

## Young People's Forum (III.25)

Dear Young People,

In the last forum article, I continued to call attention to a very important part of the Christian's life as he lives the antithesis here in the world. More particularly, I was discussing the relation between a Christian and earthly possessions. Last time you recall I talked about the parable of the rich fool who thought his life consisted of earthly possessions.

I want to move on a bit in this discussion. I want to discuss in this letter to you the fact that the antithesis is characteristic of the believer's life because God has made him a pilgrim and a stranger in the earth. We must explore the meaning of that as the Scriptures speak of it.

I must confess that I have a certain reluctance to discuss this aspect of the Christian's life because I have learned, to my profound dismay, that one can talk or preach about any subject in Scripture and God's people will listen. But when one talks about money, watch out! People do not want anyone touching their pocketbooks, or wallets, or purses. People are very touchy on the matter, especially when the Scriptures speak so directly and clearly on the subject, and they feel, deep down in their hearts, that this is one area that they do not want to hear what Scripture says. And the reason they do not want to hear what Scripture says, is that in this area they want to live as they please without any outside interference. Or, while God's people are willing to bend an ear to what is said, the words are quickly dismissed from one's mind and heart and we are content to go on living as we always have.

The trouble is that I am this way too. And as I write these articles, I want you to know that what Scripture says makes me squirm as well as it ought to make you squirm. And so, we marshal all our excuses: A person has to live, doesn't he? What's wrong with being wealthy? We may have a little fun, mayn't we? I gave my money to the church; I may now do as I please with what I have, mayn't I? Surely there is nothing wrong with saving for when I retire. I do not want to be a burden to anyone when I get old. I worked hard all my life and now that I am retired, I want to enjoy life a bit. Nothing wrong with that, is there?

The point is that we are always ready to justify ourselves, look frantically for reasons why what God clearly demands in his word is not intended for us, or else simply forget what God says to us in Scripture. We are like the people of whom James speaks in James 1:22-25: "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgeteth what manner of man he was."

Scripture lays emphasis on the truth that God's people are pilgrims and strangers in the earth. This idea has a lot to do with the subject we are discussing.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in the land of Canaan, a land that God had promised to give to Abraham's seed as their inheritance. It was given to them as a type and picture of heaven, for it was a land flowing with milk and honey. But they never owned a single square meter of it, except for the plot of ground and cave that Abraham bought for a burial place for his wife and in which Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah were buried. The Bible tells us that these men were strangers in the land of promise, for they were surrounded by wicked nations, who owned every bit of Canaan. (See Genesis 28:4, 37:1, in which the patriarchs are called strangers.)

The New Testament picks up this theme and speaks of the fact that the wandering of the patriarchs in the land of Canaan was, strikingly, an act of faith. It is said of Abraham in Hebrews 11:8-10: By faith Abraham when he was called to go out into a place that he should after receive as an inheritance, obeyed, and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles (tents, HH) with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

And then a little later in the same chapter, the author of Hebrews speaks of their faith in this way: "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. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Peter, in his first epistle, speaks of God's people as pilgrims and strangers. In fact, a commentary on I Peter that I have recently completed is called, "A Pilgrim's Manual." It is addressed to "strangers who are elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. . . ." Peter repeats these terms in I Peter 2:11: "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as pilgrims and strangers, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul."

The people of God, elect in Christ Jesus, are pilgrims and strangers here in the world because they are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and because their family and home are in heaven. In Ephesians 2:19, Paul is concerned that the Ephesians understand that the Gentiles are no longer "strangers and foreigners" as they were in the old dispensation, but that they too are members of the church of Christ, "fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God."

Our citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven. Our home is in heaven (John 1:1-3). Our family is there: Christ our elder brother is in heaven; most of our brothers and sisters are there; and our Father is in heaven. If heaven is our home, then we are on a journey while we are here in the world. We are travelling a pilgrim's path – as John Bunyan pointed out in his famous allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*.

A pilgrim is one who has no home in the land in which he finds himself. And so he travels, but always towards home. Spiritually he lives in a tent. He does not want to carry a heavy load of earthly possessions, for they make his journey more difficult. He can sing what a poet has written: "I can tarry, I can tarry but a night." Or, "This world is not my home; I'm only passing through. My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue."

The Psalmist puts it this way, in the versification of our Psalter: I am a stranger here,/ Dependent on Thy grace,/ A pilgrim as my fathers were,/ With no abiding place (Psalter number 107).

A stranger is a person who lives in a foreign land: the people are different looking; the culture is different; the language is not understandable; the customs and mores strike us as peculiar; the houses they live in are different and the food they eat is not always agreeable to our taste. We soon discover that we are strangers. If it had not been for the gracious and loving reception we received from you all in Singapore, we would have felt very much as strangers. And in a way we were. I do not think I will ever like durian. But we are of the same household of faith as our beloved brothers and sisters in Singapore and we feel completely at home with them. We found fellow pilgrims and strangers in the earth in Singapore.

But the child of God is a spiritual stranger here in this world. Because Peter's first epistle is written to God's people from the viewpoint of their being strangers and pilgrims in the earth, we need only read his epistle to find out how differently we live than the world about us. We are compelled by our faith to live in ways which the wicked world considers absurd.

But we also have a very different view of how we use the money God's gives us. But that next time.

Greetings in the Lord,

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