

Scripture and the Scattered Church: A Biblical Theology of Migration and God's Faithfulness

Let me begin with underscoring the notable fact that the United States and Burma have a long history of extensive interaction, with enduring implications for the two nations. Burma was the largest mission field for American Baptists, who evangelized the Burmese from diverse ethnicities, cultures, and languages from 1813 to 1966. The gospel they brought with them and preached was widely received by peripheral ethnic minorities in the highlands of modern Burma. Thanks to utmost tenacity, dedication, and sacrifice by bygone American Baptist missionaries, many upland people—the Akha, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa—accepted the gospel, adopted Christianity for their religion and culture, and evangelized their own people. Today Christian traditions, practices, names, music, arts, architectures, and literatures have been intrinsically entwined with the collective lives and societies of many Akha, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa. Akha, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, and Wa Christians have been grateful to American Baptist missionaries for evangelizing them, which proves what Paul says in Romans 10:14: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

While evangelizing Burma, many American Baptist missionaries, including, but not limited to, Adoniram Judson, Jonathan Wade, Francis Mason, Albert J. Lyon, and Arthur Carson, lost their lives, underscoring the huge cost of proselytizing diverse races in the highlands of modern-day Burma. What came out of such utmost dedication and ultimate sacrifice is that Burma has been home to three to four million Christians, with more than half of them Baptists. This is apparently what the Bible tells us: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). It must be added that while evangelizing Burma, missionaries also lost the lives of their wives and their children, which means sorrow and tears defined the history of the American Baptist mission in Burma. This is a timeless and classic testament to what the Psalmist says: “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him” (Psalm 126:6).

Burma became independent in 1948, when the British left what was then called British Burma, and upland people, such as the Akha, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Lahu, Wa, and some

Karen, joined what has become known today as the union of Burma. While British colonialists returned home, American Baptist missionaries remained and continued evangelizing Burma, which resulted in Christianity taking deep root. It was, however, sad and outrageous that the military, led by General Ne Win, suspended democracy in 1962 and replaced it with military tyranny, which literally upended the collective fate and future of the everyday Burmese from all religions, races, and languages. Ne Win subsequently expelled missionaries from Burma, nationalized mission schools and hospitals, banned native Christians from leaving the young nation, and restricted church activities. Ne Win and all successive dictators have adopted and executed the policy of excluding, restricting, and persecuting Christians ever since. All in all, religious persecution has defined the collective lives of Burmese Christians. While enduring suffering and hardship, they sought refuge and strength in God (Psalm 46:1).

In the face of violence and persecution perpetrated and perpetuated by their cruel military rulers, Burmese Christians place their unshakeable trust in God; whether they live or die, they are with God and God is with them. It is their belief that God would not lay on them more than they can bear. In the midst of repression and misery, they sing *Amazing Grace*, because they believe in that grace. When they sustain persecution, they sing *Amazing Grace*, because they believe in that grace. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Instead of lamenting over military autocracy, they transform their suffering into strength, resilience, and audacity. Instead of decrying the painful past, they move on, with faith and hope in the promises of God. It is surely God who gives them courage and strength to face and overcome any challenges (Philippians 4:13).

What I have learned, to my surprise, is that despite the hell of state persecution, violence, and suffering, Burmese Christians seek and find serenity in God. While accepting hardship and agony, they put their unwavering faith in him and praise his holy name. What I am sure of is the promise of Christ in the Bible: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). An infinite peace comes from God and God alone. Thus, they, with Augustine, rightly state: “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.”

Christians are keenly aware of their precarious situation in a country hostile to them. They are, on the one hand, called to do justice in society, and on the other hand, they are, as stated before, vulnerable to violence and persecution. They have attempted to balance their prophetic calling and their perilous socio-political context when they have practiced their faith,

which means they need to be prophetic and cautious at the same time. Jesus warns his disciples: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Attentive to the volatile political context, which requires care, courage, and prudence, church leaders typically refer to this biblical text while telling Christians how to live their faith. To be sure, life is, and has been, never easy for them. They have endured hardship and suffering, but they refuse to be hopeless; they remain faithful to God regardless of hardship and suffering. “Though the fig trees do not blossom or fruit be on the vine; the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food; though the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3).

What has to be categorically stated here is that despite deliberate exclusion, restriction, and brutality from the state, which was, and has been, the historically infamous military, the church has not only survived but also expanded, precisely because of two fundamental factors. First, early Christians were steadfast in what they believed and remained faithful to God in the face of uphill challenges against them. They were stronger than ever before despite, not because of, suffering and tears under military rule. They knew that the promises of God would overcome any challenges. Second, God was with them and gave them the audacity and strength to endure and overcome all difficulties. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

Because of exclusion, violence, and persecution, hundreds of thousands of Christians, especially the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, ultimately left their country and sought refuge in India, Malaysia, and Thailand. When they crossed land borders or the sea, many of them tragically lost their lives. While crossing the Andaman Sea, dozens of Chin refugees, for instance, were drowned and buried in the sea, subsequently shocking Chin communities across the globe. Nobody could fill the void of their absence, because they are not replaceable. “There is hope for a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again and its shoots not cease. But we die and disappear. We breathe our last and where are we.” (Job 14:7, 10). “As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so he who goes down to the grave does not return. He will never come to his house again; his place will know him no more” (Job 7:9-10).

While Chin and Kachin refugees in India and Malaysia have been unwanted, unprotected, and unsafe, Karen refugees in Thailand have been restricted to camps like caged

birds. Karen refugees have been confined to gated camps while Chin and Kachin refugees have lived in cities illegally and faced potential arrest, torture, deportation, and more. Lonely, distressed, and fearful, they have sought peace in God, who alone understands the depth and magnitude of their sufferings. Remember that Jesus, like Chin, Kachin, and Karen refugees, was once a refugee in Egypt (Matthew 2: 13-15). Those who have never lived in camps in Thailand seem unable to understand the depressed lives of Karen refugees, and those who have never lived in India or Malaysia illegally also appear unable to understand the harsh lives of Chin and Kachin refugees. When they became exhausted and burdened, they sought comfort, endurance, and resilience in the promises of God. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11: 29-30). They are lonely, but God never abandons them; he seeks them. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

While in India, Malaysia, and Thailand, they have good days as well as bad days. Some of their prayers were answered, but some remained unanswered. Some of their dreams had come true, but some were dashed on the rocks of hard reality. Some of their plans came to fruition, but others surely remained undone. Regardless of what happened to them, they believed that God has been in charge of the details of their lives (Psalm 139: 7-12). They have placed their fate, their destiny, and their future in God, who alone understands their agony, their burden, and their suffering. "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield" (Psalm 33: 20). "There is nowhere I can go where God's love will not find me" (Psalm 139). In the midst of uphill challenges, they stood firm in their faith and hope in God. Even when they didn't know what the future held for them, they believed in the promises of God, who has been in control of their future destiny. God is with them, knows their suffering, hears their lament, and suffers with them.

"Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4). God has neither abandoned nor left Burmese refugees; he has been with them as their companion. Time went by, and God finally led hundreds of thousands of them, desperate Chin, Kachin, and Karen refugees, out of their Egypt, and let them enter the promised land of the United States. Since American Baptists evangelized Burma, the United States has a special place in the hearts of Burmese Christians. Some two hundred thousand Chin, Kachin, and Karen refugees left Asia and came to this country. What must not be left unstated here is that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Chin, Kachin, and Karen refugees died while in India, Malaysia, and Thailand. I

visited Malaysia twice and saw some of their final resting places. Their dreams of immigrating and rebuilding their lives here in this country became shattered forever. Such shattered dreams vividly remind us of the nature of life and the story of Paul. The Bible tells us that Paul surely wants to visit and evangelize Spain, but he never sees, let alone evangelizes, the people of Spain (Romans 15:24)).

Those who ultimately left Asia for the United States brought with them virtually nothing but their own bodies and the clothes on their backs. When they landed in American cities and towns, they became stunned and amazed. With abiding love, amazing grace, and utmost generosity, Americans—individuals, families, churches, and social services—embraced them, new Americans, with open arms and helped them in all possible ways to not only survive but also flourish, thus embodying the best part of Christian values and traditions. “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25: 35-40).

Living in a land of freedom, Burmese Christian immigrants are now free from lingering fear of restriction, violence, and persecution from their former military dictators, who have abused religious minorities with utter impunity. They can freely worship, speak their mind in public without reprisal, and express what they sincerely believe without fear. They can freely build churches, publish ethnic and religious literatures, and learn their own vernaculars. Living in a land of opportunities, where all people can achieve their fullest potential, they, like other Americans, have pursued the American dream. The transformation they have undergone has been remarkable. It is hard to overstate the sheer scale and magnitude of blessings they have received since their arrival. Let me count some, but not all, of their blessings: they own homes, cars, and businesses, their children are educated at U.S. colleges, universities, and seminaries, they use U.S. hospitals, and some of them visit world cities—Athens, Jerusalem, London, New York, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, and others—as tourists. What God has done in their individual and collective lives is more than amazing. He fills their lives with good things (Psalm 103: 5). “How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you” (Psalm 31:19). To God be the Glory!

What has to be emphatically stated here is that Burmese Christian immigrants have been made indebted forever to the American people, without whose love, grace, and generosity, neither freedom nor prosperity for them would be possible at all. They must remember how the Americans embraced them, shared their blessings, and let them become Americans. Note that

those who are devoid of memory are devoid of gratitude, and those who are devoid of gratitude are devoid of thanks to God. The Bible teaches us that we must be grateful to those who help us for their service (Luke 17:11-19). Chin, Kachin, and Karen immigrants must be, therefore, grateful for all the love, grace, generosity, and help the Americans have given them. It is helpful to remember that generations of the Americans have built their spectacular cities, towns, universities, highways, airports, libraries, and more, and hundreds of thousands of the Chin, Kachin, and Karen come, live, and use them.

The point of my contention here is simple: Chin, Kachin, and Karen immigrants are morally required to love, cherish, and serve the best interests of their new country, which first embraced, loved, and served them. They must remain dedicated and loyal to the United States. What is more, when their new country would receive more refugees from other parts of the world in the future and when new immigrants arrive in U.S. cities and towns, Chin, Kachin, and Karen immigrants must welcome them and help them in all possible ways. They have biblical and moral responsibility to embrace future immigrants. The Bible states: “And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19).

The church has been indispensable to the lives of Christians, so when they landed in the United States, Burmese Christian immigrants also founded hundreds of ethnic churches, large and small, in cities and towns across the country. I have the rare privilege of visiting dozens of Burmese immigrant churches in Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Nashville, Philadelphia, St. Joseph, St. Paul, and more. The sight of Burmese Christian immigrants—mostly ethnic Chin, Kachin, and Karen—reading the Bible, singing hymns, and preaching in their respective ethnic vernaculars is incredible. Recall that the Chin, Kachin, Karen, and other minorities in Burma continue to struggle to preserve and practice their religion, languages, cultures, and identities. It is notable that Chin, Kachin, and Karen immigrants in the United States have freedom to express their cultures and costumes, use and maintain their ethnic literatures, and speak their mother languages.

Nobody ever imagined, let alone predicted, before the 1990s that God would someday change the long course of Chin, Kachin, and Karen history by leading and letting hundreds of thousands of them enter the United States, a land of opportunities, hope, and freedom. I, with Paul and Jeremiah, therefore, believe: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). Looking back to what God has done in

the individual and collective lives of Burmese Christian immigrants, we can see the remarkable art of God—his abiding love, lasting faithfulness, and abundant blessings. We can sing *How Great Thou Art*. To God be the Glory. May God continue to bless the American people richly as they continue to embrace and welcome vulnerable people like Burmese immigrants.

What has to be emphatically stated here is that though they left Burma, a land of tyranny and atrocity, years to decades ago, most Burmese immigrants neither forget their brothers and sisters back home nor detach themselves from the mounting costs of the 2021 coup decimating cities, towns, and villages across the country. It is important to note that the hell of extreme violence and atrocious war has displaced millions of the everyday Burmese, killed tens of thousands of people, and impoverished the entire nation. Left with no place to return and live safely, countless men, women, and children found themselves living in camps without enough foods, clothes, and medicines, and nobody knows for sure when the midnight of repression, terror, and death under military rule would end. Not unlike Joseph, who helps his destitute brothers in Egypt (Genesis 42), Burmese immigrants in the United States have helped their own brothers and sisters back in Burma to share and reduce their suffering. I believe that God sent us, Burmese immigrants, to this great country in part to help our brothers and sisters who continue to struggle under their repressive military rulers.

While counting the splendid opportunities and blessings Burmese immigrants have received here in the United States, their new country, we are, indeed, not unaware of the important fact that their lives are, and have been, neither perfect nor free from any challenges. They know in their deep bones that they live in the real, imperfect, world. Due to numerous reasons—language and culture barriers, illness, loneliness, stress, alcoholism, and more—many of them face uphill challenges in their lives. What must not be left unsaid, moreover, is that they are not among the highest-income and best-educated racial groups either. To be sure, they are one of the humblest ethnic groups in contemporary America society.

However, what is important to recall is that while their lives in the United States are imperfect, it is still 100 times better than their old lives in Burma. While recognizing the tough reality of their everyday lives, they are fully aware of where they came from, why and how they left Burma, and how God protected them from dangers, walked with them, and carried them all the way from Burma, India, Malaysia, and Thailand to the West. They never lose sight of what God has done for them; they remember his abiding love, amazing grace, enduring faithfulness, and unfailing protection in the course of their uneasy journey from Burma to the United States. To remain faithful to God, who embraced and brought them to this blessed country, Burmese

immigrant church leaders need to tell and retell their collective history to present and future generations. They must keep this story—the story of their immigration—alive in their social and religious memory. It is worth stating that Joshua reminds his people that God liberated them, protected them, and blessed them (Joshua 24:1-24). “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24: 15). Burmese Christian immigrants in this country must remain faithful to God, who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

“Our days are like grass; we flourish like flowers of the field; the wind passes over and we are gone, and our place knows us no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord abides forever” (Psalm 103). “For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord” (Psalm 117:2). “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him” (Psalm 103: 11).

Pum Za Mang

Princeton Theological Seminary

Princeton, NJ