

God's eternal plan...

I would like to start by trying to put the whole refugee issue within the *context of God's eternal plan*.

In **Isaiah 65:17** we read the following words of the Lord: **“For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered, nor come into mind”**.

Why is He talking about a new creation?

Because, as Peter says: **“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up”**. (Peter 3:10) Which means that the first creation will finish.

I want to remind us, what happen at the first creation.

In **Genesis 1** we have the description of the first creation. And in **Gen. 1:31** we read **“And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good...”**.

Everything was **good** and **beautiful**.

There was a **perfect harmony**.

The food of the Adam and Eve and of all the other living creatures was coming from the earth. And God said to Adam and Eve... **“... Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for food: And He added... “and to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the heavens, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for food...”** (Gen. 1:29-30)

And there, in the perfect and peaceful environment of the first creation... came a **devastating earthquake** of the first **“sin”**, of the **disobedience** of Adam and Eve, and changed everything.

Now:

- Adam **must work hard** in order to survive.
- Eve, will bear her children with great pain.
- God said to snake, **“... Because thou hast done this, cursed art thou above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shall thou go, and dust shall thou eat all the days of thy life”** (Gen. 3:14)
- And the **animals will eat other living creatures** in order o survive.

Everything came **upside down**... and since then... **“the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now”** (Rom. 8:22)

There, in the very beginning, where there was NOT seen any hope to change things...comes God with mercy and unfolds the implementation of his NEW CREATION the **new heavens and a new earth**.

Now between the First (the old) and the New Creation there is one big difference.

- God created **the first creation**, this Earth with everything on it, with His Word. But **He created, Adam** according to His image, **with His hands** and **“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul”** (Gen.2:7).
- In **the second creation**, He will create a **New Heaven and a New Earth**, because **everything** of the first one **will be burned** and destroyed. But does not say anything about making another new Adam out of nothing.

WHY?

Because according to His promise of Gen.3:15 **“...I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: he shall bruise thy head, and thou shall bruise his heel” ...**

Jesus who **created the first Adam by His hands**... came down to this earth **as a NEW ADAM** - the promised seed - to **shed His blood** in order to give new and eternal life to everyone who will believe in Him in order to make them NEW CREATIONS. **This is what the word of God says: “Wherefore if any man is in**

Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new". (2nd Cor. 5:17)

These men and women, the new creatures are not made only from God's people, Israel. **But Jesus builds his church, the new creatures, from every nation. That is why He has sent His disciples by saying: "... Go ye into the entire world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. 16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieved shall be condemned."** (Mark. 16:15-16).

And here is where we are coming in. Jesus' last command includes us too!!! & the refugees who, in a sense, were sent to our Countries to hear about Jesus.

God builds His church, the bride of Jesus. In order to do this work **He could bring down angels from Heaven. But instead,** He chose to use men and women, made out of earth **but who became new creatures** and sends them to the nations to preach the good news, about the New Life by faith in Jesus Christ.

Since the first missionaries, the Apostles,...God was sending and **still sends many more missionaries** to different **countries, tribes, languages, etc.** to share the God News. **And He does it even today.**

You know, the first church... the first Christians **had to be persecuted in order to go out in the known world** to find work and safety ...and at the same time they were taking the Gospel with them... and Church was multiplied.

The last few decades we live in Europe the opposite. People from countries and nations where the Gospel was and is forbidden to be preached... and missionaries are almost impossible to go and preach about Jesus... **many people are being pushed out of their countries to the Christian West.**

As we see so many thousands of **refugees / immigrants coming to the west,** to our cities, to our neighborhood and around our churches, **we must not be scared...instead, we must praise the Lord.** For we **do not need to do anything** to go to Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Morocco, etc. **to preach the Gospel.** We do not have to put our lives in danger. **They are coming to us and it is much easier to share the gospel to them.**

How accurately has put it, **Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the World Day of Refugees declared:** " The phenomenon of migration today is also a **providential opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel** in the contemporary world. **Men and women** from various regions of the earth, who have not yet encountered Jesus Christ or know Him only partially, ask to be received in countries with an ancient Christian tradition. **It is necessary to find adequate ways for them to meet and to become acquainted with Jesus Christ** and to experience **the invaluable gift of salvation** which, for everyone, is a source of **"life in Abundance"** (John 10:10); migrants themselves have **a special role** in this regard because **they in turn can become "heralds of God's word and witnesses to the Risen Jesus, the hope of the world"** { **Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI For the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2012, Copyright- Libreria Editrice Vaticana**}.

I am saying all this in order to emphasize that God's plan, as He is building his new creatures for the New Heaven and the New Earth, **is to save many of the people of the nations that are coming in our countries.** And we need to take action and participate in this building of the church, **in the completion** of the bride of Jesus.

And there are many ways to do it. And all depends on how much willing we are to get out of our comfortable zone to get active in showing God's love **practically** and to share the gospel **vocally.**

Allow me to give one example of how to serve God by serving refugees and speak about...

THE HELPING HANDS MINISTRY IN ATHENS GREECE.

The beginning of Helping Hands...

Twenty six years ago, the Almighty God had seen a great need arising in Greece. **Hundreds of Kurdish refugees were flooding Greece.** They desperately needed physical and spiritual food and care! Something needed to be done. Someone needed to step forward. God needed to do something... And He did!

Like in the days of Abraham, God visited the country of Austria and called an American by the name Scott MacCraken. God said to him: **“Take your wife and your daughter and follow Me. I will take you to another country and I will make you a blessing to many nations.”** Scott and his wife Vicky prayed and struggled a lot before they took the decision to obey the Lord. They thought: **“We will go for two years”.** Little they knew of God’s plans... So, in 1990, the three of them came to Athens and their 2 years of service became 23 years (!), before the Lord moved them to another very important ministry called the "END SLAVERY ministry and REFUGEE ministries" in Oregon, USA.

As they were practicing many ways to serve those Kurdish refugees, God led them to start a Greek-registered non-profit organization in **June 1993** with the name **“HELPING HANDS”**. Since then, a team of Christians - staff, interns and volunteers - from many countries around the globe faithfully serve the refugees and immigrants **in Athens, Greece**, having a clear **mission** and a **vision**:

Our Mission is to reveal Jesus to refugees by demonstrating and proclaiming the gospel across Greece.
Our Vision is to see lives transformed!

We plant the seeds of gospel in the lives and hearts of the refugees as we lovingly serve them, and we pray and trust that they will take root and bear the fruit of salvation and life change, by His grace and for His glory!

The way we work...

Since 1993, we have been welcoming refugees and immigrants from many nations. We serve foreigners from **Iraq - Kurdistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, Algeria, Sudan, Kenya, Sri Lanka**, etc. Hundreds of refugees and immigrants were going through our door every week to take **a bag of food, a shower, clothing, medical help**, etc. At times their number was more than 3.000 people per week!

Throughout those 23 years, we have hosted hundreds of refugees and immigrants in special events - beyond the weekly programs - like **Christmas parties, Ester programs, and Summer Camps for kids, for single men and for families.**

For the last 5-6 years we partner with other ministries (Hellenic Missions & Oasis) and other STT groups from different countries, **organize summer camps for refugees/immigrants.**

This year we organized it again and we invited 44 men who agreed to follow our conditions which are that every day **they will participated on 2 hours of Bible teaching.**

Some of them who came were already believed in Jesus some time before this camp.

At the last day of the camp, 12 refugees were baptized.

Before their baptism...they gave their testimony and explained to the rest of the Muslim refugees, who were there listening, why they followed Jesus and what it means for them to be identified with Jesus Christ who died on the cross for their sins.

What a testimony!

What courage!

And the glory belongs to our God who is building His church and using people like you, like me. Ordinary people who are willing to obey and to share their faith with those who are seeking...

With the help of Christian Doctors who volunteer, **we regularly organize the “Doctors' Days”** in which hundreds of refugees and immigrants can get medical care.

We organize **teaching classes** for those refugees who wanted to learn Greek, English or computer use.

We **accompany and help** those who need to go to the police station for their papers or to hospitals for medical purposes, etc.

We also had a **Guest House** for up to 35 people for 10 years.

For the past years, our facilities have been open:

- on **Tuesdays** we provide meals to families (about 140 people each time),
- on **Wednesdays**, we offer showers and a meal to women and children
- on **Thursdays** offer showers to men and English classes;

The influx of refugees and immigrants is massive, but we can only host a limited number on these days.

- **on Fridays, however, everybody can come;** this day we serve tea and welcome many newly arrived refugees and immigrants in Athens.

In these ministry programs, the refugees can use our facilities for almost 4 hours for eating, using the **bathrooms, charging phones, meeting with their friends, etc.**

Before the day ends, - **we come to the most important hour of our ministry - we invite those who want to learn about Jesus to join our Bible discussion groups** (for about 1 hour) while the rest leave. **Amazingly, almost one third** of our visitors (most of them being Muslims) chose to stay! They listen to the Bible message and many of them ask questions.

Throughout the years, we have seen hundreds of refugees seeking out to learn about Jesus. **Many of them gave their lives to Jesus!** And not only that, but **they eagerly share the gospel** with their relatives and friends, anywhere they go!

Here are some true stories of salvation:

“A” an Afghan man with his wife and his child came to our center for the services we provided for the refugees. Soon he showed interest to know about Jesus for whom he heard in our center.

One day he came and talked with one member of our team. He said *“I had a dream in which I saw a woman and a man beside the door of a small church telling me that through the door was the Way and the Truth”*.

He asked... **What is this all about? What does it mean?**

And our team member explained to him **all about Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life**. For many days he was reading the N.T. and asking questions and one day he asked to teach him how to pray and gave his heart to Jesus. And he **asked immediately from us to pray that his wife too can believe in Jesus**. A week later, the Lord saved his wife too.

The story of “M”: Nothing will stop me loving Jesus”

One Sunday morning at a local Greek Fellowship in Athens, we had a feeling that the heavens were opened to celebrate the salvation of 5 refugees who became Christians and were giving their testimonies in public through their baptisms. One of them was an Iranian man “M”. The night before he has set his alarm to awake up at 6:00 am. He wanted to spend some time alone with God to read and pray before coming to the church.

But he was not woken up by his alarm.

The night before, his cousin found out that he was **intending to go through the waters of baptism**. And a little before 6:00am, his cousin got up before him, boiled some water and poured it on him while he was sleeping, **burning his thighs and arm!**

After being rushed to the hospital by a Christian friend and received medical treatment, he came to the Greek Church. Before his baptism, he shared his testimony and said,.. **“No matter what they do to me, I will love Jesus.”**

I must also emphasize that “Refugees are the best missionaries”. Like the Afghan man who accepted the Lord in Greece at H.H., moved on to Belgium and was received his documents. But He had all the time great passion for his people. He prayed, and decided to go back to Turkey to work among the thousands of Afghan who were living there and tried to start an Afghan Church.

He found a work for himself and started talking to his countrymen about his new religion, about Jesus Christ. Twelve of them showed interest and he invited them to his house on Sunday.

The next Sunday there came the 12 and a new one who after hearing about Jesus wanted to pray and give his life to Jesus.

You see...Here we have an Afghan who comes to Greece,... hears about Jesus at H.H.,...accepts Jesus...moves to Belgium when he joined a church, grew in His faith...let by the God to reach out to his countrymen and sends him to Turkey and there he leads people to Jesus...

The expansion of the vision...

Part of our vision, was and is to multiply Ministry Sites – to engage missions' minded churches by introducing them to the needs of refugees and issues in refugee ministry. By building a network of church-based ministries that meet the spiritual and physical needs of the refugees.

What does this mean in practice? What are some of the steps we followed?

1. **We organized special meetings** for all the Athens based pastors – from every denomination.

Presenting our vision to serve the refugees and speaking to them about Jesus

Encouraging them that they do not have anything to fear from them

Bringing many refugees to cook for them and to serve them and to share their testimonies

Explaining how they believed in Jesus

We were inviting them for several years once each year.

The ice of fear started braking.... but still being cautious. At least they started supporting financially.

2. **We organized one day trip** to North Greece, in the city of Thessaloniki and invited all the pastors and the church members of the church of the city and from the nearby cities and villages. About 200 Greek believers came from 10 different churches.

The team members and about 20 refugee believers had a two hours meeting where we explained our vision. Asked the refugees to sing hymns in their language and all of them gave their testimonies.

The Greek believers were not leaving... They wanted more to hear... Had many questions...

- **Things started braking.**
- **The news spread among believers that God is working and real Muslims became Christians.....**
- **Helping Hands started having invitations to go and speak in different churches and bring Refugee Christians to share their testimonies.**

3. **I decided**, as a former pastor of the largest Evangelical Church of Greece and because of my position I was known in the country, **to visit all the churches, which were open, and preach and speak about the unique opportunity we have to evangelize the refugees.**

Doors were opened and the majority of the pastors, elders and lay people were encouraged by everything the Lord was doing. And **they started slowly supporting H.H.** by praying and donating money and things.

I have done this for almost 15 years (I am still going around) till some young pastors took a step of faith and wanted to try to reached out to the Greek homeless in their parish and to the refugees too.

- 4 **A fourth step** that we took was to encourage the pastors of the City of Athens, to open their churches to the refugees by promising to them that we will send one H.H. staff, once a week if they want to try for one year.

The leadership Team of H.H. was certain that if one church starts something then many more will follow.

Ant this is what exactly happen.

Took us more than 15 years of speaking, encouraging but now a number of churches from every denomination are involved in some form of ministry for refugees, and homeless people.

But the year of 2015 changed Greece upside down and we lived a miracle!

We had to face **two problems**:

- ... **the economic crisis**
- ... the **refugee wave**, coming by thousands every day.

Where is the miracle?

That through the years, the Lord prepared the churches for this day.

To our amazement leaders of churches came together to see how to serve the refugees.

They organized teams to prepare the food from 2.000 and up to 10.000 refugees a day just in one place - **Edomeni**.

Christians were trained to go and serve in different areas of Greece where refugees were staying waiting to leave the country.

Of course there were and are many MKO who provide food and medical care, etc. **But Christians had a unique opportunity to share the gospel.**

It was obvious **that eventually the big wave of coming refugees will stop** and many refugees will be moved into government refugee centers...

And this led to the second miracle...this opened the way for the Churches and Christian people to open their churches and their homes to take in whole families to stay with them, knowing that they will stay for more than 6 months.

Now many refugees **live with Christians in their homes...**

asking questions about Jesus...

going to the worship services...

hearing through translation **to the sermons....**

asking for a N.T in their language, ...

using the SD cards in their phones **to hear about God...**

In the city of Thessaloniki, the Greek Evangelical Church **organizes fellowship meals** and **invites** the refugees who are staying with different families...

- they have the opportunity to meet other refugees,.
- they hear a simple sermon about God's love and salvation.
- they watch the Jesus film...
- they learn Greek or English. Many are coming.
- We also help them with medical issues and with their asylum application forms, etc.

In the Greek Evangelical Church in the village of New Milotopos,-which is located about 20 kilometers from the ancient city of Pella where is the Palace of Alexander the Great, in N. Greece,- **in one of the Church's worship time, an Iraqi lady was praying silently** and crying for long time. When was asked by a member of the church, if she is O.K., if she needs something... She said, **"thank you for asking, but I do not need anything...I am crying because we were living in Hell and God brought us to paradise, among His angels...."**

All these are happening because many believers taken seriously God's call for action and participation in the building of His church.

I am saying all this in order to encourage you, so you encourage others to NOT be afraid. **We believe in a God who is in control and He has not lost it. We can trust Him.** And our peace rest on His word that **will never leave us nor forsake us.**

We must encourage our congregations that we are living in unique times to make a difference in the lives of many refugees/immigrants who never heard about Jesus.

Our vision is to see opening in many cities, “Day Refugee Centers”, like H.H. and to invite refugees from different, close by Hot Spots/camps, to come during the day and spent time with us, trying to make friends and help them according to their needs and give them the opportunity to stay and hear about Jesus.

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