

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A Biblical look at some popular hymns: Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah

I love camping. If I could choose a hotel, bed and breakfast or a cottage for my holidays I would still prefer my tent! I like the simplicity, the fresh air, the sense of closeness to nature, not to mention the price! I even like to camp in bad weather. Battling with the wind, rain and cold only adds to the sense of challenge – for a while at least. And that is why I am a camper and not a nomad or a pilgrim. I camp for pleasure and I always have the comforting knowledge that at the end of the holiday, or if the weather gets too bad, I have a warm, dry house to return to, with all the comforts of modern life.

In fact, I have just returned from camping in Wales during the October half term holidays as I record this talk. But what has really set me thinking about the differences between being a camper and being a pilgrim is the topic of this morning's talk, the hymn 'Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah'. This hymn, written by William Williams in the eighteenth century, draws on the history of the nation of Israel. It uses references to Israel's journey from Egypt to their promised land of Canaan, and applies them to the life of the Christian. Let me remind you of the first verse of the hymn and you will see why I started thinking about pilgrims.

*Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah!
 Pilgrim through this barren land;
 I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
 Hold me with Thy powerful hand:
 Bread of heaven!
 Feed me now and evermore.*

The Bible has quite a lot to say about Christians being pilgrims, but it is not a subject that we speak very much about today. We are used to thinking about ourselves as God's children or sons. We have all heard sermons calling us to be faithful disciples and hear quite a lot about being "salt and light" in this world. I have no wish to detract from any of those themes, which are all found in the New Testament, but it is rather a long time since I heard a sermon explaining that we are called to be "sojourners and pilgrims" (1 Peter 2:11). Perhaps this old hymn will help us redress the balance a little.

First, I want to make a distinction between three words I used at the beginning: campers, nomads and pilgrims. A camper is somebody who lives temporarily in a tent for pleasure. Their tent is not their home; they have a permanent house that they return to at the end of a trip. A nomad lives in his tent all the time. He has no house to return to. He moves constantly from place to place. Each individual journey may have a planned destination, perhaps the next oasis, but he has no final destination ahead of him, no ultimate goal. A pilgrim is different from both of these. His journey is not a pleasure trip and he will not cancel his plans if the weather turns ugly. But he is not a perpetual traveller like a nomad. A pilgrim is travelling to a definite destination and for a specific purpose. When he reaches his destination, his pilgrimage is over. The Bible describes Christians not as campers or nomads, but as pilgrims. Think about the distinctions as I read the final two verses of the hymn.

*Open Thou the crystal fountain,
 Whence the healing stream doth flow;
 Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
 Lead me all my journey through:
 Strong Deliverer!
 Be Thou still my strength and shield.*

*Saviour, come! We long to see Thee,
 Long to dwell with Thee above;
 And to know in full communion,
 All the sweetness of Thy love;
 Come, Lord Jesus!
 Take Thy waiting people home.*

We are going to look at our subject under three main headings:

1. The Characteristics of a Pilgrim
2. The Dangers and Resources of a Pilgrim
3. The Prospects of a Pilgrim

1. The Characteristics of a Pilgrim

1.1 Purpose

We have already said that a pilgrim has a definite destination and a specific purpose. Our hymn asks God to 'lead us all [our] journey through' and speaks about longing to dwell with Him above. Does your Christian life have a clear purpose? Sometimes the immediate demands on our time and energy are so draining that we are tempted to think our lives are trivial and meaningless. A young mother expending all her efforts to manage young children may wonder what is she doing that has any real purpose. A man employed in a routine job may see countless days of doing the same chores stretching out ahead of him and wonder what the point of life is. I could make a case that the mother and the worker are doing truly worthwhile and valuable things, but that is not quite my point. Our lives are to be lived with the purpose of finding out more about God and learning to walk with Him, even in mundane circumstances. We can serve God faithfully by doing whatever our daily tasks are. Each day is moving us steadily towards that great day when we shall see Him face to face. All Christians have a purpose and a destination.

1.2 Impermanence

The nation of Israel had left Egypt, the country where they had been slaves for many years, but they had not yet arrived in the Promised Land. Sometimes they camped in one place for months, but eventually they moved on again. No dwelling could be permanent until they reached Canaan. That is why they lived in tents and not houses. The society we live in wants to create heaven in this world. A little more wealth, better education for all, a fairer society and a few more gadgets, and we can all have seventy or eighty years of heaven on earth! That was never the Christian hope, and we need to be constantly reminded that we are only temporary residents of earth and permanent residents of heaven. We will only be a "waiting people" if we remember that our true home is with our Saviour and is still ahead of us.

1.3 Foreigner

I have already quoted the expression "sojourners and pilgrims" used in 1 Peter 2:11 and Hebrews 11:13. The word 'sojourner' means that we do not really belong in the place where we are currently living; we are foreigners. There is a sense in which a Christian should be the best citizen of the country they live in. Their honesty, care for others and diligent hard work makes them valuable members of society. Their determination to bring the Gospel to people around them makes them understanding of other people and determined to understand them, so that they can explain the good news of salvation clearly. However, Christians will ultimately find themselves living in a foreign culture. The moral values they hold and the priorities they live by are so alien to non-Christians that they will find it is a "barren land" that they are living in.

1.4 Travelling light

Pilgrims can't carry large amounts of stuff! When the Israelites left Egypt, they took what they could carry. Even if they had a donkey and a few children to spread the load, there was a definite limit to what could be taken along. Occasionally my family leaves the car behind when we go camping and we travel by bike or on foot. This severely limits what we take with us. The word 'essential' takes on a very different meaning when you have to carry every item for the next two days! On a long, uphill hike a fold up chair is a burden not a luxury! In a consumer society that survives by constantly persuading us that we need more things to be happy, we need to be more ruthless in our definition of essential. Not only would this free us up to give much more to those the essential cause of missions, it would also free us up to walk more easily as pilgrims. We worry about getting more things, then we worry about keeping and caring for the things we have! Our things, and I define that to include pastimes as well as objects, occupy far too much time and energy that should be used for Christ. All Christians should carefully survey what they spend their money and time on, at least twice a year, with a view to discarding some non-essentials; otherwise we slowly drift back to carrying far too much weight.

2. The Dangers and Resources of a Pilgrim

Travelling alone in a foreign country is not without its perils, even today. We will briefly consider a few dangers and the resources available to help the pilgrim.

2.1 Thirst and hunger

Travel in the east can be a dry, thirsty business. Certainly, the people of Israel found it to be so. They had not got far in their journey before they were thirsty. In Exodus 15, they needed God to make the bitter water at Marah drinkable. In chapter 17, they got to Rephidim and were thirsty again. God gave Moses instructions to strike a rock at Horeb with his staff. When Moses did so, water flowed out of the rock for the people to drink. This is what the hymn writer was referring to when he spoke about opening the “crystal fountain, whence the healing stream doth flow”. Between these two accounts of God providing water for His people we have chapter 16, which describes God’s provision of “bread from heaven”. The provision of food and drink is taken up by the Lord Jesus Himself in John 6, when He speaks about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Everything that we need to sustain spiritual life comes to us from Jesus and His death. All that we can learn about Jesus and His death comes to us from the Bible. We will certainly need the help of the Spirit to understand the Bible, but what He helps us understand is what is already written in the words of the Bible, not some new revelation or direct vision.

2.2 Hostile forces

Israel’s progress to Canaan was not just a hike where the only ‘enemies’ are terrain and climate. They also had hostile armies who were determined to prevent their progress. Sometimes the enemies used subtle means, such as Balak’s attempts to get Balaam to curse the people. You can read the account in Numbers 22 to 24. Sometimes they used full frontal attack. We also have an enemy who is very determined to stop our spiritual progress. Satan will happily switch between the subtlety of temptation and the frontal attack of persecution. Our enemy is both smarter and stronger than we are, so we need to do more than to be on our guard, although we should certainly do no less than that! The hymn writer recognised that he was weak, so he sang about his “strong deliverer” who would be his “strength and shield”. As 1 John 4:4 says, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world”. We should be quite clear that this shield does not protect us from every possible harm, or keep us from every problem. In fact, living faithfully for Christ will often bring problems. After all, 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”. What is promised is strength to endure the difficulties that arise and protection until our work on earth is complete. The large number of Christian martyrs testifies to the fact that God does not always shield His servants from harm and death. We are safe from judgement and condemnation, but God sometimes removes His saints from difficulties by taking them home to Himself.

2.3 Getting lost

If you are travelling through a foreign country, there is a good chance that you will get lost. On more than one occasion, my wife and I have driven through unfamiliar cities where I have got frustrated with her inability to read the map and tell me which way to turn at the next junction, and she has got frustrated with my reluctance to stop and ask directions! What we needed was a knowledgeable guide to travel with us and tell us the way. Our hymn begins with that famous line, “Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah!” Which of us has not cried to God to show us what to do in difficult circumstances? My wife tells me that all men suffer from a misplaced confidence in their own sense of direction and a stubborn pride that prevents them from asking for help! There may just be a hint of truth in that claim! Sometimes we are far too confident of our own ability to make the best choices for our lives, and far too stubborn to accept God’s guidance until things are really falling apart. Even then, we want God just to fix the immediate problem and let us get on with our plans, rather than being truly ready to ask with Paul, “What do You want me to do?”

2.4 Loneliness

I have a mental picture of a pilgrim as a solitary character with a bundle of clothes tied to a stick resting on his shoulder. He treks along in sandals with only his own thoughts for company. I don’t think that is how a Christian pilgrim is meant to travel. God designed human beings to be dependent on each other as well as on Himself and He designed the church to be the means of bringing Christians together for mutual encouragement and support. I know several couples who have decided that church is a place where they have been hurt or overworked. They now try to live as Christians, and continue some Christian work, without regularly attending any Christian church or fellowship. I can understand their disappointments and sympathise with some of their bad experiences, but I think their decision is both mistaken and full of danger. Both Old and New Testaments are quite clear that God’s people are meant to gather together for His praise and for their own help. We short change God, put our own spiritual welfare at risk and are frankly disobedient if we “forsake the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25).

3. The Prospects of a Pilgrim

For me, one of the delights of camping is coming home afterwards! There is nothing quite like sinking down into a warm bath and then curling up in your own warm, dry comfortable bed. Things that you normally take for granted feel like great luxuries when you have been deprived of them for a while. But that doesn’t begin to illustrate the joys of the Father’s house! In heaven we will not enjoy again comforts that we have left behind for a while. Rather, we will enjoy

delights that we have never known before and that far outstrip our previous experiences. What will some of the delights of heaven be?

3.1 Rest

Ecclesiastes 5:12 says, "The sleep of a labouring man is sweet." The idea is that those who work hard during the day will enjoy a good night's rest. This pattern of work followed by rest also applies to the whole life of the believer. The dominant theme for life in this world is work. Rest is chiefly connected to heaven. We should not make the distinction absolute of course. It is important to have periods of rest and leisure in this world to refresh us, and renew our strength for working. Nor is heaven a place where there is **only** rest. There will be plenty to occupy us in heaven, I am sure! However, our life in this world is not meant to be chiefly characterised by rest. The rest of heaven will become more attractive to us if we are expending all our energy for Christ in this world. I worry about the kind of preaching that is forever explaining how following Jesus will make us happier, more fulfilled, wealthier and more comfortable in this world. Such teaching risks making us so comfortable down here that we never give heaven a second thought! While I find that knowing Jesus is wonderfully fulfilling and encouraging now, I also find that the more I know Him, the more I want to be with Him and see Him fully and clearly in His Father's house. I also find that Christ's company makes me painfully conscious of my own continued sinfulness, and so produces longing for a day when I will have all presence of sin removed. Be suspicious of any Christian teacher who seems to focus on rest now rather than rest in heaven.

3.2 Fulfilment

In the parable of the talents that Jesus tells in Matthew 25, there is a commendation for two of the servants. "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." These two servants had worked hard for their master during his absence and at his return they are pleased to show the master what they have done for him. The master expresses his pleasure in them in the words I have just quoted. You can sense the satisfaction of these men, that their hard work has been appreciated and has all been worthwhile. We have all experienced the sense of fulfilment that comes from knowing that we have completed a task well and that our work was appreciated by others. Imagine the satisfaction of hearing the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant" from the most perfect servant, Jesus Christ! I'm not sure exactly what the joy of our Lord might involve, but it sounds a wonderful thing to be invited to enter into! What work can you find to do for Him this next week, motivated by the thought of such a wonderful fulfilment?

3.3 Home

I have defined being a pilgrim in a way that implies being away from home. The lovely thing about the Christian pilgrimage is that we are travelling towards home. We should not have a mental picture of somebody travelling to Rome or Mecca and then having to return home after the 'pilgrimage'. We are on our way home. I confess I find this a bit hard to think about because it is not a home I have ever been to, or even seen. I think of home as a place where I have lived for a long time. A place where my family are and all my favourite possessions. A place that I am very familiar with and where I feel most at rest, in fact, 'at home'.

The people of Israel did not have a home. They had arrived in Egypt as a single family and grown over four hundred years or so to a nation of well over a million people, but they were slaves in somebody else's country. Jehovah had promised them a country of their own. He described it to them as, "a good and large land... a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). In Numbers 13, twelve Israelites had returned from a visit to spy out the land ahead of the nation. They had reported that "It truly flows with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:27). The adults refused to enter the land because they feared the current occupants, so their children travelled in the desert for forty years with only these reports of what the country was like. However I'm sure they still thought of themselves as travelling home. Home to a place they had never seen, but they had been assured was wonderful, and where they would be able to set up home and build a nation.

A great part of what we are to do on our pilgrimage is to learn what God's presence is like and learn to call it home. It is, after all, the place where my family are. It is my Father's home and all His children are my brothers and sisters. If I am obediently storing up "treasure in heaven" (Luke 18:22), then my favourite possessions will be there as well. If I am learning to walk and delight in the company of God, then it will also be a place that I am familiar and comfortable with.

It is one of the paradoxes of the Bible that, when I arrive in the presence of God in heaven, it will be altogether different from anything I have ever known, but wonderfully familiar, and the very definition of home. I like the very brief account of Enoch's life in Genesis 5. "Enoch lived sixty five years, and begot Methuselah. After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years and had sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." The chief characteristic of Enoch's life, repeated twice for emphasis, was that he walked with God. Then one day God took Enoch straight into His presence. After those hundreds of years walking with God, perhaps the change was not so great after all!

Let me close by quoting again the last verse of our hymn.

*Saviour, come! We long to see Thee,
Long to dwell with Thee above;
And to know in full communion,
All the sweetness of Thy love;
Come, Lord Jesus!
Take Thy waiting people home.*

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