

G P S

For Grandparents, Parents and Seniors

By Rick Shrader

Walking as Strangers and Pilgrims

The apostle Peter wrote to the “pilgrims of the Dispersion [*diaspora*] in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). James also addressed his readers as “the twelve tribes scattered abroad” (literally, “of the diaspora”). Peter especially designates these Jews as Christian believers or “elect” (vs 2). Diaspora means a scattering of the “*spora*” or seed. These believers had been sown among these provinces throughout Asia Minor.

In 2:11 Peter calls them both “sojourners and pilgrims.” Sojourner (*para+oikos*) means “without a house.” Pilgrim (*para+dēmos*) means “without a people.” These terms in the New Testament are used to describe the Jews who have been scattered throughout their history and also of the Christians of the first century. Paul says to the Ephesian believers, “You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). D. Edmond Hiebert described them as “sojourners in an alien land, dispersed and far removed from their homeland. However, they were assured of their future in-gathering to their heavenly home.”

The Jewish people have always felt this estrangement as a people on the earth. Unfortunately, we are seeing that age-old antipathy toward them expressed in hateful racism today. But we as Christian believers in Jesus Christ will also experience a similar thing, as John wrote, “In the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ . . . for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:9). Christians are people with a foot in two worlds. Yes, we have to live here for now as the old song said, “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through,” but our real citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). We do not have a home in this world nor a people. Our spiritual family are all strangers and pilgrims as well. “For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland . . . that is, a heavenly country” (Heb 11:14, 16).

In an epistle to Diognetus, early in the second century AD, a believer named Mathetes wrote about Christians, “Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land. . . They find themselves in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth, but hold a citizenship in heaven.” Is this the way twenty-first century Christians live today, or have we lost that perspective of our true citizenship? Jesus said, where our treasure is, that is where our heart will be also (Matt 6:21).

In Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian and Faithful are passing through the town of Vanity Fair, so named because the vanity was non-stop, 24 hours a day. There they found themselves in a strange environment and odd-looking to the residents. “They wondered at their apparel, so they did likewise at their speech, for few could understand what they said. They naturally spoke the language of Canaan, but they that kept the fair were the men of this world. So they seemed barbarians each to the other.” Christian and Faithful were beaten and jailed but the townspeople still created a riot over their presence which was blamed upon the two themselves, and they were run out of town.

It is easy to be more concerned with what the world thinks of us than what our Savior thinks. James wrote, “Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (Jas 4:4). This should concern us greatly in the day in which we live and walk with the Lord. John wrote about false prophets, “They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us” (1 John 4:5-6). You really don’t have to work at displeasing the world. All you have to do is work hard at pleasing the Lord and the world will by itself be displeased. A lost and dying world needs the godly believer, if for nothing else than a convicting testimony of God’s grace.

Further Thoughts on Strangers and Pilgrims from Hebrews 10:25

“Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24-25).

Strangers and pilgrims (Christians) gather together in church. This has been the pattern since the Sunday night of resurrection and has continued for over two thousand years. Unbelievers have always been welcomed, sought in fact, to come and observe what Christians do in this strange gathering. However, the local gathering is designed for those who are basically strangers and pilgrims to the rest of the world. This great verse contains four actions that motivate these believers to gather together.

Forsaking. This first action is put in the negative as a warning and a contrast to the previous verse. How can we stir one another up to love and good works if we forsake the gathering? One of the major reasons for being in church is to communicate verbally with others who need encouragement. This word is used in very serious ways in the New Testament. Jesus cried to the Father on the cross, “Why have you forsaken me.” Paul mourned that Demas had forsaken him, “having loved this present world.” In the warnings that follow verse 25, those who are not part of the assembly “willfully” do not receive these truths. But the writer notes that we should not be surprised because this is the “manner” of some. The word *ethos* (*ēthōs*, as we say it) refers to the culture of the world of which church attendance is usually not a part.

Assembling. The assembly of the local church is a familiar word to believers. Usually the word would be “ekklesia,” but here is one of the few uses of the word “*sunagogē*,” usually translated as synagogue. We have it also in Jas 2:1 referring to the congregation of believers. 2 Thes 2:1 uses it referring to the raptured saints who will be “gathered together” in the clouds with the Lord. So whether we say “assembly” or “congregation,” we know what it means.

The Christian church is not a synagogue nor is Sunday a Sabbath day. In America we have always been glad that Saturday and Sunday have been the weekend, when one can choose to worship on either day without work obligations. Christians gather on Sunday because that is the day churches in the New

Testament gathered. “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread” (Acts 20:7). John gave it the title, “the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10). Sunday, of course, is the day of the Lord’s resurrection and we are believers in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. We do the business of the church on this day. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). We could rightly add to that singing, receiving offerings, and even eating common meals.

Exhorting. *Parakaleō* is a familiar Greek word meaning to come or call beside. It can mean to comfort or to encourage. It is difficult to come along beside someone from an invisible distance. In verse 24 we read the words “stir up” or “provoke.” We get our English word paroxysm from the Greek word. A connotation would be a convulsion or seizure. Stirring up and exhorting results in a person being moved to right action. This is often done by the preaching of the Word but could happen in other ways in the assembly. An encouraging word or an explanation of a truth may be just the thing a struggling believer needs at that moment. In verses 22, 23, and 24 the writer used a soft command, “let us,” to strengthen individuals, encourage better witnessing, and to consider one another’s needs.

Approaching. The local church is essential because the “Day” is approaching. That is the second coming of Jesus Christ, and to believers that means the rapture of the church. “Approaching” (*engizō*) is variously translated in verses that describe the imminent coming of Christ. “The night is far spent, the day is at hand” (Rom 13:12); “The coming of the Lord draws near” (Jas 5:8); “The end of all things is at hand” (1 Pet 4:7). Therefore we should assemble “so much more.”

Statistics abound that show American church attendance going down each year. I think that church attendance among conservative Baptists may also have gone down over the last few years. Was it just covid? Was it just the ease of sitting at home and watching online services? The biblical admonition as we see the apostasy of the age is not to run from the assembly but to run to it even more. We don’t need fewer services during the week, we need more, or at least we should not do away with the ones we have. Assembling together is not a mere legalism, and it is more than just the command. It is a dire necessity for believers as we approach the end of the age.