

A God Who Hears and Sees - Seeking Refuge

This is a true life experience by Tatiana Bondarenko

I am from Odessa, Ukraine. I moved to Edinburgh in May 2022 due to the war in my country. My son and daughter-in-law remained in Ukraine, as well as some of my friends. In Edinburgh, God gave me a wonderful family that took me in, as well as a wonderful church called Bellevue Chapel! I am very grateful to the Lord for His support and hope!

Imagine a desert. Wherever you look, all you can see is sand everywhere. There are no trees or any other vegetation, except for dry bushes. The sun burns everything that tries to grow, and you have a long road ahead through this parched land. There is nothing suitable to shelter you from the heat, there is not a single source of water along the road, only what you have taken with you. You are alone; it's just you and a boy – the son you are responsible for. There is not a single other person around who could offer you help. You wander in a direction unknown to you, no destination, not knowing where to turn, just wandering, hoping for safety. The situation is dire. What could be worse than this?

Many Ukrainians have found themselves in this situation during the war. You're running from danger, but you don't know where to run to. In your hands is a single suitcase, which now holds all your life's belongings. And sometimes you don't even have a suitcase – I did not have time to collect it. In your hands are the hands of your children. Who will help? Where to run to? Where can you expect help to come from? Everything around is new and unfamiliar. There are people around, but it is as if you are in a desert. Only you and your problems and no-one who could help!

God met Hagar twice in the desert in a desperate situation of displacement. God truly sees and understands her, and her worries and pain. God saves and restores her, and promises a hopeful future. This is the God who sees you too.

Tatiana writes, This is my God, the God in whom I believe! The God who knows all my difficulties and experiences, who does not leave me alone, but empathises and helps me! This is the God who gives hope, and gives life! In the most difficult moments of my life, my Lord supported me and gave me hope! At the beginning of the war, I came across one expression that encouraged me: "When I die, I will be with the Lord! If I live, the Lord will be with me. Live or die, I belong to the Lord!"

And she invites us to call the Lord into our lives! And then you can say, "You are the God who sees me! You are the God who saves me!"

This morning the Church of Scotland have encouraged congregations to highlight Refugee Sunday.

There are more refugees now than ever in history, a staggering 110 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide¹, around half of whom are women and girls².

Our reading today takes us to the story of Hagar, an Egyptian woman, who was brought up as a slave to Sarai, the wife of Abraham.

Hagar had no rights, and was controlled by her mistress Sarai. Sarai was unable to give child birth and so she arranged for her husband Abraham to take Hagar as a concubine and have intercourse with her slave Hagar, so that she might have a child.

Hagar became pregnant, and life suddenly became complex for them all. Sarai felt that Hagar was taunting her through being pregnant and as we can imagine jealousies surfaced.

Hagar was treated so cruelly by Sarai, that she ran away to the desert. They're all alone, this pregnant young vulnerable mother, met with an angel of the Lord who said to her, "where have you come from and where are you going?"

On Refugee Sunday let us pause and think about where refugees are coming from, and where are they running to today?

- An estimated 6.8 million refugees have fled the conflict in Syria. Of those, around 3.7 million are hosted in Turkey¹.
- The second-largest refugee population in the world is from Ukraine at 5.7 million.
- Nearly 5.7 million refugees from Afghanistan are now hosted in more than 70 countries around the world, but 95% are in just two countries - Iran and Pakistan⁵.
- At least 2 million people in South Sudan became internally displaced persons as a result of the South Sudanese Civil War, which started in 2013.
- 38% of refugees are hosted in just five countries - Turkey, Iran, Colombia, Germany, and Pakistan

- Low-income and middle-income countries, rather than wealthy nations, continue to shoulder the burden of hosting displaced people.

Returning to Hagar, she replied to the angel "I am running away from my mistress".

At times in life, we all have something which we want to run away from. So hard was Hagar's life that she had no one to run to; as a slave she was powerless, as a pregnant woman, she was alone; so running towards the desert, was a sign of her literally giving up on life. It was consigning herself to death. What hope for life does a young pregnant mum have in a desert with no water?

We all have a desert experience at some point in life! No one to turn to, unloved, in need of help.

It is in the desert, at her lowest point, in deepest distress, breaking her heart, that the slave woman meets with God; the angel of God tells her to go back to Sarai, and be her slave, and that throughout it all Hagar would be blessed with a child; whom she should call Ishmael because the Lord has heard of her distress. Ishmael means the Lord hears.

Isn't that beautiful. Every time Sarai would call on Ishmael, she would be reminded of this desert experience and that God heard her cries of distress and answered her. Ishmael, the God who hears.

That's an encouraging thought for us also today that God hears our cries of distress. Hopefully you will never be a refugee, but there are many ways that we can feel isolated, lost, hurting, detached in this world. If we are ever there, remember this story and remember that God hears our cries of distress in the desert places of our lives.

But more than that God speaks into Hagar's situation. She was feeling hopeless; she no doubt felt used and abused by Abraham and Sarai. But God reminds her of his plan; a plan that is much bigger than the situation that Hagar finds herself in; God's plan is that her son Ishmael will be the catalyst for a new nation; God said, "I will give you so many descendants that no one will be able to count them."

The Arab nation believes that it is from Ishmael that they have their beginning.

In response Sarai calls the Lord, “the one who sees”. In this encounter between Hagar and God, we have two attributes given to God, a God hears and a God sees!

Scripture tells us that God has a real heart for the refugee.

In the Old Testament, God's people are commanded: 'Don't mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God' (Leviticus 19.33-34).

Our Saviour Jesus Christ was born a refugee, born in poverty, in a stable to a young mum. God knows the plight better than anyone of the refugee.

The 2023 theme of world refugee day was “hope away from home” and the theme of World Refugee Week is “compassion”.

Hope away from home is exactly what the slaver Hagar meets with.

As she runs away from her mistress, she discovers “hope away from home” in the form of an angel of God meeting with her.

Hagar the slave woman symbolises the crisis that we have today in our world for there are countless Hagars running from situations, that are out with their control – born into poverty – born into slavery – born as an orphan – born into war – exploited in so many ways.

On Tuesday evening, as Presbytery convenor of World Mission, I had the privilege of welcoming to Presbytery, Rachel Clark, who is the manager of St Rollox Outreach centre at Sighthill, literally down the road from us.

She spoke of the work, of her team, welcoming to the centre mothers and children from many diverse countries and of the wonderful work that they do to support them and give them refuge.

Yes, Hagar's story is the story of many mums in Glasgow today.

Last week, I highlighted one of the five marks of mission that our National Church and Cadder Parish church has adopted is caring for creation as a mark of mission; this week another vital mark of mission is Transform – which is about serving society through compassion and justice. Jesus said “blessed are those who thirst for righteousness or justice”. The mark of mission of a healthy church has a real concern for justice and cares for those on the margins of life.

Our own mission statement says, "In 5 years' time, Cadder will be a church which is known for being willing to pioneer things which enable change in society. By its actions it will help shape that piece of the jigsaw which is the church's part in social justice and reform."

There are many ways that we can respond, supporting charities that directly support Refugees like Christian Aid or if we want to get involved directly, St Rollox are appealing for people to come and volunteer and support their work.

It is a work that will bless you and enrich your life as you support and help those who have been rejected.

Amen.

Recent prayers from Refugees

I will keep trusting and believing in God
and I will keep holding on to His promises
knowing that it shall be well with my soul.

I refuse to be discouraged.

I receive spiritual encouragement to go forward.

Lord, everywhere I go, I will not be alone
because You are always with me.

I declare I am courageous,
no matter what I see or hear,

I will not give up, in Jesus' name.

Lord, remind us of the precious and constant thoughts You have for us,
entrusting our identity and our self-confidence in You
rather than in ourselves, our circumstances, or the culture that we live in.
Thank You for Your word and unending love for us.

In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Father God, help us to value life as much as You do,
and to be good stewards
of not only the bodies You have crafted for us,
but the short time here on earth You have given us
to do Your will and glorify You.

Lord Jesus, You break down the walls that divide us;
walls of hostility that blind us to one another.
You died that we may be one.
Thank You for Your great and merciful love,
we trust You.

May God bless us with encounters
that turn strangers into neighbours,
that turn fear into friendships,
that turn hatred into hospitality,
that turn pain into peace. Amen