

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

A BIBLE STUDY



This Bible study aims to help church members engage with some of the biblical ideas around society and immigration.

SETTING THE SCENE

Timings: The Bible study will take between 45 minutes to an hour. People often welcome a clear end time as well as a start time.

Bibles: It's useful for everyone to have a copy of the Bible passage, so you can print this for everyone or have some spare Bibles around for anyone who needs one.

Think about hospitality: It's good to make sure there are a variety of comfortable seats available, and consider how well people will be able to hear.

Welcome: Welcome people with drinks and some tasty treats. Introduce everyone if needed.

Discussion: Give people plenty of time to answer the questions before reading the supplied information.

OPENING PRAYER

You may wish to open this time together with a prayer in your preferred style, or you could use this one:

Living God,

We thank you that you welcome every person who approaches you
and you meet with us now.

Help us to listen as you speak to us through Scripture and through each other,
so that we may be people who serve you with all our hearts,
and better keep your commandments in our individual and shared lives.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray,

Amen.

OPTIONAL ICE BREAKER

You could invite each person to talk about a time when they went to a new place or community and were a stranger, and to reflect on how that felt.

READING: DEUTERONOMY 10:12-22

The Essence of the Law

¹² So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. ¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵ yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. ¹⁶ Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. ¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹ He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. ²² Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

THINKING ABOUT STRANGERS

Invite reflection on these verses with the following questions:

- **What has jumped out at you from these verses? What are your initial reactions?**
- **What does the word 'stranger' mean to you?**
- **As you listened to this passage, did you identify yourself with the nation of Israel or the stranger? If so, why?**

In the Old Testament there are different words that translate stranger, but the word that means a 'resident alien' or immigrant, *gēr*, appears almost 50 times in the first five books of the Bible. This suggests that how immigrants were treated was clearly a key concern as the Israelite nation discovered their call to be the people of God. The command to welcome the stranger is repeated 37 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, which suggests it was something of which they needed reminding.

The passage tells us that God loves the stranger and provides for them practically. He does not discriminate, he is like the perfect judge as he cannot be bribed and he executes justice for orphans and widows, not just deciding in the favour of the wealthy and powerful, and loves the strangers, even providing them with food and clothing.

OUR OWN STRANGENESS

- If God already loves the resident aliens and provides for them, what is the role of the people of God in this?
- Why are strangers nonetheless in need and feeling unloved?

The Israelites are told that they must also love the stranger because they too were strangers in the land of Egypt. This is particularly noteworthy if we think of the place of this story in the wider narrative of Deuteronomy. Moses is reminding them of the law before they enter their new territory, which means that Israel are a nation who do not yet occupy a land. However, this command to welcome also comes with later caveats, for example, Deuteronomy 7 contains the warning not to marry into the neighbouring tribes but to keep themselves separate.

THE CALLING OF THE NATION

- How does the passage reflect on the tension between national interests and welcoming strangers?

This passage asks 'what has God chosen the Israelite nation for'? They are reminded of the *shema*, the essential declaration for the Israelite people that God is one, and the people of Israel should love the Lord their God with all their hearts, minds, soul and strength. Yet where most Ancient Near Eastern texts which exalt national gods are followed by the exaltation of their human kings, this suggests God's love is for the weak and the vulnerable and that the Israelites are to share in this traditionally royal responsibility.

This passage shows the surprise that the Israelite nation has alone been chosen 'out of all the nations', when they are a small nation and not politically strong. This chosenness of God's heart for them then seems to have implications on their heart for others. They are also told that fearing and responding to God in the ways set out will enable them to thrive; these practices are 'for your own wellbeing'.

The middle verses of this passage use pattern to make an interesting contrast between the specialness of God and the valuing of vulnerable people. Verses 14-16 start with the hymn-like **exaltation of God** (heaven and the heavens and the earth with all that is in it belong to God), then they talk about **God's character and action** (he sets his heart with love on the Israelites), and then they finish with the command for **how to respond** (circumcise your heart and do not be stubborn). The next few verses echo this same structure of firstly exalting God, then talking about his character as being impartial and taking no bribe, who executes justice for the widow and orphan and loves the resident alien. This then leads to the resulting command to love the stranger. These structural echo is designed to show the links between being the people of God and loving and taking care of people who are not in the people of God.

In this passage, fearing God and loving the stranger seem to be connected as two sides of the same coin.

- **Is our call as the people of God today the same as it was for the Israelites? What are the similarities and differences?**
- **Has this passage made you think differently about God?**

HOSPITALITY AND HOSTILITY

- **In what ways might our society today be unwelcoming to strangers?**

The 'hostile environment' is a web of UK government policies designed to make life so difficult for immigrants who cannot prove they have the right to live in the UK that they will choose to leave. It deliberately prevents anyone who cannot provide the right documentation – for whatever reason – from getting work, renting a home or accessing the kinds of services we all need to live. This is leading to destitution, racial discrimination and a culture of distrust and suspicion.

- **How do the policies of the hostile environment contrast with the instructions in Deuteronomy?**
- **How could welcoming 'resident aliens' be something beneficial to society today?**
- **What would that look like? How could we help to make that happen?**

If your group would like to explore what we can do to challenge the hostile environment, additional information is provided on page 5. You can also visit the Joint Public Issues Team website for practical ideas and resources on welcoming refugees and asylum seekers into your church and community.

CLOSING PRAYER

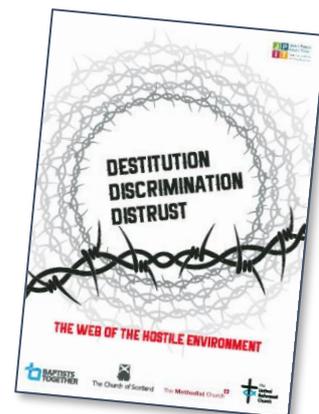
You could use your own prayer or you could use this one:

Loving God, we praise you that all of the earth is yours and we thank you for the privilege of knowing you and being your people. We pray that as we discover your heart of love, we would become more like you in our hearts and in our actions, caring for those who are vulnerable and welcoming the stranger. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

FURTHER INFORMATION: DISMANTLING THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

The Baptist Union, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church have joined forces to call for the dismantling of the hostile environment. The Joint Public Issues Team report *Destitution, Discrimination and Distrust: the web of the hostile environment* sets out how aspects of the policies run counter to Christian teaching.

Download a copy from www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/endhostility or order one by calling 020 7916 8632.



The report invites churches, church groups and individuals actively to challenge the hostile environment in three ways:

1. Contact your MP

Write to your MP explaining why you think the policies of the hostile environment must be reviewed and dismantled. Visit www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/endhostility for a template letter.

2. Share your stories

It may be that you have been affected by the hostile environment. Or perhaps your church is involved in supporting people through offering help to asylum seekers or recent migrants. Maybe you can share ideas about building a more hospitable environment.

Tell your story. We'd love to hear from you. We will safeguard the confidentiality of any sensitive information. You can email us at church.society@urc.org.uk and get involved in the conversation online using the hashtag **#EndHostility**

3. Challenging ourselves

Take this opportunity to engage in conversations within your church or your community about the hostile environment. What is your experience of hostility and hospitality? How do we balance immigration control and welcoming the stranger? How does language affect how we think? Do you feel drawn to repent personally or corporately for being complicit in a culture of suspicion or distrust in our society? How can we work to build a hospitable society?

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