

A Bible Study Resource for small groups and preachers

More than a Statistic:

God's Heart for Displaced
and Vulnerable Children

by Tim Davy

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In this series of Bible Studies we will be exploring different parts of the Bible that will help us to consider God's heart for vulnerable and displaced children and young people. Much of the material could apply beyond these age groups but our intent is to focus on what the Bible might say about younger people. We have sought to highlight different parts of the Bible to illustrate the variety of texts that address the issues.

The resource is aimed at small groups of Christians who want to consider prayerfully how the Bible might shape our attitudes and actions towards displaced young people. It might also serve as guiding notes for sermon preparation or other talks. The point in each of these studies is not to explore all aspects of the passage; rather we want to highlight themes that resonate particularly with the ideas of displacement and vulnerability, and especially in relation to children and young people.

We pray it will be a useful resource to you in your ministry. If you want to explore these ideas further, here are a couple of resources:

- Davy, T. and Walley, M. (2017), 'Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children: Shaping a Church Response', Kirby Laing Institute of Christian Ethics, Ethics in Brief paper, Summer 2017 (Vol.22 No.5) (Cambridge: KLICE) http://klice.co.uk/uploads/Ethics%20in%20Brief/EiB_Davy_Walley_22.5_WEB.pdf
- Krish Kandiah, *God is Stranger: What Happens When God Turns Up* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017)
- If you want to go deeper you may also like to join Redcliffe's MA level module, 'Vulnerable Children: Bible, Theology and Society'. You can find out more about it here: redcliffe.ac.uk/vulnerable-children

STUDY 1

Genesis 1-3

How things Should Be,
and How Things Are



THEY RISK detention, rape, forced labour, beatings or death. Yet, tens of thousands of children, many of them unaccompanied or separated, are making the dangerous refugee and migrant journey in the hope of finding safety or a better life in Europe. They are fleeing brutal violence, abject poverty, drought, forced early marriage, untold hardship or lack of prospects and hope in dozens of countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.¹

How are we to respond to a statement like this?

IN THE FACE OF overwhelming statistics we need to regain a sense of what it means to be a person made in God's image, and what impact sin has had on our experience of being human.

There are many things we could look at in these passages but we'll focus on a couple of features: what it means to be human, and the effects of humanity's rebellion.

Read through the first three chapters of Genesis.

How do these chapters describe the goodness, vulnerability, and brokenness of life in our world?

The account of 'the fall' in Gen. 3 depicts a world in which relationships between God and people, between people and creation, and between people themselves are damaged and distorted. How do you see alienation in the biblical story and how do you see themes of alienation, displacement, violence and vulnerability playing out in the lives of displaced young people?

Reread Genesis 1:26-27:

- What do you think it means to be made in God's image?
- What does this imaging say about the status of dignity and worth ascribed to humanity as a whole, and individuals?
- How might a belief in the God-imaging worth of each and every person affect how we view and behave towards others?
- How can we work to demonstrate people's worth and dignity?
- How might this infuse our work amongst vulnerable children with fresh energy and hope?

¹ UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Danger Every Step of the Way: A harrowing journey to Europe for refugee and migrant children*, June 2016, p. 2. Accessed 10 January 2017.

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

What Does Faithfulness
Look Like?



WE JOIN the people of Israel on the edge of the promised land. In Deuteronomy Moses preaches to the people, urging them to shape their new society in the land in a way that pleases God and demonstrates his ways to the watching world.

Just before setting out a whole range of laws to achieve this Moses calls on the people to consider what the LORD requires of them.

Read Deuteronomy 10:12-22

THE 'FATHERLESS, WIDOW AND ALIEN' were a grouping that reflected the most vulnerable in that society. They all had one thing in common: the lack or loss of a living adult male, who was essential at that time for ensuring their protection, provision and inclusion. Regardless of how they arrived at those circumstances, they relied on the hospitality and commitment of others to protect and provide for them.

What does this passage say about:

- the nature of obedience to God?
- the character and commitments of God?
- the connection between God's character and commitments, and our response to who he is?

THE CALL to show love and justice towards the marginalised is here depicted as a response both to God's own character but also to Israel's own 'outsider' experience in Egypt. Caring for the marginalised and vulnerable is a reflection of who God is and what he is committed to. If that was not sufficient motivation for Israel, their memory should also fuel their compassion and solidarity. They knew as a people what it was like to receive hospitality and they knew what it was like to be subject to hostility. Now that they were about to be given a land of their own and were about to become potential 'hosts', they must carry out their God-reflecting responsibilities towards the outsider and the vulnerable.

How can your Christian community mirror God's character and commitments where you are?

2 Kings 5:1-5

Nameless, Displaced and Powerless



THIS STORY features Naaman, a great and accomplished Syrian general who is cured of a skin disease through an encounter with the prophet Elisha. While most of the story focused on the (at times faulty and imprudent) attitudes and actions of adults, the entire episode hangs on the words of a 'trafficked' child. This nameless young girl has been taken captive from her home in Israel by Syrian raiding parties and set to work for Naaman's wife. Knowing of his skin disease, the girl expresses a wish to her mistress that Naaman could be 'with' Israel's prophet, who would surely heal him of his disease. As the story unfolds, her word is taken seriously and this leads to Naaman encountering Elisha, being healed and having some kind of 'conversion' experience to faith in Yahweh – and all this because of the word of a powerless little girl who is forgotten as the story continues.

Read 2 Kings 5

SHE is a nameless spoil of war, caught up in events far beyond her control: plundered from home and family, enslaved in an alien, enemy land. Who knows what has happened to her and many others like her?

Questions:

- In what ways does the story describe the girl's 'smallness' and powerlessness to control her circumstances?
- How does the story describe a world hostile to the small and the vulnerable?
- Why do you think the girl speaks up?
- How do you see God's purposes being worked out through this story of displacement and vulnerability?

Esther Menn suggests that this little girl points 'to the vulnerability of children of all ages, who are caught up in the violence and upset of communal or national conflicts.' [See Esther Menn, 'Child Characters in Biblical Narratives', in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008), p. 351]

The story is sobering both in the way that it depicts with almost brutally concise matter-of-factness the dire circumstances of the girl, yet at the same time exemplifies how God finds ways of bringing about his purposes through people in the most unpromising of circumstances. It doesn't lessen the pain or undermine her experiences. Rather, this story infuses her story with hope.

How does this girl's story give you hope?

Psalm 10

Are We Angry Enough?



HOW ANGRY do you feel when you find out about the plight of vulnerable and displaced young people?

Whether we feel elated, downbeat, scared, frustrated, hopeful, or anything in-between, the book of Psalms gives us a way of bringing all of our emotions to God. Through its prayers, the Psalter also presents us with graphic pictures of the world in which we seek to live out our faith. It doesn't shy away from the harder stuff of life; rather, it confronts us with it, and forces us to reckon with the pain (especially in others) we might otherwise try to ignore.

Read Psalm 10

Questions:

- In what ways are vulnerable children depicted in the psalm? What contemporary echoes do you see here?
- How does the psalmist express their frustration and anger?
- How might Psalm 10 help us to process our anger at the exploitation of the displaced and vulnerable? How might it spur us to action?

IN THIS LESSER KNOWN PSALM, the author expresses his distress when looking around the world and seeing God's seeming inactivity on behalf of the vulnerable. It is a complaint on behalf of those suffering at the hands of the wicked and, for those who would prefer to look away, acts as a call to insistent attentiveness to the plight of the exploited. It seems particularly relevant when considering the exploitation of displaced and vulnerable children.

Consider, for example, w. 7-11 with its description of the exploitative practices of the wicked who breathe out lies and threats, lie in wait for their helpless victims, and exert their power over those with no way out. No wonder the psalmist cries out for God to arise and show that he does indeed reign (v. 12).

The more we become aware of the distress of displaced and vulnerable young people, it can be difficult not to become overwhelmed and unable to process the exploitative evil being committed. Psalm 10 gives us a language for beginning this processing and advocacy work on behalf of vulnerable and displaced children.

Isaiah 1:10-31

Worshipping God
the Way God Wants



WHAT KIND OF WORSHIP do you enjoy most? Perhaps you're thinking about a particular songs, or styles of music. Do you like big gatherings or quiet places? Perhaps like many people you have a clear idea of what you prefer.

But what kind of worship does God prefer? Isaiah tells us very clearly, and it has nothing to do with music styles, or how big or small a gathering is.

Read Isaiah 1:10-31

- Just how bad are things in Israel?
- How does Isaiah describe the different ways Israel has turned their back on their covenant relationship with God?
- Israel has sought to fix things through religious performance? Why is this not enough?
- Does it seem shocking to you that God would be so dismissive of their efforts? ('I have had enough...'; 'I do not delight...'; 'Bring no more vain offerings...'; '... is an abomination to me'; 'I cannot endure...'; 'my soul hates'; 'I am weary of bearing them'; 'I will hide my eyes from you...'; 'I will not listen...')
- What does God propose for a way of demonstrating faithfulness to their covenant relationship? How does this echo the Deuteronomy passage we looked at previously?

ISRAEL THOUGHT they could make God put things right by doing and saying the 'right' things. What this passage (and others in Isaiah; e.g., Isa. 58) makes painfully clear is that ritual and religious performance will never be enough on their own to give God delight, demonstrate our worship to God, or express our true love for our Saviour.

While we don't perform the same rituals as the ancient Israelites there are plenty of ways that we might gain a false sense of satisfaction and fake devotion. What we do (or don't do) as a Church in the public sphere matters to God because God is committed to what is just and right.

Matthew 2:13-15

Jesus was a Displaced
and Vulnerable Child



OCCURRING ONLY in Matthew's Gospel, these three verses would be easy to pass over in the midst of the broader story of Jesus' infancy. Scholars believe Jesus would have been around two years of age by now.

Read Matthew 2:13-15

- What words would you use to describe how Mary and Joseph must have felt?
- Do you think Jesus might have had early memories of his time in Egypt? If so, what kind of impact might this have had on him?
- Might we say that Jesus' early life has more parallels with a child of a refugee family fleeing ISIS than with most children born in the UK?

HOW DO YOU RESPOND to this poignant and provocative quote from Krish Kandiah?

"Jesus was a refugee. The Son of God was an asylum-seeker. The Prince of Peace went on the run from a brutal and merciless regime, crossing borders to find sanctuary. How can those of us who call ourselves Christians, who claim to belong to a Christian country, not welcome those who follow in Jesus' footsteps as a refugee?... We prefer a civilised Jesus, a respectable establishment type who will comfort us, protect us and promise that all our dreams will come true. The real Jesus is a threat to our ambitions. Are we more like Herod than we'd like to admit? If there is no room for the outcast, vulnerable, poverty-stricken refugee Jesus in our lives, then we have to get rid of the other outcast, vulnerable, poverty-stricken refugees he associates with: collateral damage in our bid to protect a ruling position we are unwilling to budge from." (*God is Stranger*, 2017, p. 231)

EMBEDDED INTO THIS STORY, our story, the God whom we serve became a helpless, adopted refugee. But this, of course, leads to hope as well. Out of these unpromising beginnings God unleashed the transforming power of the gospel.

How does this story provoke you?

How does this story offer hope?

How might this story spur you to action on behalf of vulnerable and displaced children and young people?

James 1-2

What Does Genuine Faith Look Like?



Read through the first 2 chapters of James.

We find James 1:27 in the middle of the first 2 chapters of James' letter. Here he talks about having persevering faith and the necessity of not holding a fake religious facade of just hearing and believing the truth without being committed to putting it into action.

- Consider the Christian community to which you belong. Think of some examples of where faith has led to action.
- James insists that the way the marginalised are treated says a lot about a Church's faithfulness. How well does your Christian community do with this 'James test'?

LIKE THOSE whom James talks about, it is easy for us to give our best to and focus our attentions on those who we can gain the most from rather than those who can gain the most from us. In an increasingly individualistic society, the dependency and therefore vulnerability of children stands out even more.

Questions:

- Who are the equivalent 'widows and orphans' in your community?
- How can your Christian community support them?

A brief final reflection

HAVING EXPLORED seven different Bible passages and considered their relevance for working with and on behalf of vulnerable children, what have we learned?

Like us all, vulnerable children are made in the image of God yet share in the brokenness of a fallen world. God is deeply committed to the provision, protection and inclusion of the marginalised and vulnerable. As Christian communities we are charged with reflecting these commitments as a demonstration of his love and of our faith. We face the brokenness and pain of vulnerable young people and cry out to God in the face of so much injustice. Yet we dare to have hope that God can and will transform seemingly overwhelming situations. Finally, we see Jesus, who knows what it is like to be a displaced and vulnerable child, and we cannot look away.

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STUDY NOTES

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