

A Christian View of Emigration and Immigration

South Africa's history makes it a strange combination of emigration and immigration. People from other countries have come to South Africa for a better life, and people have fled South Africa, seeking a better life.

The Bible does not forbid or prescribe movement between nations, though it does touch on the motives for leaving a nation, and how to treat the foreigner within your nation.

Unbiblical Reasons For Leaving a Nation

1. Fleeing Moral Or Lawful Obligations.

1. Leaving a country to escape financial support of one's family (wife & children, elderly parents) is wrong (1 Tim 5:4, 8)
2. Similarly, fleeing lawful financial obligations (personally accrued debt, bank loans, legitimate taxation) is a wrong reason to flee (Rom 13:7-8).
3. Fleeing the justice of a land, insofar as the laws do not compel evil or forbid obedience to God, is wrong.

2. Fleeing Out of Unbelieving Fear. The fear of man brings a snare (Prov 29:25). We are prone to fall into difficulties of our own making when fear controls us. A healthy sense of self-protection, of looking after life and limb is normal and good. However, irrational and consuming fretting over the future and over hypothetical situations will not lead to prudent judgement. Jeremiah 42-43 illustrate what happens when fear is controlling thought. The ten spies who brought an evil report likewise demonstrate this.

3. Greed. Wealth is good, but dangerous. Wanting to improve your material state is not forbidden. Being able to provide, meet your needs, and avoid utter poverty is why many people have left one nation for another. However, the pursuit of wealth for its own sake is forbidden (Prov 23:4-5, 1 Tim 6:9-10). Leaving a country only for a more luxurious lifestyle may be a pursuit of greed, which the Bible promises will pierce one through with sorrows.

Biblical Reasons For Leaving a Nation

- 1) **Fleeing An Oppressive Government (Acts 8:1).** Here you have persecution breaking out, and believers fleeing for their lives. Their action is not condemned, it is simply recorded. And, as we find out, the scattering of the believers led to the Gospel being preached wherever they went. Church history supplies us with many examples of believers who fled persecution. The followers of John Hus fled persecution and ended up on Nicolaus von Zinzendorf's land, because they were fleeing, and launched the Moravian missionary movement. The Inquisition caused whole populations to migrate and flee Spain, and Portugal, leaving the Protestant movement almost non-existent in those countries. You might remember from school history that the French Huguenots fled France and settled in South Africa, America and Holland. Believers of the ages have known that unless God directs them otherwise in conscience, there is a time to flee persecution, to save their own lives, and to preserve a Gospel witness to others. So I will say something which I will say often in this message and

come back in order to explain – fleeing a country due to persecution is a matter of conscience, and can be God's will for you.

This oppression can take the form of compelling a Christian to do evil, or forbidding a Christian from doing right.

2) Fleeing Economic Hardship Or Disaster

As early as the book of Genesis, we have examples of believers leaving Canaan due to a severe famine and going to a land where there was plenty. While there were times they were instructed to stay in the land, there were other times, such as when Jacob was told to go down and settle in Goshen, that God permits believers to flee because of economic disaster. Later, a famine in Israel caused Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, to go into the land of Moab.

In times of famine in Israel, some believers stayed, some fled. When the believers in Jerusalem were going through poverty, some probably left, but some clearly stayed

This means the opportunity to find work, to provide faithfully, to give food, shelter and reasonable comfort to your family is hindered.

What about fleeing before disaster? (Prov 22:3) Economic collapses are like predicting the weather. It is extremely difficult to know exactly which way an economy is going to go.

3) Fleeing Political Revolution (Matthew 24:2, 14-16)

It is a fact of history recorded by Eusebius that the Christian Jews fled Jerusalem four years before the final disaster in 70 A.D. The reason for this is that Christ had warned them of the coming disaster, and had told them to flee.

On the other hand, believers have remained in countries when the Nazis took over, when the Communists took over, when military coups in Africa and South America took over.

Revolution is always frowned upon in Scripture, and getting out of harm's way before the bloodshed is not condemned.

4) Fleeing Genocide, War or Lawlessness

Similar to political revolution, believers have permission to preserve life by fleeing in the face of imminent threat to life. The book of Esther shows the legitimacy of protecting oneself against a targeted genocide.

Jeremiah warned Judah to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, and Jesus warned believers to get out of Jerusalem before its Roman siege.

Broader lawlessness and social decay are more difficult to judge. There are tipping points when the fragile cords that bind the social order together can come undone, causing the collapse of policing, justice, the penal system, and a rise in vigilantism, gangs, and corruption.

These four reasons supply a legitimate cause to flee, not an obligation to do so.

John Bunyan said it this way:

If it is in thy heart to flee, flee: if it be in thy heart to stand, stand. Anything but a denial of the truth. He that flees, has warrant to do so; he that stands, has warrant to do so. Yes, the same man may both flee and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be. Moses fled (Exo 2:15), Moses stood (Heb 11:27). David fled (1 Sam 19:12), David stood (24:8). Jeremiah fled (Jer 37:11,12), Jeremiah stood (38:17). Christ withdrew himself (Luke 9:10), Christ stood (John 18:1-8). Paul fled (2 Cor 11:33), Paul stood (Acts 20:22,23).

There are therefore few rules in this case. The man himself is best able to judge concerning his present strength, and what weight this or that argument has upon his heart to stand or flee. I [would hate to] impose upon any man in these things; only, if you [flee] take two or three cautions with thee:-

(1.) Do not flee out of a slavish fear, but rather because fleeing is an ordinance of God, opening a door for the escape of some, which door is opened by God's providence, and the escape [accepted] by God's Word (Matt 10:23).

(2.) When you have fled, do as much good as you can in all [places that you come to], for therefore the door was opened to you, and you [sought to make your escape.](Acts 8:1-5).

(3.) Do not think yourself secure when you have fled; it was providence that opened the door, and the Word that did call you to escape: but where, and why, that you do not know yet. Uriah the prophet fled into Egypt, because there dwelt men that were to take him, that he might be brought again to Jerusalem to die there (Jer 26:21)...

(6.) But flee not, in fleeing, from religion; flee not, in fleeing, for the sake of a trade; flee not, in fleeing, that you may have ease for the flesh: this is wicked, and will yield neither peace nor profit to thy soul; neither now, nor at death, nor at the day of judgment.

Matters to Balance With Legitimate Reasons to Flee

Ministry. Another matter of conscience is whether or not you believe you have been called to stay to make a difference. "Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). As believers, our mission is not merely to seek the safest, most comfortable place in the world. As pilgrims, citizens of heaven, and ambassadors of Christ, we are to be salt (a preservative) and light (a guide) in places where darkness and corruption are spreading.

Rootedness. The man who is always looking to some other church, country or place he will arrive in fails to build the place he is in (Prov 17:24). Jim Eliot: "Wherever you are, be all there." We should seek the welfare of whatever place we find ourselves in (Jer 29:7)

Loyalty. Patriotism to one's nation is broadly, a good thing. It may even be a form of obedience to the fifth commandment. A nation is something of a parent and a home to us, and we do owe it respect, gratitude and a qualified loyalty.

* National patriotism should never rise above loyalty to Christ and His church. When laws conflict, Christ's takes precedence.

* A nation may betray its citizens by violating its own constitution, committing genocide against a particular ethnicity or religion. In these cases, one must choose between loyalty to the ideas originally enshrined in the Constitution (and so resist its corruption) or disloyalty to the corrupted version of the nation.

How to Treat Immigrants

- 1) Unless immigration law contradicts biblical principles, we should obey the laws that restrict entry or residence in another country.
- 2) Believers should obey the law of the country they are in. If a believer is illegally residing in South Africa, he should take active steps to rectify that situation. This may involve seeking legal residence through whatever means are available to him, be it legal counsel or other social services, or it may necessitate leaving South Africa until such a time as immigration can legally take place.
- 3) The church's role is not to police immigration, nor to adopt immigration as a political position (pro or against). It may provide counsel to believers struggling with this, or assist believers to obey the law (financially or otherwise). The church should also respect the law when hiring its own staff.
- 4) Immigration is an evangelistic opportunity: where the nations come to us. Rather than being fixated on the economic and social problems that illegal immigration brings, Christians should be aware that immigration is missions without having to travel.
- 5) God told Israel to treat foreigners as if they were at home (Lev 19:33-34). Hospitality to the foreigner living lawfully among us is expected of the Christian (Heb 13:1). Living in a nation with different customs, ways, foods, manners, accents, languages is a difficult experience. It is painful to be 'the outsider' perpetually. Christians should seek to make lawful immigrants feel at home, and particularly fellow-believers.