

Strangers in a Strange Land – Their Destiny

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Beloved young people in our Lord Jesus Christ,

Long ago, a man had a vision. He saw injustice, oppression, and all wickedness banished from the world. He saw the coming day of the deliverance of the poor and of the meek, long repressed. He saw an earth of blessed, perfect peace, an earth in which the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid; an earth of glorious rest for men, for swords will be beaten into ploughshares and there will be no strife or war. “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain,” says God. You may share in that wonderful vision yourself, by reading Isaiah 11.

Later, another man had a similar vision. It was a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which all things have been made new; of a world of unsurpassable beauty, defying all efforts exhaustively to describe it beforehand; of a world without tears, without sorrow, without crying, without pain, without death; of a world without any defilement, without any abomination-worker, without any lie; of a world of peace among all the peoples and nations; of a world of glittering glory, the glory of God Himself. You may share that vision by reading Revelation 21 and 22.

These visions were true, authentic and reliable. There have been, and still are, many empty dreams and hallucinatory visions. “These words,” however, “are true and faithful.” They set forth your destiny, you who are strangers now in an alien land. This will be your future, your end. It is certain, as certain as the truth and faithfulness of God in Jesus Christ, Who has prepared this destiny, Who promises it to you, Who now leads you to it, and Who will on a Day give it to you.

The glorious future envisioned by prophets and apostles in the Scripture is held out to us who are strangers in a strange land. As strangers, we are people who are not at home on the earth; people whose hearts are not set on this earthly life or anything it offers; people whose one and only hope is elsewhere, on another land, another life; people who therefore with all their energy seek and desire the other. We are strangers in an alien land for two reasons. BY the grace of God, we have been delivered already from the sin and death that rule and destroy this earth and this present earthly life. Sin corrupts the present creation in every part. This life in nothing but a continual death, as the prayer of our “Form for the Administration of Baptism” expresses it. To a land and life so befouled and doomed, we are foreigners – thank God! Secondly, by the same grace of God, we are already citizens of the Kingdom of heaven, and we now possess and enjoy life of that Kingdom. We have been born again from above with the life of the Kingdom to come and, thus, have been translated into the Kingdom of God’s dear Son. Now, nothing else satisfies besides the perfection of that Kingdom. Strangers, in the sense of God’s Word and the theme of this Convention, are also men, women, and children of all nations, colors, and languages who in the whole of their earthly life possess the lifestyle of the heavenly Kingdom, reject the way of life of the people of the earth, and thus show themselves to be different, radically different, from those at home here on earth.

These people have a destiny. A “destiny” is a future that has been determined and prepared for someone and that someday will be his forever. It is someone’s end. “Destiny” is similar to “destination.” “Destination is the place towards which one is going, the goal to which he is striving. When we speak of the destination of the strangers, we emphasize that the

strangers are consciously travelling towards their destiny. They know what it is and they grasp for it. This brings out that the topic, "Destiny," on which I speak, is an integral part of the subject of this Convention, "Strangers in a Strange Land." A stranger is a pilgrim. And a pilgrim is not someone who has gotten lost and who wanders confusedly about, but he is one who is travelling to a destination, one who is going on directly to his destiny. Think of Christian in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He was the man going to the Celestial City, the man with a destiny and a destination.

We may give a three-fold description of that destiny of the strangers. First, our destiny is heaven. It is the perfect, sinless life we have with God in the soul after death. It is the life with God that is consummated when the body is raised from the dead enters into that perfect life also. It is the joyous life, the beautiful life, the glorious life, the everlasting life of the whole man, body and soul. Secondly, our destiny is the new creation, the new heavens and earth. When the Bible says that heaven is our destiny, it does not mean a vague, bodiless, "spiritual" (and fundamentally uninteresting!) existence forever "up there." In fact, Scripture does not make much of the life of the believer with God after death and before the restitution of all things. This because Scripture sees our destiny as the new world, the world renewed by the power of Jesus Christ and fashioned with a new form patterned after Him. It holds before us a new creation, of brute creatures, of lakes and mountains, of skies and fields, of trees and flowers, of animals, of the elect human race from all nations. It promises us a world of peace and harmony, of laughter and joy, of health and vibrancy, of work, of culture, of knowledge. This creation will be the present creation – renewed through fire. Now, you are strangers in the earth; someday, you will be at home on this earth. This is the teaching of Romans 8 and II Peter 3, to say nothing of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Thirdly, our destiny is God, God Himself, God in Jesus Christ. Without this, ours would be a worthless destiny, not worth being pilgrims for, no matter what else it might consist of. God is our destiny and destination. We are going to have God, the fullness of God in Jesus Christ. We are going to have His life and riches. We are going to have Him, in covenant fellowship. The Westminster Shorter Catechism expressed that God is the destiny of the strangers in its first question: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Having God makes heaven, and makes the new creation worth desiring. Isaiah pointed to this in chapter 11 when he wrote that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God. The theme text of this Convention, I Chronicles 29:15, expresses the same thing, for David says of the people of God that they are "strangers before thee [God]." The Hebrew preposition translated "before" literally means "towards," so that David says that we are "strangers *towards* God," a most beautiful thought.

The reality of being a stranger, therefore, begins and ends in God. The beginning of our being strangers is God's election of us in eternity. He elected us to be strangers in the world and in the election gave us the destiny of heaven. This is evident in the very work, *pre-destination*. By the death of His Son, God gives us the right to be strangers with a heavenly destiny. By His Spirit, God separates us from the world unto Himself. And He Himself is the goal we are to achieve, our end.

This destiny is not obtainable in this life or on this earth. It simply is not here. It is beyond this life. It stands behind the ruins of the present form of creation. It will be ours after this history ends. If anyone ever tells you of a dream or vision in which the destiny of God's people lies in this life or on this earth, he is, at that point, a deceitful prophet. Our hope may not be directed to this life, therefore. Neither our longing nor our expectation is fixed on the present life on earth. This is the confession of the theme-text: "our days on the earth are as a shadow and

there is no expectation” (Not “None abiding,” as our version has it). It is a mistake to become subtle at this point and to say, “Yes, we are strangers to the sinfulness of the present world, but not to the earth itself, to the earthly life, and to the contents of the earthly life.” Scripture is plain: “our days on the earth are as a shadow” (I Chron. 29:15); “[they] confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims *on the earth*” (Heb. 11:13).

The earthly future of the strangers, in stark contrast with their heavenly destiny, is dark and threatening. There is a sense in which this is of universal application. The life of all men and the existence of the world at large are racked by sickness and war and end in death and decay. For this reason the hope of the non-stranger, the man who is at home here, is vain. But it is uniquely the pilgrim who faces a foreboding future on earth. The future is dark for him because he is a foreigner in the world. He is a God-love in a God-hating world. He is a citizen of heaven in a country where Satan is god and prince. The world hates foreigners. Always, the child of God suffers tribulation. The Church of the last days will endure the persecution inflicted by the world-power of Antichrist. Suffering, bitterly painful suffering, is inevitable for the stranger. Indeed, it is an essential part of being a stranger. You must know this and expect this, so that the experience of it does not turn you from your course to the heavenly destination. Think of the misery of the lives of the pilgrims before you, Abraham, Jacob, and the others. Consider Jesus, the Great Stranger in an alien land.

No, the destiny of the spiritual strangers is not here. It is bound up with the coming of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven. Then, and only then, will the visions of Isaiah and John be realized. Then, there will be a creation in which God is all in all. Then, we will be raised to enjoy God in perfect fellowship. All of this will be the might work of our Lord Jesus Christ, graciously giving us our eternal destiny.

You have a destiny and a destination. You know what it is and you desire it. It is heaven, the new world, God Himself in the Lord Jesus. Having a destiny and destination is vital to your present life in the world. The importance of it is evident from the life and culture of the youth of our age, exemplified in the hippie, who lack a destiny and destination. This lack explains their empty, destructive, wicked life. Theirs is a life without a destination. They are going nowhere, because they have nowhere to go. They are aimless, confused, wandering. Modern youth sees no destiny for himself or for the world. In his own mind, he is an accidental particle of living matter that burns for a bright moment in the darkness of endless time. To him, the history of the world is a freakish wave on the endless roll of the oceans of nature’s blind development. The result is hedonism and despair, the hippie and the yippie. The parents of the present generation are indeed largely to blame for this, although not in the way that the present generation supposes. The parents gave them no destiny and destination by raising them outside the covenant of God, by rearing them under the theory of evolution, and by adopting the philosophy, at least in practice, that the present life is all there is. Parents have sowed the wind of a Godless upbringing of their children and now reap the whirlwind of youth that are hopeless and, therefore, pleasure-mad, violent, evil.

It is incomprehensible to me that those whom God has delivered from this most wretched misery can flaunt the badges by which the hopeless generation distinguish themselves, e.g., the long hair of the young men.

It is incomprehensible to me that those with a destiny in the world can revel in the abandoned, nihilistic music of the youth without God in the world, or abide the gospel of sex, violence, and despair preached by rock.

It is incomprehensible to me that one who has caught a glimpse of the new world could blow his mind with drugs.

God has saved you exactly from this wretchedness. He has given you a destiny. It is this destiny that makes you and keeps you a stranger in the world. I am referring now to your own conscious, willing choice to be a stranger and to continue to be a stranger to the very end. God graciously, sovereignly made you strangers and keeps you strangers. He did this and does this by election, by the cross, by the rebirth, by the sanctifying Spirit. But God works in such a way that you become willing to be a stranger. You want to be a stranger. You confess that you are a stranger. You live as a stranger and fight to live as one. Now, the thing that makes you willingly a stranger in the earth is the *destiny, the destination*. For the sake of the goal you shall someday reach, you now choose and persevere in the pilgrim-life. In Bunyan's parable, why did Christian endure his hard pilgrimage? Why did he despise the alluring wares of Vanity Fair? Because he had his eye, and heart, on the destination, the Celestial City. Indeed, it was because of that "destiny" that he set out at all. Why does the child of God live out his life as a stranger on the earth? Because he wants to go to heaven. Hebrews 11 makes plain this vital, practical importance of the knowledge of the destiny. Abraham sojourned because he looked for a city. The patriarchs confessed themselves pilgrims *because* they desired a better country, a heavenly.

One implication of this importance of the destination to stimulate the children of God to live as strangers is that it makes clear what relevant preaching is in our day, preaching relevant to youth. Young people sometimes complain that the preaching is not relevant to their lives. There may be truth in this criticism. We ministers ought to examine our preaching, both the public and the private, whether we apply the gospel to the needs of youth in these wild times. Young people, on the other hand, ought to ask themselves whether they speak with the minister and the elders about their temptations and difficulties, so that the minister and elders can know them. If, however, the complaint against irrelevant preaching means to disparage preaching of the gospel, preaching of doctrine, preaching the Word of God as it is in the Bible, the complaint rests on a mistake. The mistake is to suppose that a sermon about heaven, about the new world that is about to be established, about God as He is revealed in Jesus, is not relevant to the life of a young man or young woman in a world of free "love," war, drugs, unsympathetic parents, learning, racial strife, marriage, and revolution. The fact is that it is just such a sermon that is relevant because it proclaims the glorious destiny and destination which will attract you and thus maintain you as strangers on earth, that is, cause you to live rightly and happily over against free "love," revolution and drug and in marriage, the home, the State, and the Church.

What effect will the desire for this destiny have on a man's life? What is the stranger-life like? It does not consist of the avoidance of all earthly things, as much as possible. To interpret the life of spiritual strangers this way has been a temptation in the Church always. The long history of monasticism proves this. This notion still shows itself in the Church. It is the thought that lies behind the dour disparagement of earthly pleasure as such. The sexual relationship in marriage, according to the outlook on the life of the Christian, is merely permissible and then only with a view to begetting children. The joy of the intimacy of marriage is carnality. We may eat, but as soon as we enjoy the experience we have become earthly minded. It is this erroneous conception of what it means to live as a stranger that places all human activity that is not directly related to the Church beyond the pale. It is suspicious of learning and the arts.

The life of a stranger, the life lived under the sign of the eternal destiny of heaven, the new world, and God in Christ, will be a full, energetic life. What the stranger does, he does with all his heart. He abounds in the work of the Lord because he knows that his labor is not in vain. It

will be a life in which he uses and enjoys every legitimate creature of the glory of God in Christ. I Peter 2 teaches that the life of a stranger does not consist of flight from the mundane areas of civil government, labor, and marriage. Rather, the child of God is called to be a citizen, an employee, and a husband as a stranger. I Corinthians 7:29-31 describes the life of a stranger as a using of the world without abusing it.

Two warnings are in order. The stranger will keep himself from sin. This is how he lives as a stranger. Although the citizens of the land we pass through name adultery and fornication “free love,” and although they engage in it openly and unashamedly, we regard it as God does, as sin, and hate it and flee from it. Although men justify insubordination to authority, the stranger regards all refusal to submit to authority, whether of parents, of husband, of the civil government, of the employer, or of the elders as sin, as rebellion against the authority of God in the exalted Jesus Christ. Those who impenitently walk in sin, whether inside or outside the institute of the Church, have hell as their destiny. They are not strangers and will not share the destiny of strangers. Being of the world, they will perish with the world. The life of the stranger is holy in that it is separate from sin. Secondly, the stranger will never allow anything to replace God as the goal of his life. He will never allow a thing to siphon off some of the desire with which he desires God in Christ. His life is holy in that it is consecrated to God. Here is an evil that weakens and mars us. With respect to this, parents among us fail, so that they rear children to tend to be at home in this world. Life is made to center, after all, on things, earthly things, and on the pleasure earthly things can give us. The evidence of the strength of this evil is, as always, luxurious living. We then indulge in, and even feel that we need, luxurious food, lavish drink, palatial houses with such elaborate furnishings that neither we nor our children dare live in them, and even fabulous church buildings. The admonition sounded by the church father, Hermas, in *The Shepherd* applies to us: “You know that you, the servants of God, live in a foreign land, for your city is far from this city. If then you know your city, in which you are going to dwell, why do you prepare here fields and costly establishments and buildings and dwellings which are to no purpose. He who prepares these things for this city cannot go back home to his own city.”

But what positive form will the life of young people take, young people who are strangers on the earth? Concretely, what calling does God have for them? What is there for them to do? In our day, the notion prevails that if anything worthwhile is to be done, the young people must do it. Young people suffer the delusion that they must undertake, as young people, the most grandiose project. They suppose that it is their solemn duty to dismantle the State and to put it back together again, for the first time, in the right way. Within the Church also, young people of college age feel themselves called to take apart the entire structure of the Church and to restructure it according to their wisdom. *Mirabile dictu*, the adults acquiesce in this overweening pride and foster the delusion. This notion finds expression in the slogan, “Never trust anyone over 30.” All of this nonsense rests on the supposition that the goal of human life is youth. After 30, one is burned out and has only the prospect of passing time, desperately trying to emulate the young. The fact is that the goal of human life, in the light of Scripture, is not youth but maturity, the grown-up man and woman. Wisdom and understanding are not bound up with youth, but with the hoary head. When the Psalmist looks back on his youth, he does not see it as the apex of his life, which he longs to regain, but he says, “sins of youth remember not.” If I may put Scripture’s thought in the language of our time, the Biblical injunction is, “Never trust anyone under 30.” The implication of this for the question, “What are youth to do?,” is this, that the calling of youth is to prepare! Be busy growing up! Be active gaining maturity! Now is the

time for you to prepare yourself to be a teacher, a scholar, an elder, a citizen, a husband, a wife, a parent, and all of these after a Godly manner.

But is there then no valuable work for youth to do now? Yes, there is. But why is it assumed that this has to be work of a bombastic, showy, and dramatic nature. This is an assumption that appears in the Church. The youth have to save souls and do mission work. They must accomplish alleviation of racial tension. They must participate in widely advertised marches for this cause and the other. Youth itself is haunted by a sense of failure, if it has not done or is not constantly doing these things, I am reminded of the mistake of Elijah, who thought that God had to be in the great wind, the might earthquake, or the blazing fire. But he found that God was in the still, small voice. The work to which God calls young people, young people who are strangers, is the work of honoring their parents. Remembering my own youth and casting a cursory glance about at young people today, I conclude that this is demanding work and will take up much of a young person's time and energy. The work to which God calls youth of the covenant is the work of loving God and the neighbor. There are young men and young women among you that have need, real need. Help them. There are some that are lonely. Befriend them. There are some that are walking in sin, perhaps. Rebuke them; give them no peace until they repent and walk again with you as strangers.

The life of a pilgrim, or stranger, in the world is difficult. The stranger is sustained, not only by the prospect of the wonderful destination that he will reach along the way of pilgrimage, but also by the enjoyment already in this life of the destiny that is his. There is a beginning already now of the enjoyment of our destiny. Our destiny is fellowship with God, in the face of Jesus Christ. We begin to have this sweet communion, through faith, already in this life. Therefore, the Psalmist said, "I am a stranger with Thee" (Psalm 39:12). A stranger, yes. This means tears. But already now, "with Thee," "with God." This means joy, unspeakable joy. Already now on the pilgrimage. And this works faithfulness to the very end. No, by this God works faithfulness in you, to the very end. God is the origin of the strangers. God is the end. God is the One Who leads you from the beginning to the end. He will keep you, so that you enjoy the destiny He has prepared for you. I thank you.

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