



THE FIRST WORD

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The Journey to Our True Home

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ AUGUST 20, 2017

How do we make sense of this thing called life? We are all born, and some time later we all die, but in between there are so many different choices to make and options to consider, so many different and seemingly-random experiences and challenges, joys and sorrows to encounter. No two people have exactly the same life. Are there any general conclusions we can draw, any framework for understanding what it's all about?

Images of Life's Journey

One of the most common metaphors or images or paradigms, which has been used through the centuries to give us perspective, is to think of life as being like a journey, a long trip down a pathway or highway, filled with unpredictable and unique experiences.

We find the image of a journey through life in some of our greatest literature, millennium after millennium. Centuries before Christ was born, the great Greek storyteller Homer crafted the epic known as *The Odyssey*, telling of a years-long sea journey by the hero Odysseus (aka Ulysses) returning to his homeland after the Trojan War. *The Odyssey* has been a beloved classic because the adventures faced by the hero and his crew are representative of common human experiences—facing dangers, temptations, personal weaknesses, and deepest hopes. In American literature, the beloved *Wizard of Oz* took Dorothy and her companions on a journey along the yellow brick road (representing life) to the Emerald City (representing the ultimate destination). In English literature, the epic trilogy *Lord of the Rings* sent a couple little fellows called Hobbits on a long, desperate

quest to defeat evil. Modern novelist Joseph Conrad, in his gloomy African tale *Heart of Darkness*, sent a civilized European deep into the heart of Africa on a riverboat, where he encountered evil in all its forms. Life, to many of our smartest observers, is best understood to be like a journey.

A Journey of Faith

And this theme is found repeatedly in scripture. Abraham was sent by God on a long journey to a new land, which would become the Holy Land. Moses, centuries later, led the ragtag rabble of Israel from slavery through desert wanderings to that same Holy Land. Again centuries later, Ezra and Nehemiah led their people back home from exile. At the dawn of the age of the Messiah, wise men from the east traveled far following a miraculous star all the way to Bethlehem. Jesus Himself described journeys in His parables: the Prodigal Son traveling back home from a far country, the Good Samaritan helping a man wounded along the roadside.

And in our text for today, from the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament, we find the journey of faith by believers in subsequent generations described for us in these words:

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in tents. And so did Isaac and Jacob, who inherited the same promise. Abraham was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God. ...All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth. Obviously people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had longed

for the country they came from, they could have gone back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16 (NLT)

I will point out several of the truths that we find embedded in this passage of Hebrews, and then I'm going to take you on a tour of one of the most famous and impactful Christian books of all time—introducing some of you for the first time to a true classic. Let's first see what we can gain from these verses.

Choices

While every person ever born into this world has no choice but to be on the journey from our beginning to our end, there are very serious choices to make along the way. And the most important decision we will ever make—more important than a person to marry, children to have, career to pursue, place to live, candidate to vote for or mutual fund to invest in—is the decision about whether or not to listen to God's call and respond to it. Abraham's call was unique in one respect—he was called by name and invited to go to a particular place at a particular moment in history—but it was also, in another respect, common to everyone. God's voice goes out across the earth; He is constantly seeking men and women who will listen and follow Him. We can keep traveling the road we are on—perhaps the one our parents encouraged us to take, or the one our friends and peers think is right, or the one we wandered into without quite knowing how we got there. But when we respond to God's call, it will require some kind of leaving, as it did of Abraham. To leave means that we consciously turn away from or leave behind the values and actions we had once embraced. It means to repent, to change.

Verses 8 and 9 repeat the phrase “by faith.” Not only did it require faith for Abraham to make that momentous choice to follow God's path; faith was required from that moment on, all along the path. Being a Christian is not just a one-time-for-all choice, but is also a daily

trusting in God. We need to hold onto our faith to deal with and overcome every challenge of every mile along our life's road. Following Christ begins with faith, is sustained by faith, and ends in faith.

A City Out of This World

The ultimate goal for those who choose God's path is literally out of this world. Our other-worldly destination (called "eternity" and "heaven" and other terms in the Bible) is going to be so different from what we experience here—which is confined by the physical boundaries of our bodies and the temporal boundaries of the tyranny of the time sequence.

Verses 10 and 16 echo the metaphor that our ultimate destination is a city that has been designed, built and prepared expressly for us by God. The concept of a city is a complex one in our modern world. The past fifty years have witnessed an unprecedented urbanization process, as people by literally the billions have moved from rural and small town environments to megacities of vast scale. Cities have many blessings and offer many enticements: people move to them for jobs, for culture and entertainment, for excitement, and for prosperity. But modern cities also have many problems: crime, pollution, overcrowding, troubled schools, disconnection from neighbors and impersonality. And just as we have seen waves moving *to* cities, we have seen counter-waves choosing to leave cities and escape their problems by flight to the suburbs or countryside. Maybe some of us here have consciously made that choice at some point. But cities in the ancient world had a different connotation. Their primary attraction was safety and protection. Cities were built with strong, high walls. People who felt threatened from invading armies, marauding thieves, and dangerous predators could feel much more secure and able to sleep safely at night if they were tucked inside a city. It is that sense of permanent security that the picture of a city built by God for us to dwell in is meant to convey.

Verse 13 tells us that all believers who have chosen God's way through life recognize themselves as foreigners and nomads, people who have no illusions that they currently are at home. The actual real-

ity is that nobody gets to stay on this earth forever. We are all mortal, and everything we see and touch, everything we buy and own, is temporary and transient. Unfortunately, some people, in a state of denial about that fact, try to live as if the things they have are permanent—and as if modern medicine can somehow delay and defer our mortality indefinitely. Hebrews tells us that those of us who have chosen God’s way never forget that this world is not our permanent home. And though we may love life, we know that what awaits us is far greater—what verse 16 calls “a better place, a heavenly homeland.”

A Christian Classic

One of the greatest classics of Christian literature is a novel written about 350 years ago by an English pastor named John Bunyan. It is called *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and is believed to be the first novel ever written in the English language. The book was a huge bestseller in its own time and for centuries after, has been translated into over 200 languages, and has never been out of print. It is entirely built around the extended metaphor or image of the Christian life as being a journey, a pilgrimage, through this world and to an eternal home with God. It fleshes out what the writer of Hebrews hints.

Some of you have read *Pilgrim’s Progress*. I am, candidly, not recommending it for most of you. It’s hard going for modern readers, for several reasons. The form of an allegory—where every character and place represents some abstract or spiritual quality—is not something we are used to. The book’s language is also different from contemporary English; it was written only a few decades after Shakespeare, and most 21st century Americans have trouble working their way through Shakespeare! *Pilgrim’s Progress* is also filled with extended debates and dialogue on biblical and theological themes, and most modern Americans are not very biblically and theologically literate compared to centuries ago. Back then there were far fewer books and no internet, TV, or radio, and so most intelligent people, when they wanted to read, read the Bible. Today, of course, the Bible is a dust gathering, never-opened book, even for otherwise well educated people.

The Plot

Here is a quick overview of the plot of the novel. A man is convicted of his sinfulness and longs to find forgiveness. An evangelist encourages him to set out on a journey from his home (in the City of Destruction, representing this transient world) to the Celestial City (representing heaven). Along the way he finds the mercy he longs for, encounters many difficulties, obstacles, and temptations, and has to deal with some people who are opposed to the Christian faith and would lead him astray, and others who are fellow pilgrims with him. Finally, the man, named Christian, makes it across the river of death into the presence of God forever. In the sequel, *Pilgrim's Progress Book 2*, his wife, named Christiana, sets out on a comparable journey with her own unique set of experiences.

The story was written to serve as the pretext or platform upon which Pastor Bunyan could teach his congregation and his readers across England a great many truths about life and faith. People through the centuries since have profited from his insights, and some have even used *Pilgrim's Progress* as a devotional book or a guide to their spiritual walk. Rather than quoting sections and risking being bogged down in its archaic wording and images, I would like to pull out two of the lessons found within the story that can apply to every time and every generation.

The first lesson I will highlight from *Pilgrim's Progress* is that the decision to start on God's path (or we could call it accepting Christ as Savior or turning to God or becoming a believer or some other terminology) is both solitary and communal; it is something every person can only do for themselves, and yet it is not done in isolation or apart from others. When Christian in John Bunyan's book chose to start on the road to eternal life, he was not forced or pressured to do so. It was his personal decision.

But he quickly was embraced by and found walking alongside him many like-minded companions who had also chosen God's path. Collectively, these fellow travelers are called The Church; and the experience we have together is labeled fellowship: a mutual support

and help and camaraderie that comes from sharing the same purpose and the same values. In the Middle Ages, prior to the great Protestant Reformation that rediscovered the central truths of the scriptures, the monolithic Church rigidly proclaimed: “There is no salvation apart from the Church.” It was a very effective manipulation to control people and keep them obedient to the ecclesiastical leadership. When Luther and other reformers tried to advocate for change from within, they were silenced by this slogan and threatened with excommunication—which they claimed was synonymous with eternal damnation. “If you’re not an obedient member of our church, you’re lost.” But the Church is not the source of our salvation; and a person can decide to embrace faith in Christ apart from the Church.

It is not the church that saves us. Only Jesus can do that. But once His work has begun in us, He enfolds us within the fellowship or family of the church for our benefit. Though you can become a Christian apart from a relationship with other Christians, it’s awfully hard to make progress in your spiritual pilgrimage without being connected to others. And it’s lonely. And it’s not easy to be completely self-taught. And it’s arrogant to think that we can be self-sufficient and never need anyone’s help. The Christian life is meant to be lived in relationships.

The second lesson from Pastor Bunyan’s book: Our conscience can serve as the tipping point or decisive factor to turn us onto the way of faith. There are actually several potential motivations for this most important of choices. Some people have been moved to seek God and surrender to Him through becoming intellectually convinced of the truth of the Christian faith. That was the tipping point for a modern American novelist named Andrew Klavan, an ethnic but non-practicing Jew who decided to read the whole Bible and became convinced that it expressed the truth that every human longed for. Others find the tipping point of faith in the Christian lifestyle. I recently read the story of a university professor in China who became disillusioned by the emptiness and lack of caring of the secular communist

bureaucracy of his country, and then met a group of Christians from a house church near his campus who were selflessly involved in helping the poor and needy out of the love of Christ. This is what China needs, he thought, and he began to read the teachings of the Savior and embraced them.

There are many entry points. But for John Bunyan, and for his main character Christian, the prompting to seek Christ was a sense of his own failures. He knew he had done wrong things that he could never go back and undo. He knew that his desires and passions and emotions often controlled him and led him to do things he knew were wrong. And he felt unable in his own willpower alone to change, to get out of his bad ruts and habits, and to become a better person. The author memorably portrayed the burden of sin and inadequacy in his heart as a heavy burden, like a huge backpack strapped on him, filled with bricks, that he could not get off. When, in his journey, he arrived at the foot of the cross, God instantly unstrapped the backpack, it fell off Christian, and it rolled downhill into the open mouth of a tomb—where it was buried forever, never to burden him again. What a beautiful image: the empty tomb of Jesus, that once held His crucified body, no longer could contain Him and so it became the burial place for all our sins.

Perhaps it was, or now is, a feeling of the burden of your sin and guilt and weakness that leads you to Christ. Or perhaps God uses another motivation as the one that gets you started on the pilgrim road. Our paths are unique and personal, yet they also contain many similar experiences. Next week we will return to *Pilgrim's Progress*, and learn more from Pastor John Bunyan to equip us for our journey through life. ■