



The Middle East Initiative

Pray.
Learn.
Engage.

Displaced

By Naji Umran

Scripture Texts

Hebrews 11 ff. (esp. 11:8-10, 24-27)

8 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. 9 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. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

Matthew 10:9 ff. (esp. vv.37-42)

37 "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

40 "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet



will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. 42 And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

Biblical Contexts and Explanations

Matthew 10 and Hebrews 11 are complementary passages when read together.

Hebrews was written for a historical context in which the people of God were being scattered, where they felt they had lost homes and lands and families and connections. The Jewish diaspora was being targeted by tyrants for extermination, and was walking by faith, not by sight, searching for a promised land, a new home unlike any other, whose origin and designer and protector would be God Himself. The message of Hebrews has Christ at its center, as principal priest, primary representative, and perfect exemplar of living by faith through a life of suffering and unjust persecution.

Matthew's Gospel was also written to people who were feeling like outcasts, and the particular content of chapter 10, was Jesus' guidance for the disciples as they were being sent out from house and home—from the contexts of their loved ones—to the context of having their faith under fire. They would need to live by faith and carry their crosses with Christ, they would have to look for people of peace who would receive them as God's modern-day prophets, so that they should become like a generation of people who would follow the examples of Moses and Abraham.

Similarly, Christ, the son of God might be rightly compared to the displaced of human history—having set aside his own rights and interests, given up his place in God the Father's presence, and made himself nothing, even taking on the very nature of a servant (cf. Isa. 53:3; Phil. 2:8; John 1:9-11). Is it possible that the displaced know Christ's path—as Christ knew theirs? Is it possible that Jesus experienced what it felt like to be the most 'displaced' of all, the most cast out, and most rejected? Was this what he was inviting his disciples into in Matthew 10?

Furthermore, in Hebrews 11, both Abraham and Moses are cited as exemplary people of faith, among those who watch us as we live in our hard times. These two are first and foremost, among those who have shown that they were confident in what they hoped for, and sure of what they had not yet seen. In Genesis, faith was what helped Abraham leave his homeland, and why he was rewarded with blessing. A few chapters later, it was faith that helped him obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac, and why it was credited to him as righteousness. In Moses' case, it was faith which convinced him of his place among God's people instead of Pharaoh's household, by faith, his eyes were opened in the wilderness to move beyond his doubts, and faith was what prepared him for the Passover and made him fit to lead the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

Christ challenges his followers to demonstrate this same kind of faith in Matthew 10—calling for their losses: in family relationship, in place, in privilege, and even in accepting the cross of judgement, unjust suffering, and persecution. Hebrews 11:38 describes the world as being unworthy of people with such faith. A chapter later,

Hebrews reminds us that we must endure such experiences in order to fulfill what it means to be beloved children of God. Yet on the flip side, both Hebrews (13:1-3) and Matthew 10 conclude with invitations to welcome the tired representative of Christ, to remember them, and to offer even the least of these a cup of cold water—and in this be blessed, or possibly even share hospitality with angels.

Relating the Text to Today

These two texts speak to us with great relevance in our day.

So much of the Middle East is in turmoil. So many from the Arab (Muslim and Christian) diaspora are being scattered and are reaching the ends of the earth in unparalleled numbers. Youth in Tunisia, Syria, and Egypt grow tired and weary of their Arab Springs, and desperately look for jobs and welfare, far from their families, with little hope of ever returning. These are the displaced.

Lacking connection, opportunity, safety, and sustenance, we see mass movements happening in Egypt and across the Middle East. Frustration mixes with dejection, and the two crave hope. Young people are dealing with urbanization in their quest for work—entire villages and families move to the fringes of the mega-city and set up camp; the elderly and the poor struggle through their days; street-children and refugees deal with indescribable traumas and shivering nights.

Young and old, alone and in groups, moving from rural to urban, north to south, and nation to nation, millions are being forced to descend to ever more costly levels of faith than they may or may not have been prepared for or imagined. Depending on the state of their fleeing, or the preparedness of their travel, the immigrant and refugee sometimes bring their savings or possessions with them. But, in the face of global economies, and weak Middle Eastern currencies that do not exchange well in trade for Western ones—near-certain joblessness and wide language barriers expand this gulf of disparity to levels of despair.

In every case, whether one leaves one's possessions behind intentionally, or whether one packs as much as he or she can carry—the end result is the same: these displaced live by faith on new soil. And though they do not all know it yet, those who have faith among these droves are like the modern-day Abraham, and the twenty-first century Moses. Some will be a blessing to the nations. Some will lead others to freedom. Some will perform miracles among the masses, and be led by and lead through the power of God's own Holy Spirit.

And if we are not among them, then they are among us. If we are not the Arab refugee or the youthful Egyptian migrant-worker moving, desperate for a job, from one place to another—then we are called to welcome them, to be their hosts, to work to extend their hope, to be ready to share hospitality, to prepare a cup of cold water for them, and to not forget them—ever. We, who have so much more, must work and pray for their sake—for they are moving in Christ's name, and they need to hear the name of Christ, again.

Questions for Study and Discussion

Of course, not every one of the displaced peoples described above has even heard of Jesus or believed in him—but through their newfound freedoms to encounter the gospel, and from the many accounts of visions and dreams about Christ being given directly to the young and the old—in Egypt and the Middle East—doesn't it seem possible that these displaced are not as lost as the news channels suggest? Have we considered that they may, in fact, be on the right track, soon or already ready to follow Jesus and carry his cross?

In contrast to them, many in the West have given up from boredom, or distraction—but these kinds of hopelessness often lack the desperation that draws us down into humility and near unto God. What if we were to welcome them and empathize with them and remember them as Hebrews 13:1-3 and Jesus in Matthew 10:40 tell us to? What might this do to the kind of desperation and hopelessness that we experience? Would this enable us to join them, and join Jesus, and join Abraham and Moses, on that path of walking by faith?

How can we do this more? What intentional steps can we take to unite ourselves with the displaced? What practical steps? And what steps of prayer?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, daily we hear about the needs of displaced people—and you yourself experienced what it was like to grow up on the move, to flee for your life, to have no place to lay your head, to be misunderstood, and all the while, to grow as a follower of Moses and Abraham. We ask that you will anoint those who are following in your footsteps today—gift them with faith, seal them by your Holy Spirit, and enable them to truly become your people, and to shed light in darkness as you did.

But we pray also for our own needs—you challenged us to learn from the outcast, and to take up our cross, and to experience what it means to live by faith, not by sight. Anoint us too—make us become poor for your sake, loosen our grip on wealth, cause us to share what is not ours, and bless us with the opportunity to show hospitality to the angels you bring our way.

Help us Lord Jesus, have mercy on us all, and let us be one—for the sake of your name.

Amen

About the Author

Naji Umran, a Syrian-Canadian, is an ordained pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and has served in churches in the United States and Canada. He currently serves as Leadership Developer for Transformational Networks in Egypt and the Middle East, and also at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo as the coordinator for Fuller Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry in Middle Eastern Contexts. Naji lives and serves beside his wife of 15 years, Anne Zaki, and their four energetic sons, in Cairo, Egypt.