

**A Sermon:  
Migration and the Mission of God**

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*(This sermon was produced with the intention of taking the theology of migration and communicating it in a church context.)*

**I am sure we have all been disturbed by the images of mass migration we have seen from Europe**

To escape the violence, more than four million Syrian refugees have fled the country to neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, while thousands also ended up in more distant countries of the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, North Africa and Europe. As of February 2015, Turkey has become the world's biggest refugee hosting country with 2.1 million Syrian refugees and had spent more than US\$6 billion on direct assistance to refugees. During the first half of 2015, large numbers of Syrian refugees crossed into European Union member states, reaching 313,000 UNHCR applications across Europe by early August 2015. The largest numbers were recorded in Germany with over 89,000 and Sweden with over 62,000 in early August. More than 100,000 refugees crossed the European Union's borders in July alone.

**But migration has been a frequent occurrence through the history of the world**

Between 9.4 and 12 million African slaves reached the Americas between the 15th and 19th centuries, however it is likely that many more were taken from their homelands. Around 10-20 per cent lost their lives during shipment.

At the end of the Second World War, the Potsdam Agreement signed by the Western Allies and the Soviet Union in 1945 led to the migration and resettlement of around 20 million people - one of the largest European migrations. The largest affected groups were the 16.5 million Germans forced westwards from Eastern Europe, and the millions of Poles forced to resettle in 'rediscovered territories'.

The partition of British India in 1947 into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India led to one of the largest mass migrations in history. The break-up along religious lines resulted in the movement of about 14.5 million people - Muslims going to Pakistan from India and Hindus and Sikhs going in the opposite direction.

The biggest mass migration of human history is currently underway in China. Over the next 25 years it is estimated that up to 345 million people will move from the rural areas of China to the cities. Some people are calling it the second Industrial Revolution

**Indeed, migration is one of the recurrent themes in the Bible.**

In a sense the whole story of the Bible is one of people on the move

**Although there is a mass migration associated with the tower of Babel, the first migration associated with God's redemptive plan is that of Abram:**

Genesis 12:1: The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's family. Go to the land I will show you."

Leave your country, your people, your family. Leave your security. Leave your safety. Leave your emotional support. Abram's forced migration was a brutal withdrawal of all Abram's stability in life.

We get a clue as to why God asked Abram to migrate in chapter 24. He wanted to move him away from the polytheism that dominated the world at that time so that he

Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan (24:2-3).

And so through this migration God began to shape a people who would worship him alone and live according to his values, not the depraved values of the nations around them. God knew that the only way that Abraham could be this free from the depravity of Ur was for him to migrate.

As such it sets a pattern for God directed migration through the Bible. God repeatedly calls his people to move geographically from one place to another, whether by force or by free will, for the purpose of doing something significant in their lives spiritually or in the lives of people in the places where they move to.

**The second major redemptive migration was that of Israel in the Exodus**

Gen 6:1, 8: Then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. Because of my powerful hand, he will let the people of Israel go. Because of my mighty hand, he will drive them out of his country... I will bring you to the land I promised to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

The migration forged a nation set apart for God. The nation of Israel consisted of a million or so slaves who had become deeply influenced by the religion of Egypt. Through the ten

plagues God demonstrated his superiority over each of those supposed gods and brought them out of that place to their own land where they could live as God intended. The escape from Egypt, the journey through the wilderness the taking of the Promised Land – this massive migration – God used to shape his people through enabling them to trust in him. Without this mass migration – with all its struggles – they would not have become the holy nation, the people of God, he wanted them to become.

**But Israel did not fulfil its calling in the Promised Land and so another migration occurred – this time the forced exile to Assyria and Babylon**

Even though God had formed them into a nation and given them the Promised Land where they could live, the people of Israel failed to become the light to the nations that they should have. They worshipped false gods and indulged in pagan immorality. As a result God allowed them to be taken into exile.

2 Kings 25:21: So the people of Judah were taken as prisoners. They were taken far away from their own land.

This migration brought about a profound re-evaluation of the Jewish faith. The people of Judah could have interpreted their exile to Babylon as the end of their special relationship with God. But not only does the book of Daniel show them that it is possible to be faithful to God away from the Promised Land, it also shows them that God has not abandoned his plan for the whole world: he controls all of history. It showed Israel that even when they migrated their God went with them.

**The people who re-migrated back to the Promised Land 70 years later had their faith purged and strengthened.**

Eventually the tide turned and the exiles were allowed to migrate back to the homeland:

Ezra 1:5: Then everyone God had inspired prepared to go. They wanted to go up to Jerusalem and build the Lord's temple there. They included the family leaders of Judah and Benjamin. They also included the priests and Levites.

The decision to return to Jerusalem was not an easy one. As the books of Daniel, Nehemiah and Ezra show many Jews had prospered in Babylon. It was safe and fertile and cultured. Palestine was a backwater. The journey there would be hazardous and the life there hard and dangerous.

Yet some heard the call of God through Cyrus and picked up their possessions and migrated back to Jerusalem. And those that did experienced a powerful revival. As Ezra read the Law

one day the Spirit moved and the people repented and the nation was reborn – amongst a group of migrants once again.

### **As the NT begins we see another significant migration**

Indeed, Jesus and his family were not just migrants – they were refugees.

Matthew 2:13 When the Wise Men had left, Joseph had a dream. In the dream an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph. “Get up!” the angel said. “Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you to come back. Herod is going to search for the child. He wants to kill him.” 14 So Joseph got up. During the night, he left for Egypt with the child and his mother Mary.

We know that there was a large Jewish community in Egypt. Yet this migration was still hazardous and difficult no matter how warmly they were received in Egypt. And it serves as a profound challenge to us about how we respond to migrants. You see our saviour Jesus was migrant. If the people in Egypt had not welcomed him would we be where we are today?

### **But the history of the church has been marked by the migration and the mission of God**

In Acts the persecution of the church in Jerusalem resulted in the spread of the Gospel throughout Asia Minor.

Acts 11: <sup>19</sup> Some believers had been scattered by the suffering that unbelievers had caused them. They were scattered after Stephen was killed. Those believers travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. But they spread the word only among Jews. <sup>20</sup> Some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch. There they began to speak to Greeks also. They told them the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The Lord’s power was with them. Large numbers of people believed and turned to the Lord.

You might remember that in the book of Acts one of the believers, Steven, is stoned to death because of his testimony to the unbelievers. Acts Chapter 11 tells us that after his death this persecution spread. As a result many believers migrated out of Jerusalem and spread amongst the Jewish community in other cities in the Empire. Of special significance was some Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene who went to Antioch. And when they were there they not only witness to Jewish unbelievers they also for the first time shared the gospel with Gentile believers. We do not know the names of these men, but their migration and witness to Gentiles was ground-breaking. We will never know their names but they are amongst the heroes of the faith.

Later, the persecution of the Christians in Rome resulted in the spread of the Gospel throughout the empire.

Throughout history the Gospel has been carried throughout the world on the backs of migrants.

**In recent times we have seen an influx of Christian migrants into Australia from Burma and Africa.**

Our brothers and sisters who have migrated from these persecuted countries have brought a faith forged hard in the furnace of suffering. They are a rejuvenating breath into the life of many churches.

We are currently seeing a flood of Syrian refugees pouring into the heart of pagan Europe. Many are Christians. Up to 12,000 of them will come to Australia. Angela Merkel has already identified that this current mass migration will change the Europe. Maybe in a way she does not realise!

**Perhaps because migration has been used so powerfully by God for his purposes through history the writer of the book of Hebrews uses a very interesting metaphor to describe the church.**

**Heb 11:13–16:** These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

In other words, people of faith recognise they are migrants. They are moving from this world, which is not our home, and moving on to our true homeland. People of faith live in this world like strangers and exiles – immigrants – spreading the Kingdom of God as they go. God wants us to be a pilgrim people because when we are we cannot depend on the usual things that give us security. Things like a home and a job and a doctor we trust. God likes to move his people because when they do their faith in him flourishes.

Some of you have experienced migration whether forced or not. It can be a difficult experience. Leaving behind the familiar, learning new languages, new customs. But recognise that God uses migration to bring his people into new and profound experiences of faith and he uses it to spread his Kingdom, through you!

Others of us who are very settled need to consider whether God might be calling us to migration. We can get very settled. We can think “I am going to be here for the rest of my life.” But that may be comfortable, but it is not good for our faith.

We need to realise that we a part of God’s grand mission. He has always been in the process of moving masses of people from one part of the world to another in order to achieve his purposes. Mass migration is a tool in the hand of God. And if you sense the call to move, to migrate - to move from the place of comfort to the place of trust – you move in the will of God.

About the author

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