

Young People's Forum (II.3)
Dear Young People,

When the Bible talks about how God's people are to live in a world of wickedness as His people, the Bible uses different figures. I want to examine some of these illustrations the Bible uses, for it will help us understand what the antithesis and a reformed world-and-life-view are all about.

Probably the most important figure the Bible uses is to call God's people in the world "pilgrims and strangers," although sometimes the word "sojourners" is used." These terms were expressions that were used already in the Old Testament. In Psalm 39:12, 13, David plaintively writes: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more."

When that eloquent chapter in Hebrews describes the people of God in the old dispensation as heroes of faith, the same figure is used. Speaking of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their life in the land of Canaan, the Bible says, "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for 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) 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" (Heb. 11:8-10)

That this refers also to our calling in the new dispensation is clear from the next chapter, chapter 12:1, 2: "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 to 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."

So the antithesis makes God's people pilgrims and strangers as the patriarchs were. Abraham was called to leave his family and friends and travel to another land. He did not know what land that was; he was simply to travel and God would guide him. So, with his wife and nephew, his vast flocks and herds, his men servants and maid servants, he started on a long trip that took years to make. Finally he came to the land of Canaan. It was not a very nice land. It was almost all desert. Famines were common in the land. All three of the patriarchs had to go to other lands for a while because of terrible famines. It was cruelly mountainous. There was very little water for them and they had a hard time digging deep wells to find a little water. Besides, it was filled with cruel and heartless nations who served idols and practiced every kind of abomination that was associated with idolatry.

But God told them that this was the land He would give to them and their seed for a possession. They must have wondered whether they really wanted it or not, but by the time the Israelites finally came into the land, it was a land flowing with milk and honey. It was so fruitful that the spies had to carry one bunch of grapes with two men. That change in the land was a miracle!

But God did not give them the land as long as they lived. And God told them that this land was a picture of heaven. And so, just as all Christians following them, they had

to live in tents; they might not build permanent homes. They had to wander about in the land from place to place. Even though it was to be their inheritance some day, they never owned a square foot of it, except for the cave that Abraham bought for an ancestral burial ground where Abraham and Sarah were buried, Isaac and Rebekah were buried and Jacob and Leah were buried. They were pilgrims and strangers in a land that was some day to be the possession of their children.

They were often in trouble with the wicked cities and nations in the land, and even had to fight (Gen. 14). But God promised to take care of them and protect them from their enemies (Gen. 15:1). And so they are described in these beautiful words: "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 (far-off Ur of the Chaldees), they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (Heb. 11:13-16).

Canaan was truly not a very attractive country, but made beautiful and prosperous by a miracle God performed. Our world is not very beautiful either, although we usually think it is. It is beautiful from a natural point of view: flowers and mountains, blue skies and trees; but from a spiritual perspective, it is not beautiful at all. It is spiritually ugly and frighteningly wicked. We sometimes sing from our Psalters, "I wander in a desert land, where all the streams are dry," and what we sing is true. If we find this world a land in which we would just as soon live forever, we forget we are pilgrims and that our home is in heaven.

Peter uses the same figure of pilgrims in his first epistle. He addresses his epistle to the "strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia", all of which were provinces in Asia Minor (Turkey today), and were churches established by Paul on his first missionary journey. That Peter refers to people who are **spiritual** strangers is evident from the fact that he describes them as "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:1, 2).

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

What does Peter mean by this terminology?

He means that God's people are spiritual strangers on this earth. They are strangers because they are in a foreign land. Their home is really in heaven, for their Father is in heaven; their elder Brother, Jesus Christ, is in heaven; and many of their brothers and sisters are in heaven. So, almost the whole family of God is home. But they are still on this earth. This is a strange land because, although the earth is promised them for their possession (Matt. 5:5), as God promised Canaan to Abraham, this earth is now in the possession of wicked men who are working in the creation for Satan. From a spiritual point of view they are not among their family, but among strangers. They are like an American in Singapore; like a German in Tibet; like a Japanese in Alaska.

The people of God, as a general rule, do not even own very much of this earth; it is mostly owned by the wicked. They have no word in how the world is run either on a national or local level – much less on a world-wide level. The wicked do as they please, make all kinds of laws, build mighty kingdoms and invent mighty inventions, but the people of God are not permitted to share in much of it – even though some day it will all belong to them.

And so they are strangers in their own land. And because they are strangers, they are pilgrims – also as Abraham was. He lived in a tent and moved about from place to place. A pilgrim is one who is always travelling (See John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.) And so God's people, not literally, but spiritually, are on a journey that leads them to their home. But that journey leads them through this world. And here they must be for a little while until their home is finished and they are ready to move into it – through death. They sing: "This world is not my home; I'm only passing through." "A pilgrim as my fathers were, with no abiding place."

To live as a pilgrim and stranger here in the world is, therefore, to keep one's self separate from the citizens of this land and to stay on a journey to heaven.

And that is the antithesis.

As we see what Scripture has to say about these things, we can do no better than to ask ourselves the question: Are we pilgrims and strangers here in the world? Or do we find life here very amusing, very comfortable, and very satisfactory?

But this is enough for this time. We will talk about other figures of speech Scripture uses in our next letter.

With our love in the Lord,

Prof Hanko