



Hebrews 13.¹⁻²

Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

The Hebrew Bible is packed with warnings about how a people who claim fidelity to God are to treat “strangers.” “Strangers” are not to be “vexed” or “oppressed.”¹ No “violence” is to be practiced against them.² “Thou shalt love them as thyself,” God’s people are directed concerning “strangers.”³ God, Himself, not only loves and cares for Israel’s vulnerable, but “loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.”⁴ Of course, God, Himself, rarely conducts such distribution of food directly and personally, but does so through those who, as true followers, heed and obey His requirement of food and clothing distribution to the vulnerable “stranger.”⁵

Just treatment of the “stranger” extends beyond the economic sphere. There are to be treated justly in the legal system as well.⁶ “Strangers” are to be welcome participants in the community that is formed through covenant.⁷ Indeed, “strangers that sojourn among you, which shall beget children among you: and they shall be unto you as born in the country among the children of Israel; they shall have inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel.”⁸ Just as a “curse” is pronounced upon individuals who commit incest, or murder for hire, or steal other’s property, or make and worship idols, so too is a curse pronounced upon those who “perverteth justice toward the stranger.”⁹ Though it is not recognized, the poor treatment of and violence toward strangers was one of the reasons—indeed, the final nail in the coffin—for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁰

Now, just to be clear, the “stranger” is a refugee, a migrant, an immigrant, a resident alien, anyone not native to the land. As can be seen in today’s reading, it was incumbent upon Christians to not only follow Jewish tradition in loving and assisting those who were close to them (*philadelphos*), but to love and be generous toward those who were not close to them, in this case, foreigners (*philoxenia*).

The mention of the “entertaining” of “strangers”—providing food and shelter—is almost certainly a reference to Abraham and his acceptance of and care for three strangers in Genesis 18. These three strangers turned out to be messengers (angels?) with a message for Abraham: Together, he and Sarah

¹ Exodus 22.²¹; 23.⁹; Jeremiah 7.⁶; Zechariah 7.¹⁰

² Jeremiah 22.³

³ Leviticus 19.³⁴

⁴ Deuteronomy 10.¹⁸

⁵ Deuteronomy 24.¹⁹⁻²²

⁶ Deuteronomy 1.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

⁷ Deuteronomy 29.¹¹

⁸ Ezekiel 47.²²

⁹ See Deuteronomy 27.¹⁵⁻²⁶

¹⁰ See Genesis 19

would have a son of their own. What if Abraham had not received and shown generosity to the strangers? Would he and Sarah still have had a son of their own, or would they have only remained ignorant of their potential future son? I don't know. But Abraham was blessed with a message from God because of his generosity toward strangers.

The writer of Hebrews suggests that we too might receive messages from God through foreigners. Thus, foreigners become messengers, angels. Certainly, how we treat foreigners is revelatory as to who we are. Thus, at the very least, strangers serve to reveal to us our true character.

Unfortunately, America's treatment of foreigners yields an ugly revelation as the nation fails the test of character with its declaration of war on foreigners. If we entertained foreigners—loved and provided for them as we would ourselves—who knows what glorious revelations and promises we might receive. But, in our refusal to love and provide for them as we would provide for ourselves, we are revealed as Sodomites, worthy of fire and brimstone.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: june 6, 2024)