

In the Debate About Immigrants, Don't Forget Compassion

My friend Dawit (not his real name) is a 33-year-old immigrant from the troubled nation of Eritrea. When he was a teenager, he and his 11 siblings walked more than eight hours to the Sudanese border to escape the communist country. Eventually, in 2010, Dawit and his family arrived in the United States to seek a better life.

After spending some time in California, Dawit moved to the Atlanta area to work as a truck driver. I met him in 2022 through a mutual friend who is also from Eritrea, and I prayed with Dawit on the phone when he decided to become a Christian. We've stayed in touch weekly, and I send him tips on how to grow as a disciple of Jesus.

This past week, Dawit called me to ask if I could baptize him. He had been studying his Bible, and he realized that he needed to solidify his commitment to Jesus and make a public declaration of his faith. So he drove his 18-wheeler to my city, an hour from Atlanta, and I baptized him in a swimming pool while several friends watched.

Before the baptism, I read aloud the story of the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. I highlighted verse 37, in which the Ethiopian boldly told the evangelist Philip: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37b, NASB 1995). Dawit repeated those words confidently, and then we got in the water. His smile in that holy moment was another clear sign that Jesus has transformed his life.

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This baptism on a sunny Saturday afternoon in a suburban neighborhood in Georgia was no small miracle. Dawit's story could have ended much differently, because Eritrea is a dangerous place.

Dictator Isaias Afewerki has ruled the small nation since 1993. Bordering Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti, the country is known as "the North Korea of Africa" because Afwerki's tyrannical regime closed all evangelical and independent churches, and he aggressively persecutes Christians.

More than 500,000 Eritreans have fled the country in recent years, but many others who've tried to escape have been jailed, tortured or killed. Some Eritrean refugees attempt dangerous voyages to Italy each year, but many never make it to the shores alive.

Thankfully, Dawit escaped Eritrea by the grace of God. Today he has a good job, and he rents a house in an Atlanta suburb. He listens to sermons and Christian praise songs while he drives his truck on long hauls across America.

I know the issue of immigration is a tense topic these days. It's tragic that our government is allowing millions of illegal immigrants to cross our southern border without enforcing existing security laws. The office of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection says almost 7.3 million migrants have illegally crossed our southern border since 2021. That's more people than the population of 36 states.

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The recent murder of Georgia college student Laken Riley, allegedly at the hands of an illegal immigrant from Venezuela, proved to all of us that we shouldn't just let any foreigner march into our country without being vetted. Rather than throwing all doors open, we should require foreigners who are

seeking asylum in the United States to go through the official citizenship process, just as other immigrants entering this country have done.

At the same time, we can't forget that the United States is a nation of immigrants—and we can't throw out all compassion just because some people have abused the system. There will always be people like Dawit who are trapped in a hellish situation in their homeland. Dawit and his family were not criminals. They craved freedom from tyranny, and their only hope was to come to America. Once Dawit got here, he also found spiritual freedom.

My life is richer today because of immigrants like Dawit. I'm now close friends with Americans who were born in Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, Ukraine, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, El Salvador, Mexico, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, China, Indonesia, Egypt and so many other countries. Hearing their testimonies has strengthened my faith in Jesus.

God told the ancient Israelites to love foreigners. He said in Leviticus 19:34a: "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

I hear some Christians today speaking harshly about immigrants—as if every person seeking freedom here in the United States were a terrorist. Don't let that kind of hate grow in your heart. Yes, we must secure our border and deport criminals, but we should also put out the welcome mat for those who are seeking freedom. And we must welcome them into our congregations because we are one family.

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