

First Peter No. 11 “Sojourners in the World”

1 Peter 2:11-12

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Now, that’s an odd use of the term Gentile, because most of the people to whom Peter would have been writing were literally Gentiles. I remember once in Greece we were worshipping at a small Presbyterian church in Piraeus, the port city of Athens, and on several occasions Greek believers that we were chatting with after the service referred to their fellow citizens as “the Greeks,” as if they themselves were not Greek, as if they belonged to a different country, a different class of people because they were Christians. We have something of that idea here.

As is not infrequently the case, the chapter divisions of the Bible being added long centuries after the completion of the New Testament, a thousand years later in fact, they are not always located in the most appropriate place. Here, for example, at v. 11 of chapter 2, we should have a chapter division since v. 11 rather obviously begins a new section of the letter. In the previous section, if you remember, Peter had been dealing with the identity of Christians, their place in the church of God, and the purpose God had in forming them into a kingdom of priests.

But now his attention shifts to the place or position of Christians in the world, among the Gentiles, as it were. If they are God’s chosen people, a holy nation, and a royal priesthood, how should they relate to the society around them, to the governments of this world, and, in particular how should they respond to the world’s animosity and rejection? They may be God’s chosen people and his servants in the world, but the world hardly believes that. So how are Christians to relate to the unbelieving world? All of this is to come in the following paragraph, from v. 11 to the end of chapter 2. The “Beloved” and the “I urge you” also indicate that a new set of exhortations follows.

Peter begins by repeating what he said about them in brief in his address at the beginning of the letter, that they are sojourners – that is, resident aliens – people who do not have a permanent place in this world. They are also exiles, foreigners, that is, they don’t belong to the world’s native population. They are outsiders. They will never fully *fit in*. This is not, of course, a way of speaking about Christians that is original to Peter. Abraham and Jacob thought of themselves as strangers and pilgrims in the world – that is, as people who had no permanent home in this world but were passing through it to somewhere else. They said as much on several occasions.

Remember when Pharaoh asked Jacob how old he was? The patriarch replied, “The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty.” As the author of Hebrews reminds us, this was not merely a conventional form of speech. It was a confession of faith. Jacob was a man looking for a better country and he knew that it was not to be found in this world. He was resident here but he was a citizen of another place. *His homeland could not be found in this world!*

David, in Psalm 39:12, also used the idea of being a stranger and an alien to describe a spiritual

point of view.

“Hear my prayer, O Lord, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my weeping. For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were.”

David was not a sojourner or a foreigner or an exile in the ordinary sense, the political sense, or the social sense of the word. He owned property, he had a family, and he had a position in the world. He was a king for goodness sake! He was a stranger and an alien, and his fathers were, in one sense only. David was confessing his own temporality, his own finitude, the brevity of his life and the fact that this world could never be his home. In the truest sense he didn't belong here!

But here in 1 Pet. 2:11 Peter used the idea in a slightly different way. His is an ethical application. Because they are sojourners and exiles in this world and because it cannot be their home – not only because it is passing away but because it does not represent and it is not congenial to their life as the people of God – they must take their ethics, their way of life, not from the world around them but from their true homeland and its very different moral and spiritual culture.

Through the ages and still today Christians have proved themselves far too ready to mistake the meaning of their pilgrimage. I remember, years ago, being in my office here and being visited by a fellow, in his mid-twenties perhaps, who was dressed in a kind of white robe or toga and sandals. He was following the Lord's command, he said, and going from place to place serving him. Precisely what he was doing in the service of the Lord was never clear to me, but the unusual clothing appeared to be essential to his understanding of what it meant to live apart from the world. But Peter had no interest in putting distance between ourselves and the world by the clothing we wear or by being homeless wanderers. Nor does any other biblical writer recommend such things. Even Sundar Singh – perhaps the 20th century's premier example of the Christian wanderer – who had no home and spent his life wandering from place and to place, gone for years at a time with no one knowing precisely where he was, taking the gospel to places unreached and unreachable by ordinary missionaries, preaching Christ and salvation to people who had never heard that message, adopted the clothing of a Hindu *Sadhu*, or teacher, so that people would listen to what he had to say. In other words, even as a wanderer, he saw the importance of fitting in, to be recognized as someone that people might be inclined to listen to and learn from. Christians have been strangers and pilgrims from the time of the patriarchs to the present day, but there is no evidence that they looked any different from the people of their time and place or that they could be identified as strangers in the world by their appearance. The apostles themselves dressed like the folk whose home was in this world though they themselves were the products of another culture and were citizens of another country.

Indeed, in every way Christians were and are to be “worldly” in the best sense of that word. Paul certainly was. He wore the same clothes, he ate the same food, he earned his living in the same way as unbelieving people around him. He read the world's books, he read and, I suspect, he sometimes saw their stage plays – important conveyers of their philosophy in the days before most people

could afford books; he refers to one of those plays in an address he delivered in Athens – he knew their poetry, their business, and their politics. He was, after all, a Roman citizen. He proved himself quite willing to appeal to his rights as a citizen of the empire. *He was, in those respects, thoroughly at home in the world.* When John Wayne said, “Listen and listen good, Pilgrim!” he was using the term “pilgrim” to describe someone who wasn’t worldly wise, wasn’t savvy, who didn’t understand the ways of life in the West. But that isn’t the idea here at all. It is in a very different way that Christians are sojourners and exiles, foreigners and pilgrims.

Still less is Peter recommending that Christians withdraw from the world. Christians misunderstood him in that way as well. Some forms of monasticism were precisely an attempt to separate Christians from the world, and so embody the Christian life as a pilgrimage. Quite the contrary! Verse 12 indicates that Peter fully expected that these sojourners and exiles would be living their lives in full view of the unbelieving world.

People have sometimes objected to John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* for just this reason. Can’t Christian, the hero of Bunyan’s allegory, be faulted, they wonder, for going off on that long journey to save himself, while leaving his wife and children behind in the city of destruction? Shouldn’t he have stayed behind and cried out warning to the doomed citizens of that town? Well, *Pilgrim’s Progress* is an allegory, of course. And it is an allegory about one thing only: the way of salvation. The wise and sensitive reader knows that Christian made his entire journey, through the Slough of Despond to the Wicket Gate, past the Interpreter’s house and up the hill and on through the Valleys of Humiliation and The Shadow of Death, through Vanity Fair and Doubting Castle and the Delectable Mountains and all the way to the River – I say Christian made that journey all the while sitting at his own fireside and working in his own shop and sitting at table with his own family. Being a stranger in this world does not mean that you live any less as an inhabitant of it.

Peter was speaking, as v. 12 confirms, of Christians as sojourners and exiles in the moral and ethical sense. The lives of Christians are to be nourished by and are to reflect the principles and practices *of that place and that world to which they are heading.* And there is such a difference between this world and that world that it is inevitable that each world should produce a very different way of life, a difference so fundamental that it ought to be distinctly visible and impressive to unbelievers – one of the reasons why they despise Christians on many occasions.

Peter didn’t say here, in this general statement, what such “honorable conduct” or such “good deeds” amount to that bring glory to God, but we know what he means and he will tell us in greater detail in the rest of the letter. It is the life of love, of purity, of self-denial, of kindness and generosity, of humility, courage, honesty, patience, and integrity all of which are given a distinctly Christian shape. These are the facets of a character dominated by the love of Christ and a commitment to his kingdom. It is a life of bearing witness in word and deed to the love and holiness of that God who has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

You can get to this same view of life in other ways of course and the Bible often does. We could

describe the Christian life as a life of response to the grace of God. Paul does this very often. Live as those ought to live who have been saved as you have been saved. There is a philosophy of living. Or Peter could have begun his exhortation by telling us to be holy as God and Christ are holy, as he did in chapter 1. We are to live as the children of God, since we belong to God's family we should act in the interest of our Father. That too is a frequent general motivation for the Christian life in the Bible.

But here Peter based our unique way of life on the fact that we are sojourners and exiles in this world. Here the accent falls on distinguishing our lives from the life of the world around us. Here then is another important definition of the Christian life: *it is not the life that this world lives, the life this world teaches us, encourages us, and tempts us to live*. It is a different life, a distinct life, a life apart. *That too is a very important way of thinking about our lives, a very good way to examine ourselves to see if we are really being faithful to the Lord in this way or that*. In what ways is it obvious that you and I do not live the world's life, that we belong to another country, that our speech, our customs, and our habits are quite different from those of this world?

Have we taken in this way, or in that way, our values from the world or are they consistent with the life of our homeland? Are our business ethics those of this world or those of heaven? Is our family organization worldly or heavenly? And what of our thinking about and use of money, or time, or choice of entertainment? Do we think about other people the way we are taught to think about them here or the way we are taught to think about them there? Is our life related to God in the ways this world prefers – distant, attenuated, irrelevant in most respects – or as it is in heaven, where his glory, his purpose, his wonderful love and wisdom dominate everything and preoccupy everyone? Do we speak in a foreign accent that demonstrates to the people of this world that we are from another place?

What is also helpful about this way of speaking about our Christian lives – in addition to the fact that our lives are to be obviously unusual, distinct from that of the unbelievers around us – is that in this way we are reminded how important it is that we carry with us day by day a sense of our homeland, our destination, the country to which we are headed: the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God. It will make all the difference whether our sense of heaven is fitful and weak or clear and powerful, powerful enough to produce a living expectation. Too much of the time for many Christians, the sense of the heaven is vague and so incapable of producing a powerful effect.

Basil Atkinson was one of the pioneers of the restoration of the academic respectability of evangelical biblical scholarship, the movement that led eventually to Inter Varsity Christian fellowship and which was so influential in the revival of Christianity in Britain and America after the Second World War. He was a notable scholar at Cambridge University, but an outspoken Christian who was never ashamed to preach to university students in the open air. He was an expert in the classical languages but was, at the same time, a deeply prayerful man. He was also, by all accounts, somewhat eccentric, an eccentricity perhaps magnified by the fact that he remained all his

life a bachelor. Indeed, he used to love telling the story that after speaking to an evangelistic meeting sponsored by students at the University of London the student chairman of the meeting got up to say, “We thank Dr. Atkinson very much for coming to speak to us this evening. Tomorrow we are to have two undergraduates from Oxford, perfectly normal human beings.”

On one occasion while preaching in an open-air service in Cambridge Atkinson mentioned heaven. A student heckler shouted, “What you know about heaven?” With his characteristically seraphic smile, Atkinson replied, “I live there.” [Dudley Smith, *John Stott*, I, 184-185] I read something like that and am, at one and the same time, ashamed of my life and inspired to live it differently. Surely that ought to be true of every one of us: we live in heaven even while upon this earth.

Here Peter only mentioned the point, he did not elaborate it. He doesn’t even mention heaven. But, of course, it is assumed. When he mentions “the day of visitation,” that is, the Second Coming of Christ, we are reminded of our future, heaven itself, where Christ is now and where we will someday join him. It is our task to ponder Peter’s brief exhortation and apply it to our lives; to take to heart what it must mean for a Christian to be a sojourner and an exile in this world.

Jim Price gave me a copy of Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book* for Christmas. This was his way of attempting to disabuse me of my conviction, a conviction no doubt shared by many of you, that Kipling’s definitive interpreter was Phil Harris, singing as he did in the earlier – that is, the classic – animated version of *Jungle Book*, “The Simple Bear Necessities of Life.” Jim, for some reason I am unable to fathom, thinks that Kipling would not view Phil Harris’ rendition of Baloo as perfectly capturing what Kipling had in mind. Anyway, more to the point, C.S. Lewis said of Rudyard Kipling that Kipling’s problem was that he had no doctrine of “ends.” That is the problem with perhaps most Americans today and vast multitudes of people in this world: they have no doctrine of “ends.” That is, their lives are not lived with any particular end in view, any final purpose, any destination. It’s very difficult to make a successful journey if you have no idea where you are going or don’t care where you end up. But that can be too much the case with you and me as well. Too often the end of our journey does not crowd in upon us while we are on the way, at least it does not do so sufficiently to alter our viewpoint as we live our lives day by day.

One of the effects of my having spent my summers in Colorado at our mountain cabin, almost every year since I was a very young boy, is that my weeks there each year serve to mark the passage of my life. Another year has gone by; I’m another year older; the family has changed over the year, and so on. I can remember my boyhood in the mountains and now I can remember my children having the same experiences that I had enjoyed so much. Perhaps because of the happy associations of the place for our family and because we are there only for a short time each year, such things stick in mind and take a special place in my memory.

But two memories now especially intrude whenever I am there and am walking in that lovely valley and taking in the beauty that I have taken in countless times. I will never forget watching my father drive away from our cabin for the last time in the summer of 1990. He loved that place, but he was

sick and it was obvious he was not going to live to see another summer or to return again to that mountain valley which evoked so many happy memories for him. I can still see the back of the car as it disappeared from sight for the last time. And then, in 1996 I witnessed a similar departure, this time of my sister. She loved the place as much as I do. In her case no one was quite so certain, but we all suspected that she was leaving for the last time as proved to be the case. I could hardly think of anything else as they drove away but that she would not return. She had enjoyed the last of her Colorado summers.

This world, this life, was over for them. It was as if they were driving away from it. And that is an unspeakably sad thing, *unless, as happened to be the case, they were driving to another world, to a far better and more beautiful world than any they had known here*; a world they had been pointing themselves toward for many years. It is the glory of the Gospel, it is the great honor of Jesus Christ, and it is the immense privilege of human beings and of Christians especially that such a place exists and that there is a way to it from this world. And there the saints shall live forever in unbroken communion with the Lord, a world of beauty and joy that even the most perceptive among us see but dimly.

The Bible is always urging us to anticipate this future, to contemplate it, to set out minds and hearts upon it and, then, to live in a manner consistent with it. “Set your minds on things above, where Christ is, seated at the Right Hand of God.” That was Paul’s way of saying what Peter said here and he went on to describe the life of the man or woman whose mind is set on things above. That in Colossians 3. How will we want to have lived and loved when we are there? How ought we to live before God and man when we will soon be there and everlasting joy break over our heads? Ought we not to live as citizens of that country? Ought we not to live as patriots of that city? Ought we not to declare her praises by our words and deeds? Ought we not to show to others the honor we pay to her King? Ought we not to take care never to behave in ways that suggest that we would rather live here than there? Ought we not to have such a sense of heaven as our home that we feel detached from this world and unimpressed by its allurements? Of course we should; every Christian knows we should!

Howell Harris, the Welsh evangelist of the Great Awakening, once wrote:

“I feel my spirit leaving all, places and men, here below, and going to my Father, and to my native country, home; *yea my own home*.... And if a child longs for his father, a traveler for the end of his journey, a workman to finish his work, a prisoner for his liberty, an heir for the full possession of his estate; so in all these respects, I can’t help longing to go home.”

Some of you young people have now had experiences of this. You have been away, perhaps at college or in the service, and you could not wait to get home – like a soldier who has been overseas for months or years and cannot think of anything but home and getting home. You think about it from afar, and you count the days, and your anticipation builds. Why? Because you belong there.

The ones you love are there. It is where you are your truest self. Your memories swirl around it, your entire life is connected to it. Your home is where your heart is. And heaven is that for Christians and should always be that for Christians. And, frankly, it should be more and more the case the longer we live as Christians in this dying world. Live long enough as a Christian and I guarantee you will lose your hope that what you really long for you will ever find in this world.

Peter simply tells you to live as a stranger and an alien. You must ponder what that means and how best to do that. You must turn your heart and mind heavenward. You must often contemplate your life there and compare it with your life here. And you must do what the godly have always done: take those steps from time to time to attach yourself to that city and to that world above. Some of you do this already, I know. You go to the cemetery and stand before the graves of those loved ones who are now in heaven among the spirits of just men made perfect and you stare at that stone until you think you can see your own name written there. Alexander Whyte would visit the grave of his son in the Dean Cemetery in Edinburgh and say that in that spot especially he felt as if he had one foot in this world and one foot in the next.

A friend of mine sent me a few weeks ago a small book he had written in appreciation of Lord James Mackay on his 90th birthday. [J. Cameron Fraser, *Learning from Lord Mackay: Life and Work in Two Kingdoms* (2017)] James Mackay may be known to a few of you but I doubt to many. He was a distinguished British jurist and for some time held high positions in the British government. Margaret Thatcher appointed him first to the position of Lord Advocate, the highest legal position in Scotland and then as Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain, a position somewhat like our Attorney General but with considerably more power. He was to serve in that office from 1987 to 1997. Sinclair Ferguson, well known to American Reformed evangelicals, furnished the preface to the book and in that preface, admits that there was no public person in British life that he admired more than James Mackay. He was a man of great ability as a thinker and a speaker and a leader. In Britain the Lord High Chancellor is not only a member of the cabinet, he presides over the House of Lords. A testament to his unusual gifts is that between 1983 and 2000 he received, on average, an honorary doctorate every year! When asked by the author of this small appreciation when he was himself a university student how Mackay himself had taken notes in class – he naturally wanted to know how a man so intellectually accomplished had learned to learn when he was a college student - he replied, “I didn’t. I remembered the spoken word.” A steel-trap memory has often been characteristic of men of powerful intellect.

Now James Mackay is a Christian, a real Christian, a devout Christian. Indeed, he was a member of the arch-conservative Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. This is a church so conservative that while Lord High Chancellor, Mr. MacKay was disciplined by his church for the sin of having attended a government colleague’s funeral which happened to be a Roman Catholic requiem mass. Mackay didn’t participate, but he attended the service and that was too much for his denomination! Being a devout Christian, a faithful Christian in the political world is no easy thing. There are the pressures from one’s own party, the brickbats from the opposition, the social pressures, and the endless demands on one’s time and influence. For a Christian there are also the Christians who are

sure that you have sold them out, betrayed biblical principles in some way or another. It was this way for James Mackay as divorce legislation, family law, assisted suicide, gay marriage and so on became issues during his time in the government. But throughout these years, and despite the controversies that inevitably surfaced as he supported or opposed proposed legislation, Mackay's reputation for honesty and integrity, for personal kindness, for genuine interest in the problems of ordinary people, all nourished by his Christian faith, remained and was widely acknowledged by friend and foe alike. Even his critics acknowledged his humility and sincerity. Everyone knew he was a Christian and everyone acknowledged his integrity and goodness. He was compared to Joseph serving with integrity in the Egyptian court or Daniel in the Babylonian. Even those who envied him and hated his points of view had to admit that he was a man faithful to his God and caring of others. *That is what Peter is talking about!* MacKay was a man of this world – deeply involved in its affairs; trying to help in every way he could – but, at the same time, he was most definitely not a man of this world – indeed a man of another world altogether! And the same should be true of you and me in our smaller spheres.

That is Peter's thought and challenge. It is not so many days from now brothers and sisters that we will go home or, even better, the Day of Visitation will dawn. Either way, that glorious moment will throw every other moment of your life into the shade; when you put your foot on the threshold of the gateway to the City of God. How will you want to have lived here, then? Will the world have known that you were all the while traveling to this place? Will they see the Lord Christ and realize in a moment that you were his man, his woman all along? That is Peter's challenge in these two brief but indescribably rich verses.

God grant that it may be said of us, what the great Thomas Ken said of his friend Isaac Walton:

“Of this just man let this due praise be given,
Heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.”

We want to live so that at the Day of Days the unbelievers who knew us and observed us will have to admit that our lives were the lives they too should have lived.