

COURAGE FOR THE JOURNEY

BY TEANNA SUNBERG

Courage for the journey is the motto that the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Central Europe team is putting on the back of the refugee response t-shirts. In Farsi, it looks like this:

رفس. ی ارب ت ع ا ج ش

and in Arabic, like this:

ق ي ر ط ل ل ه ع ا ج ش

The journey from a war-torn Middle Eastern village, or an economically desperate city, is long and it is hard. In many cases, young people are running from situations of religious extremism or bloody dictatorships that exist in their home country. Many young men of military age do not want to fight because there is no morally “good” or “just” side. The purpose of this session is to remind us that ultimately we find courage in Christ, but also to explore what it means to be a Christ-like community. In very practical terms, this session asks: What does it mean to be and/or become the kind of Christ-community that recognizes the need for, and freely gives, courage for the journey?

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A Bonus Lesson About Refugees



In the story of Ruth, the first verse of chapter 1 tells us that Elimelech moved his wife and two sons from Judah to the country of Moab because there was a famine. Naomi and her family were **economic refugees**. Geographically speaking, Moab was located in what is Jordan today.

During the time stamp of this story, Moabite people were considered enemies of Israel and it was assumed that God himself was against this ethnic group. The Moabite race came about because Lot slept with his daughters (Genesis 19:37-38)--obviously something that God frowned upon. There are many Old Testament references to Moabite people, and all of them are negative. For God's chosen race (Jews), Moab was not a desirable destination, and marrying into a Moabite family was an absolute mistake. "Whatever you do, do not marry a Moabite woman." You can see just how serious this rule was by looking at these passages: Deuteronomy 23:3; Psalms 60:8; Isaiah 25:10; and 1 Kings 11:1-4.

After Elimelech and Naomi moved from Bethel to Moab, their sons married Moabite daughters. This was a problem that went from bad to worse when Naomi's husband, and then her two sons, died. By chapter 2, Naomi herself was a widow with two widowed Moabite daughters-in-law. There is no up-side, no ray of sunshine, and no silver-lining for this story in the ancient Middle-East, which is why Naomi says, "Do not call me Naomi, which means pleasantness. Call me Mara, which means bitterness, because the hand of the Lord is against me." Naomi had lost all hope.

She had every reason to be hopeless. Not only were her daughters-in-law Moabites, but together, they were three widowed women from a culture that dealt very harshly with people in their situation. There was very little provision, opportunity, or voice for women in this culture at that time in history.

YOUTH FAITH CONNECTIONS

A common Jewish prayer that was recited in the morning by men gives insight into the reality of being a woman and a Moabite: “Thank you God, that you did not make me a Gentile, a woman, or a dog.”

When Naomi and Ruth set out to journey back to Bethel, they were incredibly vulnerable. They were two women crossing the desert on a 7-day trek. They even had to cross the Jordan River. They were absolutely alone, had no men to protect them, and no honorable means of making money. Their situation could not have been much worse than it was.

Imagine the courage it took for Ruth to go with Naomi. She was committing herself to a lifetime in another country amongst a different culture with different rules, understandings, and even religion. Ruth must have known that she was committing herself to a life of widowhood and poverty, even though she was young enough to marry again. Remember, in Bethel, nobody would be willing to marry a Moabite. She also must have known the dangers that she and Naomi would face as they travelled for seven days through the desert. From where did Ruth find courage for that journey?

This is the same courage that has propelled hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Northern Africa to set out for Europe. They face unbelievable obstacles: treacherous sea crossings, dishonest people who steal and beat them, unwelcoming borders where sometimes they must sneak across, hunger, cold, days



Finding a way in the rain

of walking, and a lot of danger. Some have been beaten. Most have spent thousands of dollars. Many have died, been separated from their families, or left loved ones behind. There is no easy journey ahead, but the situation they leave behind is even more dangerous.

Mishel's Story



Mishel is an Iraqi young man that we met in a park in the middle of Belgrade (Serbia). He was traveling with his sister and his mother. Mishel is 17. His sister is 16. He told us his story beginning with his life in Iraq and why he left.

“My father went to the market to get some food. A bomb exploded and he was killed. We realized that it was too dangerous to stay, so we made plans to leave. We have been traveling for more than a month.”

Mishel and his sister, both of them spoke English fluently, then told us about their journey from Baghdad. These were hard details to hear and even harder to imagine that somebody so young had witnessed such terrible things.

“At one border that we crossed, the guards began shooting into the crowds. There were bodies. A lot of bodies. We just kept running.”

After that, Mishel imagined that the journey would get easier, but the dangers followed them.

“When we came into the next country, they made us go through a process of fingerprinting, but they demanded that we pay them 5 euros per person. I only had 20 euros, but for three of us, it should have cost only 15 euros. When I asked for the change, the guard got angry and slapped me several times. Then he laughed at me, called me names, and pushed me away. We are out of money now.”

As we listened to Mishel's story, we asked him if he would have any advice for people who were thinking about making this journey to Europe. He shook his head for “yes,” and shrugged his shoulders.

“You have to have courage, you know. It is a dangerous and hard journey. But, should they come? Yes. It is a month or two of danger,

SKILL BUILDER

Chances are that your students have heard a great deal of talk about the current refugee crisis. Much of the rhetoric is divided along political lines. This is a great opportunity to talk to your students about how to see the world through Christ's eyes rather than through the argument of any political party. Help them to understand that allegiance to any ideology other than God's can make it hard to distinguish what a Christian's responsibility is in different situations. Show the students how situations such as this can be informed by looking at the examples given in scripture and applying them to life today.

versus a lifetime of fear and greater dangers in their home countries. So come, but be ready to be brave.”

At the end of our conversation, we told Mishel and his sister that we were people of faith and that we would call upon the Lord for them. They smiled, and responded, “We are Christians too.”

Right there in the middle of a park in Serbia, we bowed our heads together and we asked Jesus to give Mishel and his family courage for the journey ahead.

The beautiful thing about this conversation was that Mishel and his sister had been helping a Syrian family that they met in the park, and during our conversation they translated from English to Arabic. This family was not Christian, but Mishel’s story was a great testimony to them of God’s faithfulness. A testimony that they would probably not have been free to give before they set off on their journey.

SENSORY OPTION

If you have anyone in your church who is a long distance runner, have that person come and talk about the toll it takes on one’s body to travel long distances. Ask the person to discuss the amount of training necessary to do it safely. Discuss the physical strain for a refugee who has not trained for traveling a long distance but must still do it.



In the debate over immigration, it’s easy to lose site of the children.

PREPARE TO TEACH

A. Globally Aware

1. Locate Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan on a map. You can look for some of the other countries mentioned in the commentary as well.
- Now, locate Bethel, Israel and the country of Jordan.
- Draw a line from Moab to Bethel.

- Draw a line from some of the origin countries of the refugees (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan) through Turkey to Greece to Macedonia, to Serbia, to Croatia, to Slovenia, to Austria, and into Germany. This is the most typical route that the refugees take.
- 2. After you have a visual reference for the actual distance of the journey, ask what items they might want to take with them if they were to set out on this journey. You may even try making a list. Remember, you may never go “home” again, so whatever you leave behind will be lost, destroyed, and/or never reclaimed.
- 3. Take out an average size backpack. All of the belongings you take must fit into this space. From the list that you have created, what stays behind and what goes?
- 4. Use the following link to get a visual reference for the sheer numbers of people making this journey. Note that many of them are young men and women in their teens and early twenties: <http://www.lucify.com/the-flow-towards-europe/>

Many of the young men are making this journey alone. Almost no women can make the journey alone. The reason for the difference has much to do with Middle Eastern culture.

Discuss the ramifications of these differences in the lives of young people from each gender.

YOUNGER OPTION

For younger students, pack a backpack with what you imagine would be important for someone to carry if they had no home. Have students reach in to choose an object.

When they bring the object out, they can talk about why that item is important.

After discussing the items in the bag, talk about what things might be necessary that AREN'T in the bag, such as blankets, tents, sleeping bags, and food.



5. The recent attacks in Paris have made us even more keenly aware of the threat terrorists pose in our world. With tens of thousands of these refugees pouring out of countries where these terrorist groups reside, many feel we should be very selective of how we offer help to these people—the vast majority of whom are not part of a terrorist organization.

- In what ways might recent events affect the way we treat refugees in our world? In our community? In our church?
- Despite recent events, in what ways can we be the hands and feet of Christ in response to the refugee crisis in our world?

B. Exploring Courage

Review the story in Ruth 1. Then, discuss the kind of courage it took for Ruth to leave her home and set out with Naomi.

- *What were the consequences of her decision?*
- Now, discuss the kind of courage it takes for a young person to become a refugee today.
- *What are the consequences of their decisions?*
- *What do the observations reveal about courage, about people, and about hope?*

C. Learning to Respond

Isaiah 58:6-14 has some strong words for how Christians are to be in this world. Read this passage together.

As you read the scriptures, ask, *How do these words seem to speak directly to the current refugee crisis? What do the scriptures say about a Christian response?*

Brainstorm some ways that we can be faithful to the commands of Isaiah 58:6-14.

D. Wearing Your Faith

1. As we work with refugees, we have noticed that many Christians from

the Middle East wear crosses around their necks. And some tell us stories of persecution for their Christian faith.

Discuss what kind of courage it takes to wear your faith visibly, even though it may bring trouble.

- *In what ways might that challenge a person's faith in a country where being a Christian is acceptable, maybe even normal?*
- *What kinds of courageous acts does God call us to?*

E. Take Away

- Ruth gave up some significant securities when she agreed to go with Naomi. This is a fact that we easily overlook in a story that seems to be a "happily ever after" narrative. She showed significant courage as a woman in a world that looked down upon her for her gender and for her ethnicity. She was absolutely vulnerable and worthless from the perspective of her culture, yet God inserts her into the genetic code of Jesus. In this current refugee crisis, there are significant prejudices rooted in the fact that the majority of refugees are Muslim. It might even be true that some "Christians" encourage the idea that God dislikes Muslims, the Arab world, and/or the Middle East, just as he was thought to have hated the Moabites.
- *Courage for the journey* is a metaphor for life. None of us really know what the future holds, but we do know that we must move forward believing that God will make a way. Often, we can become paralyzed by fear, or we make decisions out of fear. God wants us to source our courage out of him, his Word, and his provision for our lives.
- Isaiah 58:6-14 is a very strong passage about a Christian response in a world that suffers. We cannot turn our backs upon suffering and brokenness and believe that we are being obedient. Apathy, materialism, and uncontrolled consumption go against the very nature of God, and are, therefore, destructive forces to our souls and in our world.