

February 27, 1998
Indian Bible College

THE PILGRIM LIFE

1 Peter 2:11-12

My subject today used to be a major theme among Christians, but today it is strangely missing. Probably you have heard few, if any, sermons on this topic. To my knowledge there are no recent Christian books on the subject, although the second best-selling Christian book of all time, behind the Bible, deals with this important theme. That book is "Pilgrim's Progress." My subject is the pilgrim life, the fact that we are just passing through this life, journeying toward heaven.

Being a pilgrim isn't how most of us view the Christian life. We're focused on the here and now: What will it do for my marriage? How will it help me raise my kids? Will it help me succeed in my career? Will it help me overcome personal problems? Will it help me feel fulfilled as a person? Heaven is a nice extra, but it's not our focus. We want to enjoy life now and cling to it as long as we're able. We don't view death as the gateway to everything we've been living for. We see it as something to be postponed and avoided at all cost. We don't view ourselves as pilgrims.

I wish you would read Richard Baxter's *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (written in 1649). He develops the theme that believers are to live every day on this earth in light of our hope in heaven. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (3.9.5) makes a startling statement: "Let us ... consider this settled: that no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection." The apostle Paul makes a similarly startling statement in 1 Corinthians 15:19: "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied."

I have often thought, "Can I truthfully say that?" For me, the Christian life is the best way to live. I have a wonderful wife and children, plus the family of God. I enjoy fellowship with my Creator and Savior. His Word guides me. I enjoy all the blessings He bestows. Where else can you find a way of life that brings as much joy as Christianity?

Of course, it's good to enjoy God and the blessings He bestows on us in this life. But if we don't hold the things of this life loosely and if we aren't focused on God Himself and on being in heaven with Him as our goal, we have a shallow form of Christianity. We wouldn't last a minute under persecution. We wouldn't endure much suffering. Nor would we withstand the many temptations to indulge in fleshly desires. The only thing that can steel us to endure suffering and to seek holiness in this wicked world is to live as pilgrims, bound for heaven.

Peter wanted his persecuted readers to see that the Christian life is a pilgrim life. He shows us four essentials to live as pilgrims:

To live as pilgrims, there is a mindset to adopt, a war to fight, a lifestyle to maintain, and a day to remember.

1. To live as pilgrims, there is a mindset to adopt.

"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers..." (2:11). That's how we are to think about ourselves: We live in a world that is now under the dominion of the evil one. Thus we're not simply foreigners; we're on enemy turf! We dare not forget it! If you were to visit Iraq right now, I'm sure you wouldn't forget that you are on dangerous ground. You'd keep on the alert!

The words "aliens and strangers" are synonymous. They point to one who is a temporary resident or traveler in a foreign country, passing through on his way to his home country. Such a person has a different mentality about life than a permanent native has.

For one thing, a traveler doesn't live according to the customs and standards of the foreign country. For the sake of not offending the locals, he may temporarily adopt some of their customs. When we traveled in the Orient, we learned that when you use a toothpick after a meal, you must conceal it under your hand. So we followed their custom temporarily, but as soon as we got back home, we did it the American way. As citizens of heaven, we may adopt some of the ways of earth, if they are morally neutral, in order not to offend the natives. But we live according to different standards than they do, namely, those of God's Word.

Pilgrims don't get attached to the country they're passing through. They have a destination in mind, and they look forward to getting there. If they pass through a scenic area, they'll enjoy the

beauty, but they don't move there. If they stop at a nice hotel, they don't start hanging pictures on the wall and settling in. They have a transient mentality that affects how they live on the trip.

One thing that has shifted our focus from being aliens on earth, looking toward heaven, is modern medicine. I'm thankful for the advances in medicine that enable us to recover from diseases and injuries that would have killed people a generation ago. But at the same time, good medical treatment has removed the stark reality of death from us in a way that was not true in earlier times. Even at the turn of the century, it was rare for families not to have lost at least one child in death. The Puritan theologian John Owen (1616-1683) lost ten of his eleven children before they reached adulthood. His other daughter died as a young woman.

In the face of death, you don't get as attached to this life and you live more consciously in light of heaven. Howard Hendricks has said, "Most people think that they're in the land of the living, heading toward the land of the dead. But the truth is, we're in the land of the dying, heading toward the land of the living." As a young man, Jonathan Edwards resolved to think much, on all occasions, of his dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death. That sounds morbid and it runs against the grain of our day. But it's biblical. We're aliens and strangers here, pilgrims heading toward heaven. We've got to adopt that mindset. We aren't staying here for long. We should live like it!

2. To live as pilgrims, there is a war to fight.

"Abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul" (2:11). To abstain means, "to hold oneself constantly back from." Waging war does not point to a single battle, but to a military campaign. Every believer faces a lifelong struggle against these fleshly lusts which, if yielded to, will enslave and ultimately destroy him.

These lusts wage war against the soul, or the total person. But the word "soul" focuses on the inner person. The battle against sin is waged in the mind (1:13-14). All sin starts in the mind. If you can win the war against sin in your thought life, you will win in your behavior. We must learn to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4).

What are "fleshly lusts"? They include, but are not limited to wrong sexual desires. They also include "all kinds of self-seeking, whether directed toward wealth, power, or pleasure" (Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary* [Word], p. 57). Unbelievers, ignorant of God and His Word, live for self. Everything they do is directed to promote self, please self, or protect self. Such people shrug off God and often mock Him. But they are enslaved to their lusts (2 Pet. 2:18-19). But Christians can live for the will of God, which is opposed to fleshly lusts (1 Pet. 4:2; 1 John 2:15-17).

Note that it is *believers* whom Peter exhorts to abstain from such fleshly desires. Becoming a Christian does not eradicate the strong, inner tug toward self-will and sin. Walking with God for years does not eliminate the need to do battle with sin. George Muller, as an old man who had walked with God for years, used to pray, "Lord, don't let me become a wicked old man." He knew the propensity of his heart toward sin. Our old nature is not eradicated at conversion and it does not grow weaker as we grow older. We're in a war for the rest of the time that we're in this body.

Also, note that we are responsible to obey this command to abstain from these fleshly desires. Certainly such desires are powerful. The word "war" points to a fierce, constant struggle. If we yield, we can become enslaved to them (2 Pet. 2:18). But through saving faith in Jesus Christ and through the power of the indwelling Spirit and the Word of God, we can abstain from these lusts. We can experience God's victory in the war.

I make this point for two reasons. First, there is a teaching that says that we are not to exert ourselves in the Christian life. If we are struggling, they say, it is the flesh. We are rather to let go and let God. We are passive and He gives us the victory. I bought into that teaching for a while as a young man, but it didn't help me overcome the lusts of the flesh. Peter does not urge us to rest. War implies an active struggle.

The second reason I make the point is that we hear a lot in our day about "sexual addiction." It is portrayed as a complex psychological problem that requires therapy. But sexual addiction is not a recent problem. The Bible calls it being enslaved to sin. Sexual addicts don't recover (as if it's an illness); they must repent (since it is sin) and walk in the Spirit. I'm not suggesting that it is

easy to overcome. Sometimes habits of sin are deeply entrenched and the struggle to overcome them is intense and protracted. But the answers we need are in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ, not in psychoanalysis.

To live as pilgrims, there is a mindset to adopt: we are strangers and aliens; there is a war to fight: abstain from fleshly lusts.

3. To live as pilgrims, there is a lifestyle to maintain.

"Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles" (2:12). The word "behavior" (used in 1 Pet. 1:15, 18; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Pet. 2:7; 3:11; verb in 1 Pet. 1:17 & 2 Pet. 2:18) means conduct, way of life or lifestyle. It points to the overall flavor of our lives. "Excellent" means beautiful or attractive. Our lives should be marked by "good deeds" which conform to God's Word, but which also are viewed by even a godless culture as attractive. The world should look at the lives of Christians and admit, even if they don't accept Christ or the Bible, that we are good people.

Note that the pagans *observe* our good deeds. This word only occurs here and in 3:2. It has the nuance of long-term, reflective observation. Even if you're not aware of it, unbelievers are watching your life. They see how you react to things at work. They observe how you talk about others. They watch how you deal with problems. They note how you treat your family. Missionaries who have gone to primitive cultures tell how the natives will often come and stand at their open windows, watching everything they do to see how they do it. The native pagans in America may not be so obvious. But they are watching you as an alien and stranger.

But Peter is not so naive as to think that our good deeds will result in the immediate conversion of the lost. Rather, because we threaten them, they may slander us. Often they will try to get us to act just like them. They will spread lies and half-truths about us. The early church was often accused of murder, incest, and cannibalism. After all, they met in secret to eat some man's flesh and drink his blood, they called one another brother and sister and were loving toward each other! But Peter says that as pilgrims, we are to maintain a lifestyle of attractive deeds, even in the face of ugliness from those who are lost.

The fact that the pagans observe our behavior also implies that we have contact with them. So often Christians complain about their pagan neighbors and rejoice if they move out and a Christian family moves in. While some pagan neighbors can be difficult to live near, we should view them as our mission field, living in such a way that they will know that we are different because we are pilgrims, living for heaven.

Thus as pilgrims in enemy territory, we adopt a mindset as aliens; we fight a war against fleshly lusts; we maintain a lifestyle of good works, even when we are treated wrongly by the lost.

4. To live as pilgrims, there is a day to remember.

Peter says that those who observe our good deeds will "glorify God in the day of visitation" (2:12). What does this mean? Most commentators take it to mean that these pagans who slander Christians will glorify God when they later get saved as a result of observing the Christians' good works.

I don't interpret the phrase that way because Peter does not make it clear that all (or even most) of these pagans will be converted by seeing our good works. (In 1 Peter 4:5, 17-18, he indicates that many will face God's judgment.) In the context, he is saying that God will vindicate the Christian's godly behavior, apart from what happens to those who persecute us (see 2:15). Thus I take the day of visitation to refer to the future day of judgment.

How will pagans glorify God in that day? Some will be converted before that day through our witness. Thus they will glorify God for His saving grace and for the faithfulness of His people. Others will stand before God with every excuse for their unbelief and rebellion knocked out from under them. At that point God will be vindicated and their once-defiant knees will bow and their once-proud tongues then will confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11).

For us, the point is that as pilgrims, we keep that great day of visitation in view. We live now knowing that some day everyone must stand before God, either for commendation or condemnation. Thus we should live in light of that day, remembering that those without Christ, too, must stand before Him. Knowing the fear of the Lord, we will persuade men (2 Cor. 5:11).

Conclusion

One way to develop this pilgrim lifestyle is to read the great men of God from the past. Calvin's *Institutes* heads my list. But also read John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, John Bunyan, Charles Spurgeon, and others. They all saw themselves as pilgrims.

Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon titled, "The Christian Pilgrim" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:243-246). He wrote (p. 244):

God is the highest good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance.... Therefore it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven, as it becomes us to make the seeking of our highest end and proper good, the whole work of our lives; to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for, or set our hearts on, any thing else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness?

God is calling you to a radical way of life--the pilgrim life. Adopt the mindset of an alien on this earth; fight the war against fleshly lusts; maintain a godly lifestyle in the world; and remember the day of judgment ahead.