

Study Guide for “To Breathe Free”

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

To Breathe Free follows the 5-year journey of a Syrian family fleeing the war in Homs to the refugee camps in Jordan and starting a new life in Washington, D.C. Using home movies, phone video, family photos and interviews with family members and former refugees, this short documentary gives an intimate and unique perspective not seen in current media reporting on the refugee crisis. *To Breathe Free* captures the intersection of individual narratives from a family fleeing the Vietnam War in 1970, to the Syrian Conflict in 2017, to the families who help create a new home in our nation's capital, giving voice to our common humanity and the struggle that binds people together. It features the ministry of refugee resettlement at Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church.

The film can be shown in a one-time session or as one segment of a study series. It might be shown in conjunction with a panel discussion or an activity to support a local refugee resettlement program or church ministry.

This study guide is intended to help viewers reflect upon specific points of the narrative and quotes from the film, while also making connections with their own stories, experiences and insights. Two people featured in the film are Merritt Groeschel, mother of the family that took in the refugees, and Loan Nguyen, a former refugee herself that works with the Chevy Chase Refugee Ministry. They assisted in the creation of this study guide.

For a broader discussion of refugees and immigration, *To Breathe Free* can be shown in conjunction with the film *Locked in a Box* - a 26 minute film about U.S. immigration detention. Both films are very enlightening on issues facing refugees and will undoubtedly lead to thoughtful discussion amongst the viewers.

What’s in this guide?

This guide contains the following sections:

- **Questions for discussion**
- **Bible Study Suggestions**
- **Refugee Ministry Resources**
- **Handouts** [one page for each Bible passage and discussion questions]

General Discussion Questions

The leader may select one or more of the following questions, depending upon the purpose of the group and the time available. If the group is large, dividing into smaller groups would be helpful.

Quotes from the film and the questions they raise:

A young member of the host family poses: "How can there be all this destruction and a war going on and we aren't learning about it in school?"

- How does this happen and what should the faith community be doing about it?

The clips of the family saying goodbye to their parents and family in Jordan are powerful and emotional.

- Did that piece of the documentary resonate with you, and how?
- Have you ever had to say good-bye to a close family member or friend, possibly never to see them again?
- If not, what do you think it would take for people to decide to leave behind their closest family members, their parents and next-of-kin, possibly to never see them again?

The father says, "I never thought for a single moment about coming to America. Not America or any other country. We thought the crisis in Syria would end today or tomorrow and we would return to Syria." People fleeing their homes leave behind not just loved ones, but possessions and plans for the future.

- What would you be leaving behind if were forced to leave your home?
- How would you cope with facing such an uncertain and potentially very different future from what you had planned or expected for yourself, for your children?

Loan expresses the relief she felt after the long journey to find the Chevy Chase church members there to meet them at the airport.

- Can you describe what you think that welcome must have felt like?
- Have you ever been welcomed by strangers? How did it make you feel?

The father of the refugee family says, "Our concept of family has become more. I don't know how to describe it."

- What do you think the father is trying to say?
- When have you been a part of a group outside of the traditional "family" that has caused you to expand your concept of family? Who was it and how did it happen?

Loan says, "You fear what you don't know. It's about not understanding what the situation is the refugees are coming from or running from. It's not a choice We are compelled to leave. All we are doing is seeking a safe place to continue living our lives."

- What can we, as individuals or a worship community do to better understand the situations refugees are fleeing from around our world?
- What are the differences between this refugee family from Syria and the families who have to evacuate because of a hurricane or other natural disaster?

Merritt goes to some length describing the "vetting process" the refugees went through.

- Was some of this information new to you?
- Did it allay any fears you may have had about welcoming refugees?

Merritt says, "I think it is so important that we do everything we can as Americans and as members of our neighborhoods, to try to integrate people who are coming to our country into our communities, and help them learn about our country and our community because they want to. If we fully integrate them into our lives, it makes everyone's lives richer."

- Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- What would "integrating" refugees into your community look like?

Toward the end of the video, the refugee father says, "Our Christian brothers have been there for us. I never thought of sorting people as Christian and non-Christian till this crisis came. On the contrary, I only saw good things from them."

- What is your reaction to his statement?
- If roles were reversed, and our Muslim brothers were helping us out, would you be able to make a similar statement?

As an adult, Loan reflects "...that feeling of being safe. It just stays with you."

- Just imagine for a minute how powerful that gift is.
- How do you think it would feel, after all that refugees have been through to be able to give them "that feeling of being safe"?

Part of the film described the nuts and bolts of helping the refugee family become acclimated to life in America. It is obvious that many Chevy Chase members volunteered to be a part of the process. Merritt says, "Everyone has a role to play."

- What kinds of roles can you imagine yourself or your congregation filling in this kind of ministry?
- What benefits for the congregation do you see in starting a refugee ministry?
- What challenges do you see for the congregation in starting a refugee ministry?
- Where could you start?

Bible Study Suggestions

Scriptures may be used for opening devotions or for more extensive Bible study before or after viewing the video.

With any of the passages included in this study a group could engage in the following process:

- Someone reads the passage out loud
- The group spends some time in extended silence [2-5 minutes, which should be stated and timed]
- During the silence, individuals note the word or phrase in the text that most stays with them or calls for their attention.
- When the silence concludes, participants share their initial response to the passage.
- The group may then continue to discuss the passage, using one or more of the discussion questions

The following scriptural passages present different ways to think about immigrants and refugees:

Genesis 21: 8 - 20—Hagar and Ishmael are evicted

Exodus 1: 8 - 2:10 - Baby Moses is born in a time of slavery and placed in the Nile river

Matthew 2: 13 - 22—Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with the baby Jesus

Matthew 25: 31 - 46—Jesus address about providing for the “least of these”

Ephesians 2: 11 - 22—Jews and Gentiles reconciled into one body in Christ

Handouts

The handouts included with this study guide are formatted as one page for each scripture passage referenced above with the same discussion questions for each. In addition, the leader may wish to print out the Refugee Ministry Resources page that follows or other informational resources available through the PDA website.

Refugee Ministry Resources

Locked in a Box Film and Discussion Guide: www.pcusa.org/StoryProductions

We Choose Welcome Action Guide – how to engage your congregation from education to hospitality to advocacy. www.pcusa.org/WeChooseWelcome

The Refugee Overseas Processing and Screening – step by step guide - www.state.gov/documents/organization/266671.pdf

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is a ministry of relief and response to national and international disasters, aid to refugees and displaced persons, refugee resettlement and efforts toward development. PDA partners with Mid Councils and local congregations in the U.S. and with church partners and faith-based relief organizations internationally. www.pcusa.org/pda/refugee

Peacemaking Program, in urgent response to the overwhelming culture of violence in our world, works toward transforming cultures of violence into communities of peace. Peacemaking responds with the community to inspire new approaches, equips God's people to be compassionate and prophetic peacemakers, and connects communities of peace to learn from each other and take action together for the transformation of the world. www.pcusa.org/peacemaking

The **Office of Immigration Issues** was established in 2004 to provide legal advice and counsel to mid-councils and congregations regarding immigration issues. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has expanded the work of the Office to coordinate advocacy and education efforts and create worship materials on U.S. immigration. www.pcusa.org/immigration

Office of Public Witness is the public policy information and advocacy office. Its task is to advocate, and help the church to advocate, the social witness perspectives and policies of the Presbyterian General Assembly. Read their blog for the most recent news: www.presbyterianmission.org/opw

Genesis 21:8-20 8

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.10So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.'11The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.12But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you.13As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.' 14So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.18Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' 19Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

What feelings or thoughts does this passage evoke in you? Any particular word or phrase that struck you?

What do you know of the refugee/immigrant experience from this passage?

What do you know of God from this passage?

What does this passage say about how the church/people of faith should act?

Exodus 1: 8 - 2:10

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14 and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." 17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." 20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. 22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

2 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. 5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

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Matthew 2:13-22 13

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." 16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." 19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." 21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

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Matthew 25:31-40; 41-46

{The group might stop with v. 40 or continue through v. 46}

31 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." 37Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 40And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." 44Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" 45Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

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Ephesians 2:11-22 11

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body*through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.* 17So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

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