

The Pilgrim's Progress

#0850

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Abraham left his native country and went out on a pilgrimage. He went out not knowing where he went. Why did he go? Because God called him. He arrived in Canaan and went from place to place as the call of God was presented. He dwelt in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise. They looked for a city which had foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

We too are on a pilgrimage.

"Let us remember that the life of God's children in this world is a pilgrim life" *Ministry of Healing*, page 478.

The great thing is not moving about over this earth, although a number of us do that. There are millions of people who are moving about who are not pilgrims. And the big thing in the Christian's life is not moving from place to place. It is moving from sin to holiness. It is leaving the country in which we are born, the land of unrighteousness, and moving through a series of experiences ever nearer and nearer to the glorious place where we reflect the image of Jesus fully. And that pilgrimage is not concerned with geography. It is only illustrated by that.

Most of you are acquainted with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. The messenger of the Lord in *Great Controversy* speaks of this book as it was written in Bedford jail, and speaks of the many souls that have found the way of life through reading this volume. It has been translated into many languages. Thank God, its influence is still reaching souls.

I have been pondering over the title of this book. I would like to share with you some thoughts as they relate primarily to our spiritual experience. Bunyan represented the condition in which man is born as the City of Destruction, and the glorious experience reserved for those who go all the way with Jesus is ever held ahead, the Beautiful City at the end of the way. But on the way the pilgrim meets many experiences.

I am not talking about geography. I am talking about our spiritual experience. All change is not improvement, but all improvement involves change. Let's put that in another way: there can be change without improvement. The world is full of it. But there can be no improvement without change.

Are we willing to change? Well, if we are unwilling to change we are not pilgrims. Abraham was willing to change. He did change under the leadership of God. Martin Luther was willing to change. He changed a great many of his ideas, and became a spiritual pilgrim. Wesley was willing to change. He became a

spiritual pilgrim. The pilgrims who left England and Holland and came over to this country and laid the foundations of a new nation were willing to change. Not merely willing to change their geographical location, but change certain ideas.

It is interesting that as they left Europe their pastor gathered them together and in a final prayer committed them to God. He told them that God has further light to give them. He has further experiences to lead them into. Then he called attention to the unfortunate situation that the Lutherans had not been willing to go past Luther, and the Calvinists had not been willing to advance past Calvin. Thus each church, following the one who had led out from Roman Catholicism stopped right there. So he told them they must be willing to keep studying the Word of God and keep on advancing in life. That was the guiding principle of the pilgrim's life.

And it is today. A pilgrim moves. He keeps moving.

When Peter, James, and John were on the Mount of Transfiguration they saw the wonderful appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus. They said, Lord it is good for us to be here. Let us build. Did Jesus encourage them? No. He didn't encourage them to stop there. He summoned His disciples to go to the plain where there was work to do.

As pilgrims we have little time to build shrines. We must be on the move. Our life is the pilgrim's life. And it relates basically to our spiritual experience. We must not only be willing to leave the City of Destruction, to leave sins and unrighteousness and wickedness, but we must be careful lest we camp too long in satisfaction over the good things we have received, over the points of light we have accepted. We must remember that the only reason that we haven't reached the city before this is that we haven't kept on moving.

What is the goal of God's people in this pilgrim life today? Nothing short of perfection. So Paul says:

"Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God"
Hebrews 6:1.

We are not to keep going over and over the same ground. Having seen certain points of light we should walk in them. Having accepted certain points of truth we should thank God for them, and be digging deeper into the Word, looking more earnestly into the face of Jesus that we may find out the next thing He wants us to do.

Don't misunderstand me. I do not mean that we should leave what is past in the sense of renouncing or turning away from any point of truth God has given us. If God is leading us we will never abandon one principle of truth. And the new light that would lead us away from this message is neither new nor light. It comes from the pit of darkness. And whatever new form it may seem to take, it is simply a new label on the old bottle of error and falsehood coming from Satan.

I am not talking about grasping for some strange interpretation of prophecy that upsets the great truths that God has given this people. Never, my friends. We go on, but we carry with us every essential truth. We never turn our backs on them. But let me stress that in our personal experience God has many precious things for us.

Long after Wesley entered into an earnest study of the Bible he received some precious rays in contact with the Moravians. To us today is this encouragement:

"For those who thus lay hold of the divine assurances of God's word, there are wonderful possibilities. Before them lie vast fields of truth, vast resources of power. Glorious things are to be revealed. Privileges and duties which they do not even suspect to be in the Bible will be made manifest"
Ministry of Healing, page 465.

Let me illustrate that. Here is a man in one of the great churches who is an earnest Christian. He has never heard of this message, but he is studying the Bible. Could it happen that some day the Spirit of God will direct his attention to the Fourth Commandment? Yes, and he will see those words illumined, "The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God." Has it happened? Over and over again. And men and women have started in keeping the true Sabbath not knowing that there was another person in the world doing it.

Is that the only thing God may reveal to others, or are there other truths? During the last year, either through your own study or something you have read or something you have heard preached from the pulpit, has some ray of light come to you which has made a change in your life? Something that you know tonight in the way of personal duty which you didn't know a year ago? Praise the Lord. Half of this audience can testify tonight that this has been fulfilled to them within the last year.

Do you suppose there are any other things that God would like to teach us this coming year? Well, it would be wonderful if each night we pitch our tent we could say, Dear Lord, I am ready to move on in the morning. I am ready for You to give me some new marching orders. I thank Thee that Thou hast led me to this point. I am thankful that I am not where I was a year ago. I am thankful that I see some things I didn't see a year ago. And dear Lord, I want to keep moving on.

Is that the pilgrim life? If I understand it, that is it. You can readily see that if it is so every pilgrim will not be at the same point on the journey that every other pilgrim is. That bothers some people. They wonder why that is. They see someone up ahead or someone lagging behind. Unless we are careful we may think that someone on one side of us is a fanatic and someone on the other side of us is a worldly liberal. That can happen.

In the allegory Bunyan wrote, Christian saw another pilgrim up ahead.

He said,

"Wait, and I will go with you."

The other pilgrim said,

"No, I can't wait. The sword of wrath drives me on."

Christian ran to catch up with him, and by the time he got up there he had gotten up such speed that he just ran past him. Then he began to feel pretty good about his spiritual progress. But all of a sudden, because he was feeling that way and wasn't watching where he was running, he stubbed his toe and down he went. Faithful, the other pilgrim's name, helped him up, and they went along in sweet fellowship.

What an apt illustration of the Christians life it is. But do you see that you cannot be marching at exactly the same speed and steps that the fellow pilgrim is? And don't worry about it. Don't think that you have to pull somebody back to your place, or keep up with all the other pilgrims on the road. Take the steps you see. Walk in the light that shines on your pathway, and don't worry about others. Leave them with God. If you have some word of encouragement, give it to them, but don't harass them. Be happy in your pilgrim life.

A pilgrim meets foes and fights. His program is not fright nor flight, but fight. When some people meet enemies, they get afraid. Christian did that sometimes. But the Lord helped him to gird up his loins and fight. He was thinking that he might run away, but the Spirit of God brought to his mind that there wasn't any armor on his back. There is a helmet for the head, a breastplate for the front, a shield, and shoes, and sword, but nothing on the back. As Christian thought about that he thought he had better not turn his back.

As you meet the Devil and all his agents the program is not flight. It is fight. And it is a real fight. I like the little song that Bunyan puts in the book:

He who would valiant be against all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master;
There is no discouragement shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Whoso set him round with dismal stories
Do but themselves confound, his strength the more is;
No foe shall stay his might thought he would giants fight,
He would make good his right to be a pilgrim.

Since Lord, Thou dost defend us with Thy Spirit,
We know we at the end shall life inherit;
Then fancies flee away, I'll fear not what men say,
I'll labor night and day to be a pilgrim.

Let's face the enemy from day to day. He is not going to let us live the pilgrim life and march the pilgrim journey unobserved and unobstructed. He is going to try in every way to scare us, to stop us.

I like the picture that Bunyan gives of Christian climbing up the Hill of Difficulty and approaching the House Beautiful. Because he had fallen asleep in the arbor and had to go back to get the roll he had lost, it was dark before he got to the gate. As he came along the pathway he heard lions growling and roaring. He thought, What will I do? But as he cried out, the porter at the gate heard him and said, Never mind, the lions are chained. They can't get to the pathway. Keep right in the middle of the path.

Thank God for that, my friends. And many a man is fearful of lions that are chained. They can growl and roar, but they cannot hurt the man who in the middle of God's road keeps marching up the pathway to the gate. Let's do it. What do you say?

A pilgrim mustn't carry excess baggage. The more you carry the more tired you will get, and the fewer miles you will add up.

"Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul"
1 Peter 2:11.

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God"
Hebrews 12:1-2.

Peter is talking about pilgrims. He says to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. Paraphrased in modern English: do not let your human earthly desires keep you from the pilgrim life and the pilgrim journey. Lusts are earnest, yearning desires. And usually when we think of lust we think of a wrong desire. All these things keeps us from the pilgrim life.

Oh brethren, whatsoever chain binds us to earthly lusts and strife, let us rend it in God's name, and live henceforth the pilgrim life free from all those things which would hold us, weigh us down, keep us from running the way of God's commands. It is pretty hard to move very fast or far with a hundred and fifty pounds strapped upon our back. We need to reduce our luggage.

We may be able to walk groaning with quite a heavy burden. But if we are going to run, there are some things we are going to have to turn loose of. May I suggest what some of them are? Sin, of course. But there are some other burdens. Trying to keep up with people around us in any line is a heavy burden. And as the world adds more and more to the things you must have to be accepted, it becomes more and more a load to carry.

There is many a man out in the world that would be glad to keep the Sabbath, but his wife who keeps the Sabbath wants so many things he knows he couldn't keep up with her wants and desires. And terrible as it sounds to tell it, I have heard of women who were even fearful that their husbands would accept this message because they didn't know what would become of them and their children in case he lost his job for keeping the Sabbath.

Is that the pilgrim life? No, it isn't. God pity such a woman. And God pity the man.

Oh, if we will lay aside these weights-- the weights of trying to keep up with the world with its customs, fashions, luxury, extravagance-- we will have more time to study the Bible and pray. We will have more time to live the pilgrim life and actually make progress in our spiritual experience from point to point.

There is another burden--the burden of discouragement. In another picture that adorns the book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful, because of taking a forbidden path, find themselves caught on the grounds of Giant Despair. He hurried them along with his big club and hurled them into the dungeon of Doubting Castle. It is quite a story. And if you have ever been in the dungeon of Doubting Castle you know just what Bunyan is talking about.

Perhaps I should tell you that many of these experiences that Bunyan so aptly portrays through these figures of speech were his own experience. He had a terrible time in the early years of his Christian experience. And discouragement was one of his worst problems. He was picturing his own experience.

So Christian and Hopeful lay in the dungeon. The giant would come down and beat them with his club. They would moan and groan and wonder what they could do. Finally they became so discouraged that the giant suggested that the best thing to do was to make an end of their lives. Many a discouraged soul has had that idea put into his mind by the Devil.

But after days of despair and discouragement, one night Christian said to Hopeful, I believe I have a key in my breast, Promise by name, that will open any lock in Doubting Castle.

Hopeful said, You do? Pluck it out of your breast then and try it.

So Christian took that key out and tried it on the lock. Sure enough, it opened. They went out and came to another door locked. It opened. They went out through the courtyard and came to the last gate that was locked between them and freedom. Christian tried the key, and although it was hard he finally got it unlocked, and away they went. The gate made so much noise it awoke the giant, and he ran after them. But they had such a head start that they got on their way.

Ah, my friends, have you ever been in Doubting Castle. Believe me, doubt is the way to discouragement. But what is the way out?

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" 2 Peter 1:4.

Thank God, we can escape.

I have saved to the last what I think is the most wonderful picture in the pilgrim's life. It is suggested in the verse we have read in Hebrews 12. We are to run with patience, looking unto Jesus.

In the early part of the Pilgrim's Progress as Christian advances from point to point he is pictured as groaning under a heavy load on his back which he tries in various way to get rid of. Thus Bunyan illustrates the terrible burden of guilt which the soul under conviction feels. My friends, if you have ever been a sinner, and have had your conscience awakened, you know what Bunyan is talking about. The sinner that is dead to sin and feels no woe and pangs of conscience doesn't know what this means. But the one whose conscience has been awakened feels that burden of guilt.

So Christian is pictured here advancing toward the City of God, leaving miles behind the City of Destruction, and yet under that burden of guilt. Is there anybody here like that? Let me read it in Bunyan's own words:

"Now I saw in my dream that the highway up which Christian was to go was fenced on either side with a wall that was called Salvation. Up this way therefore did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty because of the load on his back.

"He ran thus until he came to a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream just as Christian came up with the cross his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do until it came to the mouth of the sepulchre where it fell in and I saw it no more.

"Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, 'He has given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death.' Then he stood still to look and wonder, for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the water down his cheeks."

And listen to the song that Christian sang as he ran on up the pilgrim way:

Thus far did I come laden with my sin,
Nor could ought ease the grief that I was in

Till I came hither.

What a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blessed cross, blessed sepulcher, blessed rather be
The Man that there was put to shame for me.

Ah, that's where the joy comes in the pilgrim life. That's where the joy comes from--looking unto Jesus. That's the place to get rid of the burden of sin, the burden of guilt. And we have been told that the feeling of guiltiness must be laid at the foot of the cross or it will poison the springs of life.

Thank God, we can come to the cross. The cross stands where we are tonight. And we can lay there at the feet of Jesus every burden of care and worry and fear, every burden of sin and guilt. And, like Christian, we can go on the pilgrim way singing, and glad rejoicing in our hearts.

"Alas, and did my Savior bleed?
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?"

But drops of grief can ne'er repay
The debt of love I owe:
Here, Lord, I give myself to away,
'Tis all that I can do.

I thank God for the pilgrim life and the power of the cross that would release us from the burdens that would hinder our progress.

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