

THE PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

Psalm 84:5-7 is a great passage that sums up our entire Christian life in a few words, and the key word is “pilgrimage.” ⁵ *“Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.”* ⁶ *As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.* ⁷ *They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.”*

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.” So it's good to be a pilgrim – to be on a pilgrimage. Are you on a pilgrimage? What exactly is a pilgrim?

The dictionary definition is “A religious devotee who journeys to a shrine or sacred place.”

An encyclopaedia says: “*Pilgrim, one who travels to a shrine or other sacred place out of religious motives.* Pilgrimages are a feature of many religions and cultures. Examples in ancient Greece were the pilgrimages to Eleusis and Delphi. Pilgrimages are well established in India (e.g. to the sacred Ganges River,) in China and in Japan. The Temple at Jerusalem was the centre of an annual pilgrimage of Jews at Passover. Every Muslim tries to make the pilgrimage to Mecca once in his life; this is the pilgrimage (Hajj) par excellence and has had a remarkable effect in unifying Islam. Roman Catholic centres of pilgrimage include Fatima and Lourdes.”

In the Middle Ages, Christian pilgrimage was regarded as a sacred obligation and a trial of one's faith, since travel was dangerous, expensive and time-consuming. Popular destinations for pilgrimage in England included Bury St Edmunds and Thomas Beckett's shrine at Canterbury, the destination of Chaucer's 14th century pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales. The shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain lay at the end of a long connected string of pilgrims' sites, as did the city of Rome.

Over the centuries the terms ‘pilgrim’ and ‘pilgrimage’ have come to have a somewhat devalued meaning, and are nowadays often applied in a secular context. For example, fans of Elvis Presley who choose to visit his home, Graceland, in Memphis, Tennessee, are sometimes called pilgrims.

The “Pilgrims” or “Pilgrim Fathers” were a group of English ‘Separatists’, religious dissidents who exiled themselves first in the Netherlands, then sailed for Massachusetts, in the hope of setting up a colony where they could enjoy religious freedom. In this context the term ‘pilgrim’ (first used of them in 1799), means that they travelled a long way in order to practise their religion.

So where are you making your pilgrimage to? We don't have any physical pilgrimage to make, but we are spiritual pilgrims.

Jacob described his whole life as a pilgrimage.

Gen. 47:9 *“And Jacob said to Pharaoh, “The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers.”*

David described his life following God as a pilgrimage.

Psalm 119:54 (NKJV) *"Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage."*

Our Christian life is very much like a pilgrimage. It is a journey – a long journey. A journey for religious reasons. The journey of a lifetime. It is towards a destination – the Kingdom of God – and it's vitally important we make it to that destination. We're not just tourists, distracted by any lovely sights, but we're headed for a serious goal. There is a difference between pilgrims and tourists.

After Passover and the days of Unleavened Bread, Israel under Moses left Egypt and were on a pilgrimage, first to Mt Sinai and then to the Promised Land. They wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, as travellers, wanderers, pilgrims. Spiritually speaking, we have left the Egypt of sin behind us and now we are walking as pilgrims in a spiritually dry and barren world, towards the goal of the Kingdom of God.

Let's come back to our key scripture, Psalm 84:5-7.

Verse 6 ⁶*"As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools."*

The "Valley of Baca" was named after some gum-exuding (weeping) trees, probably balsam trees. The Hebrew word "baca" means weeping. It was a dry and desolate valley.

"they make it a place of springs" could refer to the Christian's faith which dares to dig blessings out of hardships. We are positive and learn lessons from our trials and enjoy life as we follow Jesus Christ.

But God also sends rain, the water of the Holy Spirit, which comforts us on our pilgrimage through the spiritual wilderness of the materialistic world around us. The word "*pools*" can also be translated "blessings" (both words in Hebrew have the same consonants.)

1 Cor. 10:3-4 talks about Israel wandering in the wilderness, and they were given water from a rock in the desert.

³*"They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."*

That rock was Christ, the source of the water of the Holy Spirit, the water of the Word of God, that sustains us on our pilgrimage.

John 7:37-39 ³⁷*"On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.'* ³⁹*By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."*

Living in temporary dwellings at the Feast of Tabernacles, which the Israelites did, pictured their pilgrimage in the wilderness (and by extension, our spiritual pilgrimage in temporary dwellings now as we head towards the real dwellings of the Kingdom of God.) Israel had little water, and Jesus Christ hearkened back to that, in the context of the water pouring ceremony – to show the spiritual water we drink.

1 Peter 2:1 *“Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.”*

Get rid of sin. Leave it behind as Israel left Egypt behind. Then we begin on our Christian pilgrimage, and we are sustained by the food and drink Jesus Christ provides us.

Verses 2-3 ² *“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,”* ³ *now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”*

We can taste of that rock too, Jesus Christ. He is the Rock, the living Stone:

Verse 4 *“As you come to Him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him—”*

Verse 10-11 ¹⁰ *“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”* ¹¹ *Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.”*

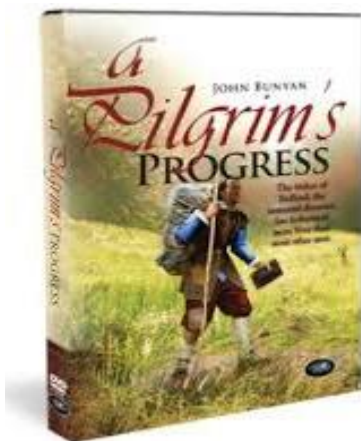
We are God’s people, and Verse 11 goes on to say what God’s people are, aliens and strangers in the world. “Pilgrims” is how the KJV translates the word “aliens”.

I’ve never liked the word “aliens” – sounds like someone from another world, extraterrestrial, but now it refers to someone from another country, which applies to us spiritually. We are not of this world, spiritually we should be different to the people of the world around us!

Verse 12 shows how we should stand out from them!

“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.”

The world is a spiritual ‘valley of Baca’, a dry desert; but we have the water of the Holy Spirit refreshing us, making us a spiritual garden instead of a desert. When God looks at us, He should see something quite different from the rest of the world!



I guess you’ve all heard of “The Pilgrim’s Progress”, written by John Bunyan in 1678. The full title was “The Pilgrim’s Progress from this world to that which is to come”. It is an allegory, where the characters and incidents suggest deeper meanings than what they say on the surface.

It is the story of a man called “Christian” who must make his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City of Zion. He goes past hazards such as the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair, the Giant Despair, the River of Death, etc.

Hebrews 11 is a story of pilgrimage too, this time an accurate history rather than a novel.

Hebrews 11:8-10 *“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”* ⁹ *By*

faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Abraham was a pilgrim, as were the other heroes of faith mentioned in this chapter.

Verse 13 *"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth."*

Verse 14 *"People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own."*

Is that us? Are we looking for a different country?

Verse 15 *"If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return."*

We can easily go back to the world any time. And Satan tries to get us to.

Verse 16 *"Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."*

This is our longing, and the destination of our pilgrimage.

Back to Psalm 84:7 *"They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion."*

Faith in God transforms weak people into those who "go from strength to strength" spiritually speaking, as we progress along our pilgrimage. This brings to mind a similar statement in 2 Cor. 3:18:

"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

As we continue our Christian life, the Pilgrims' Progress, we become closer and closer to God and the way He sees us, is as going from strength to strength, from glory to glory, as He values and appreciates our endurance and patience, and growth in the faith.

Psalm 84:7 *"till each appears before God in Zion".*

We will make it to the Celestial City, the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God for all eternity. So there you have it. The Christian life. The Pilgrims' Progress – from this world to the Kingdom of God. Happy Pilgrimage!

