



Living the Gospel Through the Feet of a Refugee: Sharing Abraham's Hope in Kindness and Humility

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The hope and humility of the gospel took on new meaning for me one night in a Central European free-clinic for refugees. With a Syrian refugee translator, we treated fellow sons and daughters of Abraham from Syria, Iraq, and additional refugees from throughout areas of Asia. Many years prior, our young family lived for two years in Asia Minor, better known as modern-day Western Turkey. We studied and traveled the biblical lands of the Seven Churches, Israel, Galatia, Cappadocia, and many of the coastlands in Greece and Turkey along Paul's missionary journeys. This current migration is along these areas.¹ I even visited areas near Haran and Antioch, bordering Syria. Haran is where Abraham briefly sojourned.² Antioch is where early believers demonstrated God's grace and were the first to be called Christians.³ It is easy to study and travel; it is difficult to truly practice humility as a daily way of life. A special grace and insight took place that evening upon, figuratively, washing and clothing the worn feet of a refugee. The kindness and honor practically demonstrated moved our translator to honestly inquire about the Light and Hope of Abraham, as Abraham's hope is briefly recounted below:

By faith Abraham obeyed . . . And he went out, not knowing where he was going . . . living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God . . . and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth . . .

But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God . . . And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect (Hebrews 11:8-10, 13, 16, 39-40).⁴

SOJOURNER, n. A temporary resident; a stranger or traveler who dwells in a place for a time.

For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding (1 Chronicles 29:15).⁵

. . . his {Abraham's} faith was "counted to him as righteousness." But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord . . . (Romans 4:22-24).

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself

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will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:18-21).

Thousands of Abraham's descendants from Syria and Iraq with those from Afghanistan and additional locations throughout Central and Southeastern Asia are making an arduous, and often treacherous, journey to Western Europe. Most have been traveling through Turkey, on to Greece, and from there traversing Central Europe for Western Europe.¹ The reason for this modern-day Exodus is manifold and caught in a whirl-wind of terminology that often defines political hearts or fears.⁶ Many feared for their lives due to ongoing war, conflicts, and persecutions in their homeland, often facing insecurities of food, safety, and justice. Some ascribe mostly economic motives to the migration.⁷ Escaping to lands largely free from hunger and violent political upheaval is likely much more prevalent a reason for migration than singularly partaking in the European Union's economic "Four Freedoms"⁸ of free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour.⁹ Perhaps, many may not be much different than Naomi, who sojourned during a famine with her husband and sons in Moab (Jordan),¹⁰ returning only with Ruth, a Moabitess and the future great-grandmother of King David.¹¹ Yet most refugees are unaware of the hope and freedom promised to Abraham and his descendants of promise. That evening, middle-aged men and women, families, teens, children, and a few unaccompanied young men often wore expressions of muted anxiety while awaiting their next leg of travel; worried for the family left behind and looking for family and a hope laying ahead of them. Biblically speaking, they were (are) on a sojourn for a new hope, even if their journey is more or less like Jacob's escape to Haran as a single man, fleeing a brother intent on his death.¹²

The lands of Turkey and the Mediterranean coastlands of Paul's journeys have remained in my heart, which often stirs when I have seen news

reports of this current migration navigating on land and sea where we once visited. Now many years after our family's two-year employment in Izmir (Smyrna), Turkey, we now made plans to visit our daughter studying abroad in Central Europe. She learned of the free-clinic for refugees and that I might be welcomed to assist upon our visit. I jumped at the opportunity to briefly serve the ongoing migration funneling through this Central European train station. Providentially, I work in a U.S. Midwestern medical practice with a Palestinian follower of Jesus. Upon learning of my plan to visit the free-clinic in Europe, my Palestinian friend gave me several gospels of John written in Arabic. I prayed for an opportunity to honor my Palestinian friend by putting these accounts of Jesus' life to good use.

I found a small group of dedicated local medical professionals volunteering their time in a make-do, field-style clinic for the refugees. The clinic director eagerly accepted my offer to assist them. She paired me with a single 20-something year-old Syrian gentlemen to translate for me. He happened to be a refugee himself that knew Arabic, English, and likely several other languages and dialects. He had stopped for several days along his trek to assist others at this way-point clinic and aid station. This way-point featured not only shelter, food, and clothing, but also wi-fi access to try and communicate with relatives. He wished to help fellow sojourners on their trek while also hoping to hear or connect with family and friends spread across two continents.

Together we sat on clinic cots providing advanced medical triage. This was triage with a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, pulse oximeter, urine dip-stick, and years of history and physical exam assessments in much more austere environments. We listened to the stories of these refugees, these sons and daughters of Abraham. We determined who could be treated at the clinic with over-the-counter medicines and medical supplies purchased from a drug store shelf and who needed to be referred on for immediate or definitive medical

attention at the local hospital. Commonly, we gave reassurance to a mother or father that their child only had a cold and did not have pneumonia. We dispensed many antacids and laxatives for worried bellies or stomachs stopped up or stressed. Many regions through which they traveled had not been as kind nor did not have as many resources to assist the refugees. Several refugees had a serious illness needing immediate transport to an emergency or casualty department. Whether the illness be major, minor, or mundane I strove to remember the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”¹³

Toward the end of the evening, a young man came seeking medical care for his feet. He had traveled a great distance, likely more than a thousand miles. This traveler had no socks and, much of the time, he told us, he had traveled without any shoes at all. His feet had obvious sores, and his clothes had not been washed for many days or weeks. The shoes he had were threadbare canvas, thin-soled, and carried a thick smell of poverty. I carefully lifted one foot at a time for inspection and to see how he could best care for each foot. He had likely worn out many shoes during his travels. Currently, the left ankle had an abrasion created by the ill-fitting, sockless, heavily-worn canvas shoe. The right large toe had a small abscess on top; again, likely from not wearing socks. After cleaning the foot, I carefully lanced the abscess with a needle, liberating a large amount of purulence. Careful examination found no deeper, nor more serious, infection. While bandaging the feet, I asked how the wounds had happened. The translator passed on to me that the traveler did not know for sure, as he had often been barefoot and often times could not feel his feet.

The translator then observed something that he had never experienced before. The aid station had shoes to give to the refugees but had run out of the size that the traveler needed. Our traveler wore the same size shoe as I. Even though my trekking shoes

had many miles under them, they also were built to last with warm, strong, breathable fabric and a good sole. I removed my shoes and asked through the translator to give my shoes to our traveler. The translator tried to intervene, saying he, a fellow refugee with more means than the traveler should be the one to donate his shoes. I gently persisted in giving the traveler my shoes. The translator enlisted the nurse running the clinic, who agreed that I need not donate my shoes. Again, I gently stood firm, reminding them that although the clinic had socks to give the traveler, they had no shoes that fit our young man.

"What will you wear back to your place?" asked my Syrian friend.

I replied, "His shoes."

I finished dressing the traveler's wounds and passed on bandages I brought for myself. This included a small foot-care kit purchased earlier that day. I then placed my shoes on the grateful traveler's feet to ensure that they indeed did fit. The translator had never observed such an act before. Shoes carry much more significance in the Land of Abraham. A presumably respected physician had not only donated his shoes but was going to wear the traveler's pungent, worn shoes home. In many cultures, this would be a disgrace.^{14,15,16}

Later that night, after the patients had all been seen, my Syrian translator friend and I talked over a cup of coffee. He was surprised to learn that I had once visited close to his home, Haran and Antakya (Antioch), knew many of the words he spoke, and had also traveled and visited many of the coastlands and Turkish cities he had also walked. I asked of his family. He then shared his story, a story of broken relationships and a broken home now scattered across many lands. His father and his father's new wife had successfully traveled recently from Syria to a destination European country. His birth mother still lived back in a war-torn Syrian city; he hoped to be able to send for her once he arrived in Western Europe.

The translator wished to know more about how I had come to the clinic and the kindness that had

been shown. I spoke of hope, especially the hope of Abraham. I shared that the great religions of Christianity and Islam share a common lineage that traces to Abraham. I pointed out to my Syrian friend that his home-town is near one of Abraham's homes (Haran) where Abraham had briefly sojourned. The translator spoke of knowing that Abraham was the father of many prophets. I then shared of the One, Isa, which is Jesus in Arabic, who makes Himself known to those who seek Him. The translator asked if I had read the book of his prophet. I affirmed that indeed I had read an English version of the Koran. I then explained that the Prophet born of the promise of Abraham would make Himself known to him, the translator, if he sought Him.^{17,18} This provided opportunity to share the account of John, Jesus' most intimate friend on this earth, to whom Jesus referred, "the disciple with whom He loved."¹⁹ Just as the shoes had been tangibly received by the traveler, our Syrian friend gratefully accepted the Arabic version of the Gospel of John. The act of kindness and humility of exchanging shoes had opened his heart to learn of Isa.

We bid our farewells that included a late-night selfie outside the train station clinic. I then laced-up the traveler's well-used, odiferous shoes on my feet and took a local train back to the hotel room. I hoped the others on the sparsely populated train could not detect from where the pungent smell emanated. Sometime after midnight I reached my train stop and slipped the odiferous shoes into a waste-bin outside the hotel. Yet, the smell reminded me that I had been willing to materially assist another sojourner.

Verses of Hebrews, Matthew, John, and others came vividly to life. I dimly understood many aspects of the gospel in a new way. How Jesus' humbling of Himself when He washed the feet of the disciples took on new meaning; ". . . but [He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men."²⁰ The translator had been willing to listen to the hope of Abraham and Isa after he had observed a "person of stature" humbling himself to help clothe and wash

another,²¹ as Jesus had washed the disciples' feet,²² then (literally) walk in his shoes. I also better understood the humbling of the woman who had washed Jesus' feet with her hair in front of others.^{23,24} Her hair was her dignity and washing Jesus' feet was her sacrifice to Him. Again, the kindness had opened a door to speak to my Syrian friend of the hope available to all that would call upon Him - Isa, Jesus.^{17,18}

Additional thoughts flooded my mind, including a story from a missionary friend that had assisted refugees migrating between Istanbul, Turkey, and Vienna, Austria in the 1990s. Our friend shared the story of one December night, when she spoke to refugees in Central/Eastern Europe about the Christmas story, wondering if they could relate to such a story for which they had not heard before or have a cultural context. When she came to the part of Mary and Joseph having to flee to Egypt to escape the authorities seeking Jesus' life²⁵ and being afraid to live in their homeland upon return from Egypt,²⁶ our friend realized that these refugees with whom she ministered understood the Christmas story in a much deeper way than she had expected. The Christmas story spoke to them in their current modern-day experiences of fleeing and fearing for their lives and the life of their Child. Jesus and His parents had also been refugees.

The current migrations give us a real-world opportunity to move from fear to faith. If we cannot welcome refugees, then we will not recognize when Jesus is in our midst.²¹ The act of giving my shoes is only a fleeting moment in my walk by faith, and I do not wish to give the impression that this type of grace has been common. Yet, to live by faith means taking off the old self and clothing ourselves in a humility that comes from being transformed by Jesus' grace;²⁷ and by so doing, we become a fellow sojourner and learn what it means to be like Abraham, "Friend of God."²⁸

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*But you . . . the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners,
saying to you,
. . . I have chosen you and not cast you off";
fear not, for I am with you . . . (Isaiah 48:8-10).*

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