in a code of hospitality to strangers. The traveler would be welcomed in and offered refreshments, food, and a safe place to sleep for the night.

In Judea, this tradition of offering warm hospitality to the travelling stranger dated back to the time of their ancestral father, Abraham. Ancient Jewish tradition says that Abraham used to open the flaps of all four sides of his tent so travelers passing by would know that he was home and they were welcome. We remember the story in Genesis 18 when Abraham welcomed strangers into his tent, prepared food for them, and never realized he entertained the Lord and angels.

The ancient code of hospitality was not common just among the Jews. It was widespread and is observed even to this day among many nomadic people groups. Through the centuries, it has become a method of survival. The one showing hospitality today may be in need himself sometime soon when he has to travel or flee. In some cultures, the practice of hospitality runs so deep that people will entertain and provide food and protection even to their enemies, treating them as friends and honored guests as long as they are taking refuge in their home.

And it wasn’t just the nomad or travelling merchant that took advantage of this system of desert hospitality. Often the foreigner, the stranger, or “the sojourner” as the Bible sometimes calls them, were fleeing enemies from their homeland. No longer safe to live in their own country, they were forced to flee and take refuge in the safety of another land. As they fled, they came under the protection of a network of people who believed in the tradition of hospitality toward strangers. As they settled in their new land, the laws and traditions of culture guaranteed their protection and care. Their host nation helped the resident aliens survive until they could either return home or establish a new life in their host country.



All these traditions of hospitality have survived in some cultures, even to this day. If you were to visit the homeland of Ruth today, the most common phrase that you would hear during your visit would be, “Welcome in Jordan.” What they are trying to say in their broken English to the stranger is, **“My friend, during your visit here in Jordan, I want you to know that you are welcome!”**

It would be difficult for you to walk very far down a street in Jordan or through a field in the countryside without being invited to step out of the hot sun and enjoy a cup of sweet tea.

If you stayed long enough, you would be invited to eat with the family and stay the night, in genuine gestures of hospitality.

It is probably this deep-rooted tradition of Bedouin hospitality that makes the country of Jordan stand out with a very important distinction in today’s world. Because of wars and conflicts, the world today is facing the largest refugee crisis of all time with over 65 million people displaced from the comfort of their homes.

Of all the countries of the world that are taking in refugees, the small country of Jordan is taking in the most. America is a very multicultural nation with a long history of welcoming the foreigner. The US admitted around 85,000 refugees in the 2016 fiscal year.

That is a lot of people. Some have expressed concern that it may be putting a strain on our resources to host that many people. But Jordan, with its limited resources and space, has taken in more refugees than any other country of the world! The numbers they are hosting has now reached 2.7 million refugees!

The country of Uganda is another example of the code of hospitality to strangers. Their neighbor to the north, South Sudan, is currently embroiled in a civil war that has thrown the nation into utter chaos. Soldiers on both sides of the conflict raid villages to loot and kidnap, killing people indiscriminately as they go.

In fear and frustration people gather up a few belongings that they can carry and make their way to the border with Uganda. They are not only welcomed in, but they are even given a small plot of land where they can build a small mud brick home and plant a small garden. Over the last year, Uganda has given refuge to over one million people.

The modern-day equivalent to the “stranger” mentioned in the Bible, is most likely the refugee. One of the largest life-threatening emergencies we face today in 2017 is the crisis of the refugee. When the bombs fall and the bullets fly, families and whole communities are forced to flee their homes with only what they can carry on their backs. Like Ruth of old, they suddenly find themselves destitute, poor, jobless, homeless, strangers in a foreign land.

One of the ways that we can welcome the stranger is by supporting the work of ADRA. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency is the humanitarian arm of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Over the last thirty years, ADRA has been working to relieve suffering and hunger,



wherever people are in need around the world. We know about the work of ADRA primarily for the emergency response work that they do in times of natural disasters, drought, or extreme poverty.

The work of ADRA also extends into refugee camps, helping people who have fled in war and conflict. Over the last five years, as the refugee crisis has grown worldwide, ADRA has had to expand its work to many camps around the world. In places like Ukraine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, and Uganda, ADRA has been “welcoming the stranger,” providing for their needs as they seek safety and salvation in the hospitality of others.

In fact, many of the refugees have extended to ADRA workers the very hospitality we have been talking about. ADRA workers report that when they have visited with refugees from such places as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, they were moved by the hospitality offered to them by the refugees, who gave up their seats and offered food and drink, even when it was in short supply.

As we think of the plight of the refugee, let us remember the words of Jesus, “I was a stranger, and you invited me in.” Let us remember the story of Ruth. When we look on the refugee let us see them as God sees them, people of immeasurable worth.

Let us be like the Bedouins of Jordan and develop a culture of caring and hospitality.

Let us be like the people of Uganda, who even though they are a developing nation, themselves with many needs, still welcome strangers in need into their home.

Let us be like the refugees themselves, who even when suffering in refugee camps on foreign soil, still extend hospitality to visitors.

June 20 has been set aside by the United Nations as World Refugee Day. Since the crisis is as big as it is, I would like to recommend that we take the whole week to remember the refugee. Let’s keep them in our prayers this week and think of ways that we can offer a hand of hospitality. Let’s join together with ADRA as they reach out to support refugees.

Together, we can fulfil the commission of Christ and the mandate of Scripture to relieve the suffering of people in crisis and in need. One day, on that great day, may we all hear the words of Christ speaking to us, “I was a stranger, and you invited me in.”