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EDITORIAL

# A Psalm for the Refugee Crisis in America

When our government is wrong, the church responds by doing what is right.

**Mark Galli** / posted January 30, 2017



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A funny thing happened to me on the way to waking up today. Imagine my surprise when the first reading of the morning (in the Revised Common Lectionary) was from Psalm 37:

Do not fret because of those who are evil  
or be envious of those who do wrong;

for like the grass they will soon wither,  
like green plants they will soon die away.

Trust in the Lord and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.  
Take delight in the Lord,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart. (vv. 1-4)

It nearly goes without saying that the sweeping, ill-planned, and draconian order about refugees, to use the psalmist's words, constitutes a *wrong*. (I'd like to save the word *evil* for more egregious acts—e.g., people getting murdered by governments). But even [many conservatives are calling Trump's move "wrong."](#) I agree [with Brenden O'Neill](#) at the libertarian rag *spiked*,

It is the lowest form of gesture politics: the swipe of a pen intended to demonstrate all-American strength, yet really signaling a stunning disregard for the American spirit of liberty and tradition of providing a home for the repressed of the globe.

Christians have deeper reasons than "the American spirit of liberty" to be dismayed by the executive order, of course, but the psalm got me thinking about not merely the wrong but how we might respond. I was especially startled by the admonition to "Trust in the Lord and do good." It reminded me of a very simple truth: that the powerful who do wrong cannot stop the church from doing good. In this case, there is nothing the current administration can do to prevent the church from continuing to minister to refugees.

To be sure, it will be harder to do so—much harder. It will require more sacrifice on our part. For the time being, we cannot count on the government to bring refugees to our doorstep, so it appears more of us are going to have to travel to the refugees overseas, wherever they might be huddled. Nor can we look to the government to subsidize our efforts. That means we're going to have to give up the new electronic gadget or the home remodel or whatever to deepen our support of the efforts of World Relief, Samaritan's Purse, World Vision, and others overseas.

**The psalmist's admonition to do good is not some romantic idealistic wish but hardheaded realism.**

For many of us, the door to ministry toward refugees has been slammed shut. But other doors remain wide open, and they look out on people desperate for our service and evangelistic ministrations: refugee families in the apartment complex down the street; pregnant women with few resources; the illiterate in our inner cities and in small towns; the drug-addicted; the sexually confused; the abused; prisoners—need I say more? Nothing the government can do can stop us from helping someone, somewhere, somehow in the name of Christ. The psalmist's admonition to do good is not some romantic idealistic wish but hardheaded realism.

In another verse, the psalmist adds:

Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;  
do not fret—it leads only to evil.  
For those who are evil will be destroyed,  
but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.

A little while, and the wicked will be no more;  
though you look for them, they will not be found.  
But the meek will inherit the land  
and enjoy peace and prosperity. (vv. 8-11)

The psalmist, King David, knows something about the ins and outs, and ups and downs, of government. He knows that the people of God will find themselves in situations over which they have little power. He also knows the temptation to respond to evil merely with anger and wrath. There is a season for appropriate anger, but anger has a way of soiling the soul very quickly (this is perhaps why Paul says it should be cut short within a day—Eph. 4:26). We comfort ourselves by insisting our anger is righteous, but I have to admit that the longer I harbor it, that little bit of righteousness in my anger becomes increasingly tainted with a great deal of self-righteousness. This can lead to nothing good.

As David reminds us, there is a hope to which we cling: God's people will inherit the land, in fact, the whole earth—God's justice will prevail. If there was ever a time to meditate on this hope, this would be it.

And this gives us perspective as we enter the political fray on this issue. And enter it we must. We live in a democracy, after all, and that means there is always the possibility of policy change. Yet we mustn't fool ourselves into imagining that a reversal of the current executive order would mean that our work is done. It wasn't too long ago that people like me were bitterly (and rightly, I think) [complaining about the](#)

[stinginess of the Obama administration regarding its refugee policy](#). As Dan McLaughlin [put it](#) in the *National Review*:

**Our nation will alternatively welcome and unwelcome refugees, depending on the national mood.**

The United States in general, and the Obama administration in particular, never had an open-borders policy for all refugees from everywhere, so overwrought rhetoric about Trump ripping down Lady Liberty's promise means comparing him to an ideal state that never existed. In fact, the Obama administration completely stopped processing refugees from Iraq for six months in 2011 over concerns about terrorist infiltration.

We were hardly a light to the nations in the previous administration.

Sadly, nations are fundamentally self-centered enterprises, mostly concerned with protecting and defending their power and sovereignty. That is the great insight of Reinhold Niebuhr's classic, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. As generous as the United States has been toward immigrants and refugees—and it has been more generous than most nations—it still has been and will continue to be ambiguous about this commitment. In times of crisis, or perceived crisis, it will do the cruelest things to protect and extend the national interest, from importing Africans to excluding the Chinese to interning the Japanese.

This latest executive order reminds us that no, we do not live in a Christian nation committed to Christian ethics. We've seen that regarding the life of the unborn, human sexuality, the mistreatment of minorities, and so on. It should not surprise us that our nation will alternatively welcome and unwelcome refugees, depending on the national mood. Let us continue to press it to be as generous as possible, but let us also remember with whom we're dealing.

O'Neill [put it well](#) in addressing liberals who have been, by many accounts, reacting with fear and hysteria. But his word, I think, can be helpful caution for the church when it is tempted by fear:

This is the awfulness of what has happened this weekend: Trump has exposed his authoritarian streak, and the left has exposed its inability to oppose such authoritarianism in a real, connecting, positive way. We have the theatre of Trump's strongman act, and the hysteria of a radical take on the politics of fear. Between theatre and hysteria, there has got to be something else: reason, perhaps, and principle, and a true, fear-free moral case for liberty.

Those who have been set free in Christ are, of all people, passionate about making a "moral case for liberty," not just for ourselves but for those fleeing oppressive tyranny. And given our confidence in God and our sure calling in Christ, we of all people can pursue our work with reasoned arguments in the public square—and do so free of fear.

*Mark Galli is editor in chief of Christianity Today.*