

The Pilgrim Concept

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Christian Life | *The Sword & Trowel*

March 2014

‘These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth’ (*Hebrews 11.13*).

THE BIBLE is full of pilgrimage. The eleventh chapter of *Hebrews* speaks among others of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who are described as ‘strangers and pilgrims on the earth’.

‘Strangers’ literally means foreigners, people of a different culture and language. ‘Pilgrims’ are those who live in a foreign land, away from their own people.

In the Bible the pilgrim word implies a journey – travelling home – as we see in *Hebrews 11.14*. It describes those who ‘seek a country’. Biblical pilgrims live in another country alongside the resident community, but they do not fully integrate. They are ‘alongsiders’, soon to go home. They may accomplish great things for the benefit of the country in which they live (as Joseph did), but they never cease to be pilgrims.

They are not like ex-patriots who choose to settle in another country either because they are making their career there, or because they like it better than their own country. Most ‘ex-pats’ are where they are because they want to be, but a sojourner or pilgrim in the Bible has no burning desire to be where he is, except for the service of the Lord, the salvation of souls, and the love of his family. A pilgrim’s primary interest is not in his present country.

The concept of pilgrimage is tremendously important to the Christian, giving guidance on the believer’s stance in all circumstances of life. Without this concept we become unnecessarily sensitive to all the problems and trials of life.

The pilgrim concept is specially vital at the present time, when an increasing number of evangelicals advocate being ‘culturally progressive’ or ‘culturally relevant’, exhorting us to get much more into the world. The very word ‘pilgrim’ sounds a warning, reminding us of our duty to be distinctive and set apart for Christ.

That most famous book *The Pilgrim’s Progress* powerfully takes up the pilgrim term. We remember, too, how Jacob spoke of ‘the days of my pilgrimage’, and that David said, ‘I am a stranger and a sojourner.’ He was a king over his people, and yet he declared himself to be a foreigner and a temporary resident. The apostle Peter also referred to believers as ‘strangers and pilgrims’. Is this term true of us?

The heroes of faith in *Hebrews 11* ‘all died in faith, not having received the promises [in their earthly lifetime], but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them’. They made the promises of an eternal home the engine of their lives, declaring by their lifestyle that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Their lives said, ‘We do not belong here. We are foreigners and temporary dwellers, living in tents, and looking forward to something far better.’

Today’s new teaching says we must love it here, do the things that worldings do, sing their songs, play their genre of music, watch their films and plays, dance their dances, and wear their most daring styles, along with other compromises that would have horrified believers throughout the last two millennia.

Whenever there is a great catastrophe in a wealthy country such as the USA, a freak hurricane, perhaps, destroying homes and possessions, the TV cameras focus on affected residents. In the background we see demolished homes and possessions strewn everywhere. No doubt the people are insured and will survive, obtaining new homes and goods, but they are seen distraught and inconsol-

able, as if their world has come to an end. We understand the shock and upheaval, and the disappointment of losing appreciated things, but so often we see a reaction more appropriate for multiple loss of life. It has evidently meant too much to the sufferers to lose the things they possessed. What has happened is to them the greatest blow imaginable.

Bible pilgrims never thought like that. This world was never their place. Earthly losses and disappointments were never the end of the world to them, because their minds and hearts were not set wholly on earthly things. In a sense they travelled lightly through life, and so should we.

There were three pilgrim feasts in the Old Testament, when the people would go to Jerusalem. There was the Passover, which commemorated the deliverance from Egypt. Pentecost commemorated the end of the grain harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles marked the end of the agricultural working year, also recalling the wilderness journeyings.

All these feasts involved pilgrimage, which reminded the people that all of life is a pilgrimage. On the journey they sang the pilgrim psalms, or songs of degrees (*Psalms 120-134*), especially during the final ascent to the city. The pilgrim theme was a major feature of the calendar.

Are we prepared for a pilgrimage, or do we expect fulfilment and purpose from this alien land? As foreigners, we should take every opportunity to make the world a better, kinder, fairer place to live in, but it is not our place, and many worldly people resent us, or are fairly cool toward us.

It is heresy to think that Christ's purpose is the social reformation of the world. Good works by individual believers are part of our witness, but the clear biblical view of the world is that it is a fallen and doomed world, from which Christ is gathering out his people by grace.

We do not think like worldlings (though once we did), or have the same aspirations, or enjoy the same things. We are bound to be suspected, misunderstood, and even hated. Though many people may be respectful toward us, and appreciative, many more will be hostile in some degree.

All believers at some time experience some form of persecution, and for many it will be very bitter. If we don't understand this, then it will be very painful to us. We should try to be as engaging as we can be, and as helpful and courteous, but we so often remain misfits as far as this world is concerned.

If we know what it means to be pilgrims for Christ, then we understand this, and derive our happiness and peace from him alone. We expect to be slandered and unfairly treated by the world.

Not only is the world hostile to us, but also the devil. He often takes advantage of us while we are 'on the road' away from home, firing at us temptation, despondency, and even doubts of our standing with the Lord. But we are provided with many helps and blessings on our pilgrim way to balance these things.

Six Benefits from Christ

Whatever the trials of pilgrimage, we must set against them the overwhelming benefits, the best of which are described by the Saviour in his great high priestly prayer in *John 17*. We are the enlightened ones, the knowing ones (v 8), those who belong to God (v 10), people who will certainly be kept (v 11) and never lost (v 12), who will have certain joy (v 13), who are sent into the world on a divine mission (v 18), who will be sanctified (v 19), whose mission will succeed (v 20), who will ultimately be vindicated (v 23), and who will finally see the glory of the Lord (v 24).

Benefit of Fellowship

The benefits shine out from *Hebrews 11.13* also – 'These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off.' We particularly notice the word 'all', which reminds us that there are countless believers. We are not alone; there are many others.

It is so precious and valuable for believers to join together on the Lord's Day and on weeknight gatherings to hear the Word, to fellowship together, and to draw pleasure and solace from each

other. It is sad when Christians don't know many people in their church fellowship, because one of the great comforts in the life of a pilgrim is that there are many of us in this family.

Round the world there are millions and millions of Christ's people. Of course we cannot know all of them, but we may think of others, even in the most isolated places. Countless people love Christ and his Word, and live as pilgrims passing through this present evil world. There are far more than we realise, even in our land, and certainly throughout the world. Vast is the company of those who have been brought to see through this world, have met with Christ, and now walk with him. We are not talking about a few pilgrims, but about the largest nationality or clan of like-minded people on earth.

Benefit of Experience

Another benefit that engages our attention in *Hebrews 11.13* is the fact that our pilgrimage is a very well proven journey. The phrase – 'These all died in faith' – extends from the first generation of people on earth to the twenty-first century. Billions of saved people have taken this journey before us, and have proved the Lord. We see the picture set out in the Scriptures. Here are the histories of those who have proved him through mighty deliverances. They were vindicated and blessed, finishing their journey in triumph and happiness. So have a great throng down the rolling centuries since. How moving it is to read the biographical accounts of the people of faith, and the famous proclaimers, who adorn history! The encouragements and lessons are innumerable. This is a well-trafficked and well-proven journey, and we are not by any means the pioneers.

Benefit of Security

Allied to this we see in *Hebrews 11.13* the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, for all the pilgrims 'died in faith', kept safely to the end by the power of God, in spite of any weakness and foolishness of their own. If they fell into some foolish pitfall by their own sinfulness, even if the Lord had to discipline them, he rescued them from that fall, and they were restored to the full joy of their salvation. Every twist and turn of the pilgrim journey is known to God, who watches every step of his people. No man and no other force can pluck them out of his hand.

Believers never forget that they are on their way to that place where there is no more death, sin, pain, or suffering, and even now they have the 'earnest' of their inheritance, the 'down payment' as it were, their new nature, new understanding and their spiritual faculties and joys.

Benefit of the Spirit

Can there be any greater privilege and source of power than to have the Holy Spirit as our resident Divine Guest? We are told in *James 4.5* that the Holy Spirit yearns jealously for believers, to keep them from the world and close to Christ.

The Spirit moves the believer's conscience to warn of sin. He also moves their hearts when they read the Scriptures prayerfully, deepening their understanding. And at times they are so moved that they experience an unusual elevation of spirit, because the Spirit grants such a clear grasp and appreciation of what is read.

As believers resist and mortify sin, the Holy Spirit strengthens them, enabling them to succeed. As they strive to pursue better attitudes, it is the Spirit who helps them to achieve love, joy, peace, and all the other elements of the fruit of the Spirit. To 'walk in the Spirit' is to have a hold on divine power, and to have the joy of certain progress in the journey of sanctification.

Benefit of Providence

Another priceless benefit of our pilgrimage is the certainty that the Lord superintends our route,

employing every situation to our eternal spiritual good, and weaving the strands of life to serve his purposes for us.

An unbeliever may take a job in another country, and find nothing turns out as he expected, and the whole venture is a terrible mistake. He may say to himself, 'I got myself into this mess, and having made my bed I must lie in it. I have signed a contract, for so many years; it will be miserable, but I only have myself to blame.'

The believer's pilgrimage is never like that, because he is able to say, 'The Lord called me to my spiritual journey and he will be my guide and will see me through.' What a difference! We are called by none other than the living God, by the Saviour of the world. When he calls, he keeps. We say, 'He will surely conduct me through to the end of the journey. I am not a volunteer, but a called person. The Lord has given me the status of a temporary resident here, and I know that –

*He who has led me hitherto
Will lead me all my journey through.*

'He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.' This is the work of Christ, who cannot fail. He showed us himself dying on Calvary for our sin, and we fell at his feet in repentance and faith, answering his call. On this journey we are not tourists, but called people, and he will providentially superintend our journey.

Benefit of Special Blessings

Here is another remarkable blessing of our pilgrim journey. It is not like a trek through a vast desert lacking any vestige of relief. This world certainly is a desert to believers, but there is many an oasis to refresh and lift our spirits. There is, of course, an oasis in our life every day, when we are with the Lord and his Word. And sometimes there are seasons of special happiness, tranquility, blessing and usefulness. And then there is the rich oasis of fellowship with other members and our spiritual family, only forfeited by lofty remoteness or criticism and gossip.

Then there are the countless times we stumble across an 'oasis of delight' through significant answers to prayer, fresh evidence of God's power.

The Lord has not left his people without encouragements, comforts and tokens of his care along the route.

Do's and Don'ts of the Pilgrimage

We must now consider some of the do's and don'ts for pilgrims, that make such a difference to the journey. We shall address them directly to readers, the first being a serious warning: Be very careful not to settle. You are a pilgrim, don't settle! We are not talking about spiritual things here, but about earthly things.

Do not put down roots and become dependent on earthly things, growing to like them too much. On the contrary, if you like something too much, don't have it, don't do it, because it will be a snare to you.

Have we not all fallen into this trap? Something very valuable has come into our life, such as a home, or an over-treasured possession, or a recreation, or clothing, and it has meant too much to us, absorbing our fascination and attention. We have become committed and dedicated to it, which is against the whole spirit of pilgrimage.

Perhaps we recognised this. It was not an immoral, wrong or dreadful thing, but it engaged us too much, and by God's grace, we decided to lay it aside. We reminded ourselves we were pilgrims who must be ready to move forward unimpeded, devoted to the Lord and his cause. Called to be pilgrims – passing through – we dare not settle, allowing earthly things to enfold and detain us.

Another rule for the pilgrim life is to remember that every phase of life is temporary. Are we young? Well we will not always be young. Time rolls on and we have to leave youth. The earnest pilgrim spends his youth preparing for the next phase, not clinging to the present stage. Young men have to think of marriage. In our godless age this is not seen as an obligation, but for believers it is, unless the Lord overrules. We certainly do not want to develop a flirtatious spirit, but we should have a prayerful spirit and a willing heart.

In the unsaved world, when young people are asked what they aim to do in life, they generally answer by naming something they particularly enjoy, as though enjoyment is the basis of a career choice. But saved pilgrims think more of careers that will be useful and will enable them to serve the kingdom of God, and, if possible, do a good work for all people. The worldling aims at personal pleasure, gratification and fulfilment, but the pilgrim aims at service to God and good works.

When young, the pilgrim is in training for the next phase of life, emulating Christians like Hudson Taylor, who in youth restrained his diet and denied himself many reasonable comforts in order to condition and toughen himself for pioneer missionary service in China.

A vital don't for pilgrims of all ages is – never surrender spiritual priorities or waste time. I once knew a Christian man who had in his garden a beautiful and elaborate working model train system, carefully engineered and constructed. The engine, trucks and tracks were quite large, capable of carrying children, and the total impression stunning. But how did a Christian man justify devoting so many hours, if not years, to building a gigantic toy! Let us never waste time that belongs to the Lord.

One wonders what John Wesley would have done in this situation. We read that he would visit a house where silver vessels were on display, and would openly appropriate them for his orphanage work. Pilgrims cannot spend their time and set their hearts on earthly idols. They have a very practical approach to the material things of life.

Time, however, is not only lost in excessive attention to home, possessions and recreation, but sometimes in protracted idleness. Perhaps we have been sick or distracted by an intensive period of work or study, and unable to do all the things we would normally do for the Lord, but that period of distraction has long passed and we have never resumed our former pattern of attendance and service. Well, time is short, and we are pilgrims. We are here to make every phase of life count for the Lord, and so we must hasten back to dedicated action and weeknight attendance, resisting all the overtures of the world, the flesh and the devil. Thomas Hornblower Gill's beautiful hymn has a convicting verse:

*I would not, Lord, with swift-winged zeal
On this world's errands go,
And labour up the heavenly hill
With weary feet and slow.*

The hymnwriter was thinking of people who wait until later life before they wake up to serving the Lord, when all the years of energy and capability have slipped past them.

Pilgrims do not take digressions either. I once knew a man, an earnest Christian, who bought a house far bigger than he needed. It was a very beautiful detached house with umpteen bedrooms. It altogether captured his heart, but it ruined his stewardship, absorbed all his resources, and virtually consumed his life. We cannot let that kind of thing happen to us, in any area of life. We cannot take on commitments that will rule us, and negate all Christian usefulness.

Another don't concerns complaining and murmuring. This was the menace that drove the children of Israel round in circles, and kept them so long from their desired destination. William Cowper had the perfect cure for this expression of faithlessness:–

Were half the breath thus vainly spent

*To Heaven in supplication sent,
Our cheerful song would oftener be,
'Hear what the Lord has done for me.'*

Yet another don't is hostility between believers. Here is direct disobedience to the special law of Christ that his people should love one another. There are some professing believers who vent hostility on others, cause great hurt, and grieve away the Spirit, for years, if unchecked. We hear of pastors newly called to churches, who find there has been hostility for years. What a tragedy! True pilgrims surely cannot allow such things to ruin their lives.

We can even say that pilgrims are dressed for the journey, and so should we be. In deportment and appearance believers are clearly not worldlings who relish the life of the flesh and want to take part in its lowest pursuits. True believers do not follow flesh-flaunting clothing styles, and message-laden 'rebel' hairstyles. (The emerging churches and 'missional' churches seem to emphasise worldly fashions, some of their middle-aged pastors presenting themselves as teenage streetwise hipsters, seemingly desperate to move as far as they can from a 'strangers and pilgrims' image.)

God blesses us with discernment and understanding if we live as pilgrims, but these faculties, like many other blessings, are conditional upon us so living. This is the message of the famous eleventh chapter of *Hebrews* – the annals of faith and pilgrimage. The pilgrim spirit brings us rich spiritual experience, together with instrumentality and usefulness. Our own trust in God increases mightily, because we prove him so much. We develop in holiness by his grace and power, and gain an ever clearer heavenly view.

We must not linger, looking longingly at material things, or fame in this world. We should think often of the journey's end, and check everything with the question – 'How does this affect my pilgrimage?'

It is very sad that there is this movement among Christians, already referred to, to throw away the pilgrim attitude. The so-called emerging and missional churches – or most of them – recommend extraordinary things. They want believers to give up traditional church (many say give up preaching also), and be entirely informal.

They believe that to win people to God we must be like them. So we must go to all the films they watch (even with them), so that we can talk about them. Do the same things, they say, going to dances, clubs and pubs, for normality is vital. Just mix, mix, mix, and live like worldlings. They don't exactly put it this way, but this is what it amounts to. We are to be more like worldlings, acting like worldlings, and mixing with worldlings in their activities and delights. The more we do so, the more we will influence them.

Liberal churches who reject the Gospel started this line of thought and action, and the missional authors have adopted it. But this policy is the exact opposite of what Bible-believing Christians have believed for centuries, and contrary to the Word of God.

Yet nowadays one may go to any one of a number of evangelical Bible colleges in the UK and obtain a degree in 'doing church' this new way. C H Spurgeon had a phrase, 'We never know what we are going to hear next: we shall die of astonishment.'

Some of the things we hear today are so incredible, so anti-biblical, and so wrong, we are jolted when we hear them. We must never lose hold of the fact that our Saviour has called us out of the world. We should be full of sympathy for lost souls and labour for their salvation. But we cannot do that by rejecting the pilgrim concept and grieving the Holy Spirit of God.

Says the apostle, 'I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus' (*Philippians 3.14*). We press forward as pilgrims, a people distinct from this fallen and doomed world, having been called out of it, and winning souls from it by the power of the Spirit. Our task is to call them out, not to seal them in. This is the only valid attitude to Christian living and Christian service: to live as pilgrims.