

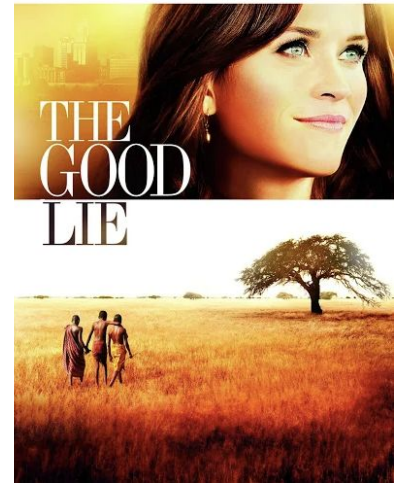


Off-Weeks: October 16 & 23

1. Watch the Movie: *“The Good Lie”*

Available to rent (\$3) on Google Play, Amazon, or YouTube

After their village is destroyed and their parents killed by Northern militia, Sudanese orphans Theo, his siblings and other survivors make a difficult journey to a refugee camp in Kenya. Thirteen years later, the group gets the chance to settle in the U.S. They are met in Kansas by Carrie Davis (Reese Witherspoon), who has been charged with finding them jobs. However, seeing how adrift they are in 20th-century America, Carrie endeavors to help them in rebuilding their shattered lives.



2. Read 3 Refugee Stories Below

Rami: a Syrian Veterinarian

Rami and his three siblings grew up in a middle-class Sunni Muslim home in Homs, Syria, the children of a taxi driver and a stay-at-home mom. Following high school, he found work finishing granite countertops while he studied veterinary science. After earning his associate's degree, Rami found work in his field, caring for chickens. Eventually he married and started a family. He describes his life in Syria as “wonderful.” It was “a very safe place,” where families would go out on the street and talk to their neighbors. Their life was “beautiful,” Rami remembers—until the spring of 2011, when his country erupted into civil war. “In April 2011, everything changed,” he says, his voice softening somberly.

Syria's civil war emerged amid a larger regional context. In 2010, a female Tunisian police officer slapped twenty-six-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi for selling vegetables without a permit, then confiscated his wooden cart. Mohamed, who was supporting his widowed mother and six siblings, set himself on fire in protest. Video of the humiliating event, captured on a cellphone, resonated with millions of people across the Middle East and North Africa, eager to find their voice and freedom. The Arab Spring had begun.

While Tunisia went through a relatively peaceful transition to democracy, the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad met the initially nonviolent protests in Syria with deadly force. That conflict sparked a civil war that has pitted the Assad government against various rebel groups, most of them composed of Sunni Muslims, who make up the majority of Syrians. Various other countries—including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and the United States—have backed different sides in the war, which has already claimed more than 250,000 lives, one-third or more of them civilians.⁴ While responsible for only a small fraction of the overall deaths, one particular rebel group, the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS, which emerged in 2013, has used headline-grabbing brutal methods and has particularly targeted Christians and other religious minorities.

More than twelve million Syrians—half the total prewar population—have fled their homes to escape this violence. More than four million of those have become refugees outside of the nation's borders, most of them fleeing to neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. While several hundred thousand have continued on to seek asylum in Europe and a much smaller number have been resettled to Canada or the United States, the vast majority of Syrian refugees remain in those neighboring countries.

Among those forced to escape were Rami and his family. When violence first erupted in Homs, Rami tried to stay, in part because his father, suffering from kidney disease, needed regular dialysis. But as rocket fire intensified, once hitting very close to their house with a horrific noise, it became risky even to leave their home. Eventually, electricity was cut off and bread and water became scarce. Rami, his wife, and his children fled—first to another city within Syria, then, in 2012, to Turkey.

Shortly after arriving in Turkey, Rami learned that his father, unable to access medical care, had died. His grieving mother and Rami's three siblings, including a developmentally disabled brother, Raed, decided to make the perilous journey to Turkey as well.

While grateful to be safe from war, life in Turkey—where more than two million Syrians have sought refuge—was very difficult. Without knowing the Turkish language and without legal work authorization, Rami and his family found it almost impossible to sustain themselves. Rami found work repairing air conditioners, and his wife and sisters worked in a garment factory, but still their combined income was insufficient to cover food and rent, because they were paid poorly and mistreated. Unscrupulous employers in Turkey often pay extremely low wages and subject Syrian refugee employees to dangerous or demeaning working conditions, knowing that they cannot complain because they are not technically authorized to work.

Rami and his family registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) shortly after arriving in Istanbul, which qualified them for some limited assistance and opened the possibility—though slim, because only a very small percentage are ultimately approved—that they could be resettled to a third country. Over the next eighteen months, they were interviewed six different times—twice by UNHCR, and then four times by various entities affiliated with the US government, which had identified Rami's family as a uniquely vulnerable case to be considered for resettlement there. The US authorities verified UNHCR's determination that Rami and his family met the legal definition of refugees and determined that they in no way presented a national security or public health threat to the United States.

Finally, Rami and his whole family received notice that they would be among the first Syrians—eight of 2,192 in 2015—to be resettled to the United States as refugees. Rami's sisters, brother, and mother arrived in July 2015. World Relief staff met them at O'Hare airport and took them to their new home in Aurora, Illinois. Rami and his wife and children joined them the following month.

Within a few months, with World Relief's continued help, Rami, his wife, and his sisters all found work, allowing them to cover their rent payments beyond the short window of assistance the organization could provide. Rami enrolled in English classes at the local community college, and he hopes someday to resume work using his training as a veterinarian. For now, though—while grieving all that his family has lost and ever mindful of the vast majority of Syrian people still in harm's way—he is grateful to the people of the United States for receiving him and his family. He is hopeful as he sees a safe, peaceful future for his family.”

Deborah: Persecuted for Following Jesus

Deborah was born in a rural farming community, without electricity, in Burma's Chin State. The Chin are one of many ethnic minorities within Burma, also known as Myanmar. Having been evangelized by American missionaries, most Chin are Baptist Christians, which make them religious minorities in their mostly Buddhist country. Their commitment to following Jesus has led to mistreatment by the Burmese government. “We, the Christians, were persecuted very badly,” Deborah explains. The government expected her to produce a certain amount of food on their farm. Threatened with arrest and imprisonment if she failed to meet an unrealistic quota, Deborah, a widowed single mother, ultimately decided to flee with her nine-year-old son and six-year-old daughter, following in the footsteps of many other Chin Christian refugees. Traveling by foot and occasionally hitching a ride in a small van crammed with other refugees, they finally reached the border with Thailand. From there, Deborah used the little money she had and some jewelry to pay a guide to help them cross surreptitiously through Thailand—traveling only by night, and hiding during the day—to reach Malaysia.

Once safely in Kuala Lumpur, the largest city in Malaysia, Deborah and her kids lived with several other refugee families crammed into a small apartment with a single bathroom. Life there was also difficult: police officers would harass Chin refugees, most of whom had to work illegally to cover their basic living expenses, and threaten them if they did not pay a bribe. But Deborah found solace in a local church and a church-operated school, which provided education for her children. Having learned to speak English through her Christian college in Chin State, Deborah was able to find work as a translator with the International Rescue Committee, a global relief organization. Through those connections, she also was registered as a refugee with UNHCR.

Four years and one month after registering, in May 2013—after four different interviews, where she explained, in detail, why she had been forced to flee Burma—Deborah and her children boarded an airplane for the first time in their lives. They were heading to their new home in the United States. After layovers in Hong Kong and Los Angeles, they landed at Chicago's O'Hare airport. Deborah's uncle, who had been previously resettled in the area, met them there and drove them to their new apartment. When she had first learned that she would be resettled to

Chicago, she thought she would once again be among high-rise buildings, as she had been in Malaysia, but instead she found herself in the more spacious suburbs. As she entered their new apartment in Carol Stream, she found flowers and mangoes waiting for them on the table. At last, Deborah felt she was at home.

The transition to the United States was not always easy, though. It took a few weeks before she would allow her children to go outside and play, the images of police harassing Chin refugees in Malaysia seared in her memory. Work is challenging, too: about three months after her arrival, Deborah found work in a warehouse, packing orders for a large supply chain company. Because the pay wasn't great, she left there and has since held two additional jobs, but most of her income goes toward covering her rent. Still, Deborah says, she is proud of herself: "I am able to pay my rent every month."

Deborah is also very involved in her church, the Falam Christian Church of Chicago, where she teaches Sunday school and preaches on some Sundays. Her faith is really what gave her the strength to seek refuge. And in each location of her journey, she notes that the one common thread has been the importance of the local church.

Today, she is particularly passionate about investing in the next generation: she has written Sunday school curriculum for children, praying that God will use it to help them, as she states, "have the mind of Jesus."

Come: the Potential Locked in a Refugee Camp

Come Nzibarega's gift for languages—he speaks five—helped land him a job, at twenty years of age, as a translator for a United Nations peacekeeping force sent to his country of Burundi. For decades Burundi has been plagued by conflicts between the nation's two largest ethnic groups. By assisting the peacekeeping force, though, the young man became a target for a rebel group.

One dark night, as Come returned from a run, a group of rebels kidnapped him and forced him into the jungle to their compound, where they beat, tortured, tortured, and interrogated him about the UN's operations. Finally, after two weeks, the UN peacekeepers raided the compound. Come was free, but not safe—and he feared that if he returned to his home, he would put his family at risk as well. Leaving behind his parents and siblings, he set out on a long journey to his uncle's house, in a different region of the country. But after he learned that the rebels had tracked him there, he decided to flee Burundi altogether.

Come ended up more than a thousand miles away in a refugee camp in Ethiopia, with a few other Burundians, but many more refugees from Somalia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He missed his family desperately, and the living conditions in the camp were deplorable, with a roof that could not keep water out when it rained. "I was hopeless," Come says. "It was really painful, because I could not see a future in front of me."

Come was also frustrated because he was not allowed to work in the camp, and he saw stifled potential in himself and all around him. "The richest places in the world are refugee camps," Come says, "because everyone is created with a purpose, with gifts, and with talents. Refugee

camps are full of people who are full of potential, but who cannot use their potential. Maybe some of the problems that the world is facing right now, the solutions are in those people who are stuck in refugee camps.”

Come spent his time running, which he found therapeutic. He also found community in a church within the camp, where his faith was deepened in the midst of his pain. “The church helped me a lot,” Come reflects, “giving me hope that God would one day open the door for me to get out. The only thing that gave me hope and joy was knowing that God is in control of everything. And that made me strong.”

Finally, after six years and as many interviews with both UNHCR and the US government, one day a friend told Come that his name was on a list of refugees selected for resettlement, which was posted outside the UNHCR office. At first, Come did not believe it—it was too good to be true, he said. But when he verified it, his name was there. “I was going to be able to fulfill my vision and my dream,” he says.

Come was resettled to Spokane, Washington, on August 29, 2012. He was paired with a roommate—another refugee, from Eritrea—and with a volunteer, Jason, who became a good friend and running buddy. He found work at a Wal-Mart, working a night shift. He became involved in a local church, Genesis Church, which helped provide him with a sense of community, though he still struggles with the cultural differences: in Burundi, he says, you can stop by a friend’s house at any time without scheduling something in advance, which is different from in the United States.

Come also joined the staff of World Relief Spokane, the agency that helped resettle him, where he now serves as a job developer, helping other refugees to find their first jobs. He enjoys interacting with refugees from around the world and seeing them find the dignity of working and providing for themselves, which most were denied in a refugee camp.

Come speaks publicly at every opportunity, telling his story—his testimony of how God has sustained him through incredibly difficult times—and urging anyone who will listen not to forget about those still in refugee camps. He dreams to someday host a television program, where he can provide a platform for others to tell their stories.

“I want to be a voice for refugees who are in refugee camps around the world, who are suffering,” he says, “and to use my story to inspire people who are going through tough times. I truly believe that the world is changed by stories. Even Jesus used to preach using stories. I believe stories are really powerful.”

3. *Recommended:* Read Chapter 6 in *Seeking Refuge*, “Other Displaced People”

1. The authors highlight the plight of internally displaced people. How might you and your group help to address the situation of persecuted people who remain within the boundaries of their countries of origin?

2. Have you ever known someone who sought asylum? If yes, what was his/her experience? If no, were you surprised to learn in this chapter about the unique challenges and vulnerabilities faced by asylum seekers?
3. Coauthor Matthew Soerens relays the story of an undocumented immigrant, Gloria, within his local church who fears being the victim of violence if she were to return to her home country of Mexico. The issue of undocumented immigrants living illegally in the US is contentious in our country. What are your views, and does reading Gloria's story change your perspective at all?
4. Given the gang-related violence currently plaguing many Central American countries, many have argued that children and others who flee from these regions should be treated as refugees. What is your opinion? How do you think the Church should respond to the situation of unaccompanied children who arrive at the US-Mexico border?