

# Weary Of Conflict

## Series : Pilgrim's Life In An Alien World

by Brian Morgan

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Reading Michael Green's book " Evangelism in the Early Church" recently, I was struck by the fact that Christians in the first century influenced their world for Jesus Christ far more than Christians do in our day. Their world was more openly hostile to Christianity than ours. They were far fewer in number. They did not hold any influential positions. They did not have our money or our technology. Yet in a span of 30 years they succeeded in spreading the Kingdom of God from Jerusalem to Antioch, to Corinth, to Ephesus, and then to the capital of the Roman Empire itself. Christians today have more established rights, they are greater in number, they are more influential- they hold some of the most influential positions in the land- they have all the money and technology they need, yet their influence in the world seems stifled and anemic by comparison.

Why does Christianity in the book of Acts seem far more exciting than it does today? I think one of the primary factors is that the Christians in the first century had a far better understanding of their identity in the world than we do. They discovered something about their identity that we would do well to recall. As they studied the Scriptures, in the New Testament they discovered that the role of a believer in the world was always that of a pilgrim. There a pilgrim is described as an alien. He is not at home in this world; he is a citizen of another world, a heavenly city to come. Secondly, a pilgrim is called in the Old Testament a "sojourner." He was a foreigner, living in a land where he had no rights. As such he was dependent upon the hospitality of others to meet his needs. A sojourner did not go into a foreign country to build an empire, he went to bless and encourage others.

The fact that the early Christians practiced this lifestyle is evident in this quotation from an unknown second century author:

The Christians are not distinguished from other men by country, by language, nor by civil institutions. For they neither dwell in cities by themselves, nor use a peculiar tongue, nor lead a singular mode of life. They dwell in the Grecian or barbarian cities, as the case may be; they follow the usage of the country in dress, food, and the other affairs of life. Yet they present a wonderful and confessedly paradoxical conduct. They dwell in their own native lands, but as strangers. They take part in all things, as citizens; and they suffer all things, as foreigners. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every native land is a foreign. They marry, like all others; they have children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have the table in common, but not wives. They are in the flesh, but do not live after the flesh. They live upon the earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the existing laws, and excel the laws of their lives. They love all, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown, and yet they are condemned. They are killed and are made alive. They are poor and make many rich. They lack all things, and in all things abound.

Such was the lifestyle of those first century pilgrims, aliens and sojourners.

To illustrate the contrast between those Christians and Christians today, I found a good example in a recent issue of National Geographic. In an article on Jerusalem, the reporter asked an Israeli official, "How many Christians are there now living in Jerusalem?" The Israeli pondered the question, and replied, "If by 'Christian' you mean one who loves those who persecute him, who turns the other cheek and lives by the precepts of Christ, none. The Christians clamor for their rights now." That is true of Christians the world over. We have lost our influence on the world because we have forgotten our identity as pilgrims.

Here in the Bay Area, in Santa Clara County, it is especially difficult for Christians to live as pilgrims. we have the world's best climate. Per capita income is the highest in the world. In a time of high unemployment everywhere else, Silicon Valley offers some of the leading positions available anywhere, many of them on the cutting edge of the computer industry. Living here it is really easy to be lulled to sleep, to have the senses dulled by worldly pleasures. It is easy to become self-absorbed and ingrown. It is extremely hard to live the life of a pilgrim. We need help in redefining our role in the world as pilgrims.

To help us do that, let us spend the next eight weeks looking at a selection of the Psalms called the Songs of Ascents. These psalms were compiled as a little hymnal within the Psalter. They were to be sung by every male Israelite three times each year, when he traveled to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at Passover, at the Feast of Pentecost, and at Rosh Hashana. Isaiah is probably referring to these psalms in Isaiah 30:

**You will have songs as in the night  
when you keep the festival;  
And gladness of heart as when one  
marches to the sound of the flute,  
To go to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the Rock of Israel.**

In each song the pilgrim reveals his deep yearning and hunger, the sense of alienation he has living in the world. At the same time he shows how he has that need met in the Lord.

The meaning and significance of these psalms deepened as Israel's history progressed. Looking at her history from Abraham to David, to the exile, as the years went by they traveled farther and farther from home. Finally, after the exile, they were scattered among pagan peoples over the face of the earth. Many of them never returned to Israel. We can sense their increasing alienation as they are driven farther and farther away from home. This sense of alienation takes on even deeper significance in the New Testament. There we find the Pilgrim, Jesus, who left his heavenly home to dwell among an ungodly people, a world that did not know him. As a sojourner he sensed this alienation. He did not come to stay, or to assert his rights; he came to bless. He sang these hymns just before his own Passover. When he left the upper room and ascended up the Mount of Olives to his place of betrayal, these were his songs. Let us look afresh at these psalms so that we can learn how to live the life of a pilgrim in an alien world.

In Psalm 120 the pilgrim is called to live amidst pagan, immoral, godless people, not just temporarily, but as a lifestyle. The pilgrim hungered to have an influence wherever he went. His message was Shalom, peace, which he faithfully proclaimed, yet his message was totally rejected. Even when it seemed that his word was accepted and peace was agreed to, he was a victim of deceit and his life was endangered. In his alienation and distress he was driven to worship, to cry out to the Lord.

The Psalm breaks down into three parts: petition, confidence, and lament. I will begin with the section on lament because that gives the full atmosphere of what the pilgrim is experiencing in his hurt and

heartache. Verses 5 through 7:

**Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech,  
I dwell with the tents of Kedar!  
Too long has my soul dwelt with those hating peace.  
I am for peace (And thus I speak) But they are for war.**

"Woe is me" is the pilgrim's impassioned word. He has had it. For too long he has dwelt among this type of people. They are the reason for his woe.

The people of Meshech lived in the north of Israel, by the Caspian Sea. They had two outstanding characteristics, their economic expertise and their military might. Meshechs were shrewd traders, who exchanged in bronze and slaves. Ezekiel says that Tyre's greatest achievement was her ability to trade with Meshech. In today's terms, trading with them would be like dealing on the New York Stock Exchange. It was a prestigious position. Then they had tremendous military capability; they were skilled at war. Archaeological inscriptions tell us that Assyria, the strongest nation on the face of the earth at this time defeated Meshech, but at tremendous loss to herself.

Kedar was Israel's neighbor to the south. They were descendants of Ishmael, and as such were the implacable enemies of Israel. They too were skilled economically, and militarily they were the epitome of strength. Speaking in today's terms, our pilgrim could well have prayed, "Lord, why have you put me amongst people who do not know God, people who on one side have the military capability of Russia and on the other side the economic trading ability of Japan?"

Have you ever asked yourself a similar question? When you go to your work, like a pilgrim, like Abraham with your tent and your altar, among people who are far more adequate than you, people who are at the top of their field, do you sometimes say, "Lord, what am I doing here?" Many a good Jew asked that, and some of their rabbis discovered the right answer to the question, why did God scatter his people among the nations? Rabbi Eleazer said: "God scattered Israel among the nations for the sole end that proselytes should wax numerous among them." Why did God place you where you are? To be a witness for Jesus Christ. Rabbi Hillel said to the Jews of the Diaspora: "Be one of the disciples of Aaron, following after peace, loving mankind and drawing them to the Law."

What are the methods and the message of this pilgrim as he endeavors to influence his pagan neighbors? Remember that he regards himself as a sojourner. He does not live among these people so that he might build an economic empire and use them to advance that. No, he comes as a sojourner, without any rights. He comes to be a blessing to them, to serve them. His message is Shalom, peace, well-being, prosperity. He brought the message of the Torah with him: he wanted to lead these people to the God of Peace who would give peace to their souls through sacrifice, so that they would worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Creator, who would give them life. Such was his method and his message. In response he was rejected and hated. And it was not a one-time, but a continual rejection. The one time his message was embraced it was only for the purpose of deceit.

The pilgrim discovered that those who live a lifestyle of peace are ripped off. Theirs is not a promising lifestyle. It does not seem to exert any influence. We can see why he says, "Woe to me." The pilgrim's life is a discouraging one. We know from history that as one generation succeeded another, far from becoming more amenable to the God of Peace, these nations become more hostile towards Israel. A fifth century Egyptian inscription talks about one of the kings of Kedar, Geshem "the Arabian." This man may have been the same king who tried to deceive Nehemiah. Every time Nehemiah wanted to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, Geshem opposed him. Later in the wheels of history, the founder of Islam, Mohammed, traced his lineage back to Ishmael through Kedar; a whole new worldwide religion

surfaced to oppose the God of Shalom. Ezekiel had a vision of the last days when the pilgrims finally come home to Jerusalem. But in Meshech the people said, "The Jews are home. Let us go and plunder." From Meshech too will come the Prince of Gog, with an army so great that it is compared to a cloud that covers the land as it assembles against Israel. No wonder the pilgrim feels that he has had enough.

Have you ever felt that way? Perhaps you have been married for years to an unbeliever. You have been living a lifestyle of peace so that your spouse could come to know the Creator of Peace, but all you got in return was war. Perhaps you have been praying for your in-laws for 10 or 15 years but nothing happened. You are for peace, they are for war. Perhaps you have taken a new job, and you desire to bring peace. That is your message to your new employers, but their response is war. You may even have begun to influence the way a few people think but then the whole company turns the other way; hostility breaks out and people are mad at one another. How should you respond when that happens?

Let us consider first two wrong responses. The first is what I call the "monastery approach." That is, when you are weary of conflict in the world you respond by saying, "I've had it. I'm leaving." So you do business only with Christians. You go to school with Christians, you relate only to Christians, going from one Christian foxhole to another, withdrawing totally from the world. "Privatization," is what Os Guinness calls this. But when we do that we lose our ministry. The Puritans took that approach. They grew so tired of living as pilgrims and aliens, being hounded across the face of Europe, they came to America vowing, "We're not going to live as pilgrims anymore. This land is for Christians only. We're going to make it our empire." But it did not work. God kept bringing over more and more peoples who did not know him. The Puritans had to live among Indians who did not know God. They could not keep their little theocracy because God would not allow it.

Yet it is so easy to fall into this attitude. The New Yorker magazine did a story about a year ago on a church on the east coast with a membership of fifteen thousand. The reporter interviewed non-Christians about the impact this church was having on the community. With such an enormous congregation going to the same church in one community you would imagine that they would have a tremendous influence. But one non-Christian said, "They don't associate with us. They have their own bowling alleys, their own ice cream parlors, their own businesses." This church was regarded as smug and self-righteous. They did not have any impact on that city at all. May we not fall into that trap. To respond to woe by withdrawal from the world is not an option.

The second wrong response is to say, "If I've got to hang in here in the world and get a bad response day in and day out, I'm going to compromise my message of peace. It doesn't work; you just get ripped off." So you sacrifice your message; you no longer come to work with the message of Shalom. *If you* are going to be a victim of deceit, then you operate in deceit and manipulation; you look for human solutions to your problems because your message of peace does not work. Yet when we do that the Word no longer applies to us. It does not apply to how we run our business, how we live in our families, how we respond to our neighbors. Scripture is just for Sunday. We are all tempted to try the world's ways of influence, since Shalom does not work. But that is not an option either.

What does this pilgrim do in his distress? In one word, he worships. 1 Peter says, "I am writing to you aliens and strangers in the world, but *beloved* of God." If you feel alienated and estranged in the world, that is an opportunity to experience intimacy with Jesus Christ. If you feel at home in the world, you are not intimate with Jesus Christ. The pilgrim worships in three ways. The first way we have already seen: he laments his situation. He does not put a smile on his face and say everything is well because everything is not well. He is genuinely disappointed. He had expectations of being an influence in that nation and he was not, so he laments. Lamenting is unburdening on the Lord with candor, boldness, honesty and intimacy. Arthur Weiser says: "It is only when the heart is unburdened to God with absolute candor, without any hidden mental reservations, that the atmosphere of truthfulness and trust is created

in which the communing with God serves a real purpose, and the answering of our prayers becomes possible." Therefore lament! It will keep you from slandering. Lament is a cure to that.

The second aspect of the pilgrim's worship is petition; he prays to the Lord. Verses 1 and 2:

**To the Lord in my distress,  
I called and he answers me.  
O Lord, deliver my soul from the lips of falsehood,  
from the tongue of deceit.**

In Psalm 119, speaking of the Word of God, the Psalmist says that when God speaks to him his words open his heart, giving him life and freedom- just the opposite feeling of being constricted or in a tight place. But when men speak to him they bring him distress; he is the victim of deceit. It is that deceit and distress, however, that causes the pilgrim to pray, and in his prayer he is looking solely to the Lord for a solution, not to any human help.

The character of God is what gives him confidence to pray. He knows that it is the nature of God's character that if you can call to him you immediately get his attention. God takes note of what you say, and he acts. The psalmist knows that.

Notice what is the focus of his prayers: "Deliver my soul, my life." Notice too that deliverance does not mean that he could avoid the circumstance. That is not true of this pilgrim. He had already gone through the deceit; he had already been victimized by words that cut deep into his soul, words that burned in his soul like coals. To be delivered does not mean you are going to avoid the unpleasant circumstances. That was not true of this pilgrim, and it was not true of the Pilgrim, Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed this prayer on his way to the cross. He had a close friend who was in the process of betraying him. Everything Judas wanted to do was successful. Yet the Lord prayed, "Deliver my life." What did he mean by that? He asked for deliverance from the deceit he had experienced so that it would not damage his life. In other words, the pilgrim's concern is that what he had gone through not damage him in his soul; that the deceit not continue to constrict and distress him so that he in turn became deceitful and manipulative. Deliverance, therefore, does not mean that you will find peace in the world. Peace will come to your soul after you have been through the hard circumstance. (cf: John 16:33)

During the last two and a half years I have had the prestigious privilege of being an executor of an estate. It is a very complex estate. involving two deaths, my wife's mother and her grandmother, both of whom died within a short time of each other. All the assets were in Oklahoma, while my wife's stepfather lives in Los Angeles and I live here locally. Throughout the whole process I feel that I have been the victim of deceit- not intentional deceit, but deceit which came through laziness and negligence. Land was part of the assets, and it had been in the family since the Oklahoma Land Rush. The grandmother was so concerned that the family would not be hit with taxes she saved a phenomenal amount of cash to her dying day just to pay for the inheritance taxes. But all her saving did not even begin to cover them. In the two-and-a-half year process we have lost almost all the assets. As executor, my reaction to the whole thing was that we were being ripped off. A grandmother's sentimental inheritance which she was trying to preserve for the children was almost totally taken away. In such a situation it was possible to become a victim of deceit, bitterness and anger, yet I have learned from these psalms that real deliverance will come. Not that all of those things will not happen to us, but may they not damage my life or my wife's life. May we not be gripped with anger or deceit.

Last week was my daughter's first year birthday, and we celebrated at the park. Emily's Jewish stepfather Sid was there. I love him. I call him my Jewish father. While we all were enjoying fellowship together, I looked at Sid and made a toast. I said, "Sic, here's a toast to the fact that we can enjoy life

before the estate is closed! Amen." That is the way I feel now. I am free. This estate thing is not going to damage my life because my home is not here. My true inheritance is a city whose architect and builder is God. No IRS, no inflation, no one can take that away.

The pilgrim laments his situation and shares his disappointment with the Lord. He then prays that the Lord deliver his life, his concern being that this circumstance not damage his soul.

The third thing he does is express his confidence that God is the judge, therefore he himself will not act. Verse 3:

**What will he give to you,  
and what will He add to you,  
O tongue of deceit?  
Arrows of the warrior,  
Sharp, with coals of the broom tree!**

Many scholars take verse 3 to be a form of an oath. When one took an oath in the Ancient Near East, one would say something like, "May the Lord do to me, and more so will he add, if I fail this vow." So when the pilgrim undertook a peace treaty with Meshech or Kedar, they vowed, "May the Lord do to me and more so if we don't uphold our end of the bargain." The pilgrim was taken in; and his life was endangered. Yet, although this is not his country, and he has no rights there, he still knows that the God who is in heaven sees. The pilgrim knows that when one takes an oath in God's name and it is violated, that produces immediate guilt, and God moves to set in motion the fine wheels of judgment, and so the pilgrim says, "What will God give, what will he add to you? Sharp arrows of the warrior and coals of the broom tree." He is saying that the judgment that God will bring is perfectly fit to the crime. Thus the pilgrim describes the judgment in the exact terms of his own experience as a victim of deceit. So just as the pilgrim was the victim of words which were like arrows that cut deep into his soul, words which burned like charcoal in an open wound (the root of the broom tree was a very hard wood used for charcoal in the Ancient Near East as it had a very effective heating power), God will bring upon his adversary the misfortune that he had desired to bring upon another. Thus his tormentor will receive from the Lord who is Judge, sharp arrows of judgment and coals of destruction. Someone has said, "A false word under oath rebounds upon the perjurer just as a treacherous arrow hits the archer himself and the lie destroys the liar by its consuming fire." So the pilgrim says, "I'm not going to act. Judgment is the Lord's." He does not want to act because he does not want to confuse the issue. He leaves room for the wrath of God, as Paul exhorts us to do. (cf: Rom. 12:17-21) Knowing that God is the ultimate Judge also gave the pilgrim a great humility. He knew that if he compromised his message of peace and adopted the world's method of operating, he, too, would become a victim of God's judgment. This reminder keeps his own life pure. The pilgrim is confident God will bring judgment.

You might ask, "Does this mean that we as pilgrims must never assert ourselves actively for justice?" That is not what this is saying. Other Scriptures say that we should stand for justice, for the rights of the poor and the oppressed. In this case the pilgrim is dealing with his own personal rights, and he is more concerned that the situation not damage his life than in recovering whatever was lost. He knows God will act, and he will do it so perfectly that it will be evident that the wrath of God has come. He laments, he petitions, and he is confident God will act.

If we want to live as pilgrims, our deepest longings and expectations will never be fulfilled in this world. This pilgrim hungered for peace, but he found war. Yet he does not want to lose his influence, so, in the face of rejection he worships and tells the Lord about his disappointment. He lays it on the Lord, and then asks the Lord to give him life in the midst of his trials so that he might continue to be influential. Then he looks to the sovereign Lord, the Judge of the universe, to judge; he does not act for

his own rights.

You may ask, "Is there any hope in the meantime?" Our pilgrim must go back and live in Kedar or Meshech. "Woe to me," he cries. You don't want to go back to work tomorrow and live with those people. Is there any hope? Well, yes. As pilgrims you may never win the world. You may never win the nation, your company, your world. You may never win the nation, your company, your neighborhood or your whole family. But Isaiah (cf: Isaiah) says of Kedar that they will sing a new song, they will shout for joy, give glory to God and declare his praise. They will take all their wonderful flocks and bring them as an offering to the Lord. The pilgrims will one day have the joy of bringing some of the inhabitants of Meshech back to Jerusalem with them, even though Meshech will try to annihilate Israel. Those individuals from Meshech will worship the Lord, and God will take some of them and make them Levites. So while we are living in the age between those times, some will come to the Lord. May God grant us his grace to continue our journey, to endure the conflict, and be pilgrims of peace.

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Catalog No. 3900  
Psalm 120  
First message  
Brian Morgan  
June 5, 1983

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