

Pilgrims and Strangers — December 28, 2019

Cain's World, The Wilderness Journey, Egypt's Diet and Canaan's Seven, Lot vs. Abraham, and Wild Grapes

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 8:2–16; Genesis 4:12–23; Genesis 19:1–29; Isaiah 5:1–4

“And thou shalt remember all the way which Jehovah thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee and to prove thee, to know what was in thy heart.” (Deuteronomy 8:2)

“And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch: and he built a city.” (Genesis 4:17)

Strangers and Pilgrims: Two Distinct Conditions

Peter writes to us as strangers and pilgrims, and there is a distinction between the two words worth holding. A stranger is someone who has left the place he called home; he feels out of place wherever he is because he is not where he belongs. A pilgrim is someone with a destination ahead of him; he is not a resident of where he is passing through, because his home is still to come. Both together describe the Christian in this world. We have left something behind — the world we were once part of, the world system that once held us — and we are heading somewhere we have not yet arrived at. That double character should mark our conduct and our affections all the way home.

Cain's City: The World as It Is Today

Genesis 4 gives the origin of the world in which we live. God told Cain he would be a wanderer and a fugitive on the earth. Cain's response was to build a city. His son was an artificer of every kind of tool of bronze and iron. Another of his line invented musical instruments. And Lamech, a self-admiring bigamist, composed a boastful little poem about violence and murder. In a few verses, Genesis 4 describes the origin of human civilization as we know it: cities, technology, music, poetry, and bloodshed. This is Cain's world. John tells us: love not the world. This is the world he means.

The pilgrim character is not found in Cain's city. It never was and it never will be. Cain built a city precisely because he did not want to be a wanderer under God's government, and every development of human civilization since has been in the same spirit: to make man comfortable and self-sufficient without God. We are in that world, passing through it. The question is whether we act like it. The world is designed to ensnare our time, our thought, and our hearts. It has been doing so from the beginning, and with every technological advance the machinery for doing it becomes more total and more relentless.

The Wilderness Journey: Humbling, Hunger, and Heavenly Food

Deuteronomy 8 gives the purpose of the forty years in the wilderness: to humble thee and to prove thee, to know what was in thy heart. The first item on the list is humility. The world tells us to be proud of ourselves, to stand tall, to find our identity in our own achievement. God's first gift to the pilgrim is a dose of humility. A man who is proud in himself does not make a good pilgrim; he wants to plant himself somewhere impressive and stay.

The second item is hunger. God suffered them to hunger before he fed them with the manna. Why hunger? Because their Egypt-formed appetites had to be broken first. In Egypt they ate fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic — six items, all earthy, all growing on or under the ground, none of them reaching

toward heaven. It was a complete diet of the world, and it formed tastes that had to be unformed before the manna could satisfy them.

The land of Canaan, by contrast, offered seven things: wheat, barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranates, olive trees, and honey. Seven is completeness and fullness. And the wheat plant is the picture: roots in the ground, but the grain held up as high as the stalk can reach, close to heaven. The Lord Jesus said, I am the bread of life. He also said of himself, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone. The manna in the wilderness and the grain of Canaan both speak of Christ, the heavenly food given to those who are hungering for something better than what Egypt provides. The purpose of the humbling and the hunger, as verse 16 says, was to do thee good at thy latter end.

Lot in the Gate vs. Abraham Before the Lord

The contrast between Lot and Abraham in Genesis 18 and 19 is one of the clearest illustrations in Scripture of the difference between a worldly Christian and a separated one. Psalm 1 describes the blessed man: he walketh not in the counsel of the wicked, standeth not in the way of sinners, sitteth not in the seat of the scorers. When the angels arrived at Sodom, Lot was sitting in the gate. The gate of a city was the place of judges and elders, the place of authority and public life. Lot had made himself a man of importance in a city whose wickedness was notorious.

What was the effect of sitting in the seat of scorers? It got into his heart. When the men of Sodom pressed against his door and demanded the strangers, Lot offered his daughters to appease them. That wickedness entered his heart because he had been sitting among it. There is no such thing as maintaining full spiritual integrity while living fully in the world's system. We become what we sit with. Not overnight, not visibly at first, but it happens.

The contrast is Abraham's position in chapter 27: Abraham rose early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord. That was Abraham's characteristic place — before the Lord. Not before the gate, not in the councils of men, but standing before God. And it was because of Abraham that God remembered Lot and sent him out of the overthrow. The separated man was not visible in the destruction; he was not there pulling Lot out by the hand. But it was his intercession that secured the mercy. The friend of God, standing before God, praying for those in Sodom — that is the pattern for the pilgrim's engagement with the world. We can intercede for the lost without having to be residents among them, without taking up their time and their causes, without becoming like them.

Wild Grapes: What Self-Pleasing Produces

Isaiah 5:1–4 is the song of the vineyard. The owner did everything right: a fruitful hill, digging, clearing stones, planting the choicest vine, building a tower, hewing a winepress. What was there yet to do in my vineyard that I have not done in it? And when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, it brought forth wild grapes. Christians have been given a new life, a new nature, a new object, a new destination. God has held nothing back from his people. The question is what is produced. Left to ourselves, what comes is wild grapes — the fruit of the old nature asserting itself, the carnal mind doing what the carnal mind does. The world around us, Cain's world, is designed to feed that old nature and produce exactly this. The pilgrim walking in separation, feeding on Christ, keeping his eye on the destination ahead — that is the path to something other than wild grapes.

Man doth not live by bread alone, but by everything that goeth out of the mouth of Jehovah doth man live. (Deuteronomy 8:3)