

Protector of the Foreigner

Good morning everyone! It's great to see all of you. If I haven't had the chance to meet you yet, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor in training here. If you've got a bible, go ahead and turn to Ephesians chapter 2, we'll land there eventually. If you're just hopping in with us, we are nearing the end of our series leading up to Christmas. We've spent the last several weeks, and will continue today and next week, talking about how the Gospel is good news for all people. And specifically a few different groups of people for whom the Gospel seems to be *particularly* good news according to scripture. And I don't know if we've actually talked specifically about it, so just so everyone is on the same page, we actually took the language "Good News for All People" from a passage in Luke 2. It's the chunk of verses that are usually used in telling what we call the Christmas story. In verses 10 and 11, an angel appears to some shepherds and gives an announcement to them saying:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you **good news** that will cause great joy for **all people**. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

Good news that will cause *joy* for all people. Joy to the widow. Joy to the poor. Joy to the orphan. Joy to any and all because of the hope that Jesus brings. Joy to so many who time and time and again are denied dignity and respect and love. That is incredibly good news. And like I said, we're continuing to look at why it is such good news to several different groups of people. Today we are talking all about how God is the protector of the foreigner. Let's take a quick look through parts of the bible and see what it has to say about this. I'm going to rattle off a few of these, but these are just some that I pulled really quickly. There's plenty more I didn't have time to include, and some of these may sound familiar from other weeks, but I still think they're worth mentioning.

Leviticus 19:33-34: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

Exodus 22:21: "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt."

Exodus 23:9: "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt."

Deuteronomy 10:19: “And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.”

Matthew 25:35: “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”

Zechariah 7:10: “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.”

Like I said, this list is by no means exhaustive, but do you notice the trend? We’re five weeks in and have been covering many of these passages each week, so I’m assuming we saw some of these coming. In the bible, sometimes instead of “foreigner” we see the word “stranger” or “sojourner” or “outsider” or “refugee,” but basically it’s all summed up as a person who was from a different ethnic or linguistic group. Just like we’ve mentioned with all the weeks in this series, in general foreigners were a particularly vulnerable group of people at the time. In societies where wealth and status was determined by the things you owned, like property, foreigners who moved somewhere likely did not have access to those things. Also, in a time where you generally stayed near where you were born for most of your life, to be a foreigner often meant something pretty dramatic probably happened to displace you. That could be war or famine or some other disaster that forced you out of your home. So essentially you would be without social, financial, or physical *protection* that the majority of people around you had wherever you were. Not to mention any of the challenges you would inherently face by just being unfamiliar with a particular place and system of life.

Throughout all recorded history though, not just a couple thousand years in the past, foreigners or immigrants have always been particularly vulnerable. This isn’t just a historical phenomenon and it’s also not just a present-day situation. And while this whole series we’ve been working through has been great and something I’ve really enjoyed, this week stands out to me personally in particular. Now you may be wondering why *I*, a twenty-something white guy who lives in east Tennessee, might be particularly invested in this week. So I’d love to give a little background on parts of my story to try to give a little more perspective for everyone. And we don’t do this very often, but if you guys don’t mind, I’m going to include a few photos to help out. **So this is me and my family on a little excursion. And this isn’t some fun mission trip, this was more or less part of our backyard.** For those who don’t know, I grew up on the other side of the world in a place called Kathmandu, Nepal. If you’re foggy on your geography and think that sounds like a made up place, don’t worry. Nepal is a small little country sandwiched right between India and China. It’s roughly the size and shape of Tennessee, but it has 8 of the world’s

10 tallest mountains. And that's where I grew up and lived until I was in 10th grade. And I want to quickly go through a few other photos just to help give everyone a little insight into what life looked like.

PHOTOS

Growing up in Nepal, I definitely stood out at times. For reference, **this is me with one of our close family friends and partners. In general, this is how I compared to most people around me.** Also, when I was younger, I had really curly and really bright hair, two things pretty much no one else in the country had, so I constantly had people come up and try to touch and play with my hair and all that. I looked different, spoke a different language, and checked most of the boxes for "different" than most people around me. And I had plenty of experiences that were difficult that have stuck in my mind. For example, I remember times riding my bike to school and getting stopped by military trucks full of armed soldiers who were searching people and vehicles because of political unrest. A lot of people here in the States have fire drills and tornado drills at school, we had bomb drills, and there were multiple times school had to be evacuated because of bomb threats, and we all had to walk home and were told to just make sure we avoided large crowds and suspicious packages on the way home. I remember one time riding in the car with my family and having to quickly turn around and drive off because we turned a corner and were face to face with a rioting crowd throwing bricks and people were surrounding the car and banging on the windows. Parts of my life felt surprisingly close to an action movie like Bourne or James Bond, just with fewer cool cinematic moments and more stuff to talk about in counseling now. I remember how we had a few different routes we could use to go to and from school because we needed to make sure we didn't have the same routines every day in case we were being watched or monitored because of what my parents were doing as foreign Christians. And all of that has lasting effects. Basically my whole family has this thing where we can't have our back to the door in a restaurant or public place. And we do it because we feel like we always need to see who might be coming in and always need a plan to get out just in case something goes down. Basically if and when a place becomes unsafe, we want to be the first to know and have a plan. Large loud crowds still make me incredibly nervous. I went to a UT game recently and my watch said my heartrate didn't get below about 120 the entire time because I was so stressed out. Yeah, so that was fun. "Go Vols!"

So in a lot of ways, the bulk of my childhood experience was that of being a foreigner. But interestingly, that isn't my main point in why this week in particular weighs on my heart. If we're being honest, while life itself was difficult at times in Nepal, we were still ultimately okay. Were there days and weeks we went without access to gasoline or electricity? Sure, but we had a close, intimate community of people with us who cared

about and knew us deeply and we were connected with resources to help us out. Were there times of political and social unrest? Definitely. Were there weeks we had to ration filtered water during dry seasons? There were, but we had people we could communicate with and come back to here in America if we really needed to. **It was certainly difficult at times, but as odd as it might sound to a lot of people in this room, that was just normal life for me growing up. For a large portion of my life, I didn't know anything different, so I didn't feel all that out of place.** People often ask questions like, "what was it like growing up in Nepal?" And in my head I think, "it was just growing up." It's like me asking people here, "what was it like being 9?" It was all just a part of life.

The time in my life when I felt most like a foreigner was not being an American who lived in Nepal. It was really when I, a person who *grew up in Nepal*, moved to *America*. I've done a lot of difficult things in my life, but the hardest thing I've ever done was come here. Like I said, I moved here when I was in 10th grade, the easiest time in anyone's life that includes the least amount of social pressure and change. And I had this idea in my head that I would be welcomed with open arms at my new private Christian school. I was going to be surrounded by people who looked like me and talked like me and I would regale the masses with my tales of grandeur and adventure. I was super pumped to go to an American highschool like I had seen in all those movies like "High School Musical" and "Bring It On." Oh boy was I wrong. I was like an outcast. The only movie I really felt like I was entering into was "Mean Girls." Except I didn't figure out a way to work my way to the top of the social ladder. I would also get asked some of the strangest questions. In response to telling someone I grew up in Nepal, I have unironically been asked "why are you white?" I've also been asked how I learned to speak English, did I ride tigers to school, or if I had seen *grass* before I came to America. But I didn't have the same experiences as other people around me. I didn't get their pop-culture references. I didn't care about the same things. And people made a point to let me know just how different I was. Not by giving me the warm welcome I was expecting, but by ostracizing me. By mocking what I didn't know, by highlighting how weird they thought I was because I talked about different things or liked different foods from them, I'd never done the things they had done together, I didn't like the "right" things or dress the "right" way. Even though we spoke the same language, I still didn't talk "right." And some people would say horrible things about me and to me, just for the sake of it. Not because I did something *to them*, but just because they thought I was different. Just because it made them laugh to emphasize all the ways they felt like I was worse than them. So instead of *finally* feeling like I fit in and belonged, it ended up being the time in my life when I felt the most out of place. The most estranged. The most like a foreigner even though everybody around me looked like me and spoke my language. And this went on for the rest of high school. I was able to get to the point where I could get along with a couple people, but I went through those years without any close friends at my school. And I was

so angry because I didn't know why people didn't want to be my friend except for the fact that I just had different experiences. I thought I was doing everything right, everything I needed to do to be accepted. But I felt so alone. And some of you may be able to relate to that feeling of walking into a building every day that was full of people and just feeling completely isolated. It hurts.

I don't say any of these things to gain pity or attribute blame to people, I just want you to have at least a glimpse of understanding that if it was like that for me as a white Christian kid in a white Christian context, how much more of an outsider do you think people could feel in America right now when they look different and sound different and don't have any sense of security around them? Can you imagine how confusing it would be walking into a Walmart when all you know is the local corner store in your village? Think about how overwhelming the DMV is for *anyone*, let alone someone who doesn't understand what the forms even say. And imagine all of the stressors of life when you're confused and lonely and isolated and oftentimes displaced and add on top of that some people being angry at you just for looking or sounding different than them. I could tell you stories for hours about people I know who have moved here as a foreigner and the struggles they've faced. We have a family friend who was a teacher who moved to Virginia as a refugee with multiple masters degrees including in Math that took him years to achieve, and he was told due to some bureaucratic policies, none of those would be recognized and he would be lucky to work at a fast food place. I also know of stories where this has happened to medical doctors. Can you imagine spending that many years of your life working to become a doctor and then being forced to move to another country and people saying, "just kidding, we don't count that. You're not a doctor anymore, here's a job no one else wants that might barely keep the lights on." Can you imagine how disorienting and crushing that would be? So when we say that God is a *protector* of the foreigner, are you starting to see more of why that would be considered such good news? We can debate legislation and policy and political preferences all day long, but I am confident in saying **there is no room for a follower of Jesus to close their heart towards or knowingly make life harder for a foreigner**. And if you look at some of the passages we mentioned earlier and more throughout the bible, and the Old Testament specifically, you will see a common thread. The *reason* that goes with the command to love or serve or protect foreigners comes back to what? The authors say, "because *you* were once foreigners in Egypt." These commands were given and the hearers would have been overwhelmingly familiar with what it felt like to be a foreigner. Two of the commands we just read are from Exodus and are literally just a few pages after the Israelites fled from Egypt. That's like saying to a group of us, "hey, you should care about people who feel isolated because you remember what it felt like when lockdown started." Some people immediately tensed up with that. Because we *remember* what it feels like. We can relate deeply to that feeling. And that's what the author is

counting on in those Old Testament passages to a *much* bigger degree because of the Israelites situation that was so terrible and lasted for so long.

You guys heard my story, but I'm telling you there are thousands of people experiencing worse versions of what I experienced right now, in the city of Knoxville. They're being stared at, poked fun of, sometimes even viewed with suspicion and antagonism by others. **Or at the bare minimum, are dealing with the disorientation and confusion of living in a place that is foreign and unfamiliar to them. Where it isn't easy to just knock out the daily tasks they need to knock out for their survival. They may not have transportation, or internet, or resources—or any number of other things.**

But we're told in the bible that God's heart goes out to those types of people. He desires to care for them, provide for them, protect them. And as we've been highlighting this whole series, he desires to do an awful lot of that through his people.

Now, some people here may have experienced a form of that isolation because of families immigrating or moving and in general, this may be an easy concept to understand. But maybe some of you are thinking, “well I’ve never even *been* to Egypt, let alone been forced to live there as a foreigner.” This may be a hard perspective to deeply relate to. But the bible doesn’t *only* reference the Israelites in Egypt as a reminder for why we should care about this. It actually says that *any* of us who follow Jesus can identify with the experience of being a foreigner. I said at the beginning we’d end up here, so go ahead and take a look with me at Ephesians 2 starting in verse 11:

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles (which is just anyone who isn’t Jewish or part of “God’s chosen people” in the Old Testament) **by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at *that time you were separate from Christ, (you were) excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners (there’s our word) to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*”**

So right off the bat the author gives a *reminder* to their readers. They say, “you all know God has made a covenant with Israel, and a lot of you aren’t Israelites.” He says they were called the “uncircumcised,” which had a lot of religious significance at the time. And just a reminder if you have any questions about circumcision, you can email us at jeff@citychurchknox.com. But the author specifically says they were “separate from Christ; excluded from *citizenship* in Israel and [what does he say they are?] *foreigners* to the covenants of the promise, **without hope and without God** in the world.” That’s an

incredibly vulnerable place to be. Without hope and without God. And that's not unique to the audience at the time. That's all of us before entering into a relationship with Jesus. I feel like this is where a lot of people, especially here in the South, fall into a really dangerous trap. See, here in the Bible Belt, "cultural Christianity" is incredibly prevalent. Sometimes when people talk about their life, I hear people say things like, "I grew up in a Christian home, and I've just always been a Christian." Or, "I've always been involved in church so I've always had a relationship with Jesus." I want to reiterate what Scripture makes incredibly clear, and that's that we are *all* foreigners to God because of our sin. We are *all* outsiders that had to be welcomed in. And that doesn't just happen because of what your parents believe. That doesn't just happen by default because you've always been involved in a church environment. For us to be welcomed in, Jesus had to *do something on our behalf*. The reality is we could not be more different from God because of our sin. And, it was precisely *because of* our sin that we were alienated and foreigners to God. So the only way for us to be brought inside is for God to do something about our sin. For us to have been intentionally pursued and invited in because of the blood of Jesus. And with that, everything changes. Just like the author of Ephesians said, we were without hope, separate from Christ, outsiders, *foreigners* to God. But *because of* Jesus leaving the comfort of Heaven and actively laying down his life and shedding his very blood, we have been welcomed in. What a beautiful reality.

The point the Scriptures make is that any one of us that claims to know Jesus at one point *was* a foreigner. And the fact that we are a part of God's family, we owe *entirely* to what someone else (namely Jesus) did to welcome us in. So this all starts not with seeing ourselves as some great rescuer and protector of foreigners, but by seeing ourselves **as** the foreigners that God welcomed in. That's a lasting motivation to welcome others in as well.

So I talked a little about my story and the reality of some of the things I faced when I moved to America, and fortunately everything didn't have to stay that way. After I had been here for a little over a year, I got involved at a church that had a pretty large youth group. And I vividly remember the first day I walked into the room. There were probably about 100 people in the room, but I loosely knew one person. He was also a missionary kid that I had met a few times because our parents worked for the same organization, but he had moved to America a few years before me. And he knew exactly what it was like to be an outsider. To be different in a really similar way to what I was experiencing. And so he came straight to me and invited me to sit with him and introduced me to some of *his* friends. And he made it a priority to make me feel welcome and to make me feel cared for. And then we hung out pretty much every single day for the next 5 years. And I think some people here know Trevor Davis (shout out because he said I could) because he lives here now and is a part of City Church. That initiative that he took and his

willingness to look at me and say “I know how it feels to be an outsider” and the way he welcomed me legitimately helped me out of one of the darkest and most difficult times in my life. And a big part of the reason Trevor thought to do that, and was willing to do that, was that he had gone through the same experience. He knew what it felt like to not feel welcomed, to not feel at home. So when he saw another kid going through that same thing—he knew exactly what needed to happen.

That's what the gospel should instill in each and every one of us. Because we know the experience, we should be the first to welcome people in. Those of us who have experienced what it means to have been an outsider and be welcomed into the family by Jesus have experienced a change unlike any other. Experiencing the welcoming nature of relationship with Jesus *motivates us* to extend that same caring and welcoming nature. Listen, walking at a distance and observing Christianity from the outside doesn't motivate action because you haven't fully experienced it. But when we remember that without God reaching out and welcoming the foreigner, we wouldn't have the opportunity to be part of God's family, we can start to have our hearts shaped and molded to care for others in the same way. And the goal is that individually and as a church our hearts would continue to be changed to be more like the heart of God.

So as with all the weeks from this series, this can have multiple implications for our lives as we leave here today. But one specific way to get involved going forward is through one of the organizations we are partnering with called Bridge Refugee Services. Bridge is a great local organization whose mission is to help families rebuild their lives after arriving in Knoxville from their home they had to leave due to suffering persecution and displacement. In the past 10 years, they've been able to help resettle over 2,400 refugees from Africa, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, Central and South America, and the Middle East. Last year alone, they were able to help 215 families here in Knoxville. And all the bedding items we asked you guys to bring will be going to the families they help serve. One thing they do is help families find housing here in Knoxville, and those places need to be furnished in some way. Most of these families are arriving here with next to nothing and literally are trying to rebuild from scratch. And working with Bridge is one great step to get involved in loving and serving those around us. And the reason we do this is *because* we understand it as a response to what Jesus did for us. Jesus is a protector of the foreigner.

Let's pray.