

# The First of the Pilgrim Fathers

by F.B. Meyer

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a detached life as pilgrims and strangers on earth, with our true treasure and affections centered on eternal realities.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 12:4

**Topics:** "Pilgrimage of Faith", "Worship and Sacrifice"

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## Description

F.B. Meyer emphasizes the life of Abram as a model for pilgrims of faith, illustrating how he journeyed through life as a stranger and sojourner, focused on eternal promises rather than earthly possessions. Meyer highlights three key aspects of Abram's life: the tent symbolizing his detachment from worldly concerns, the altar representing his commitment to worship and sacrifice, and the promise of God that guided his path. He encourages believers to adopt a similar mindset, living as pilgrims with a focus on the eternal city, while also establishing altars of worship in their lives. The sermon calls for a separation from worldly distractions and a deeper commitment to faith and family worship, reminding us that obedience to God leads to the fulfillment of His promises.

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## Transcript

Genesis 12:4-9

"Abram departed" (Verse 4).

"Abram passed through" (Verse 6).

"Abram went forth" (Verse 5).

"Abram removed" (Verse 8).

"Abram journeyed" (Verse 9).

"He went out, not knowing whither he went." -- Hebrews 11:8.

All through the history of mankind there has been a little band of men, in a sacred and unbroken succession, who have confessed that they were pilgrims and strangers upon earth. Not more certainly does the scallop-shell on the monument of the cathedral aisle indicate that he whose dust lies beneath once went on pilgrimage beyond the seas, than do certain indications, not difficult to note, betray the

pilgrims of the Unseen and Eternal. Sometimes they are found afar from the haunts of men, wandering in deserts and in mountains, dwelling in the dens and caves of the earth -- to which they have been driven by those who had no sympathy with their other-worldliness, and hated to have so strong a light thrown on their own absorption in the concerns of the earth, and time, and sense. But very often they are to be found in the market-places and homes of men, distinguished only by their simpler dress; their girded loins; their restrained and abstemious appetite; their loose hold on gold; their independence of the maxims and opinions and applause of the world around; and the far-away look which now and again gleams in their eyes, the certain evidence of affections centered, not on the transitory things of time and earth, but on those eternal realities which, lying beneath the veil of the visible, are only revealed to faith.

These are the pilgrims. For them the annoyances and trials of life are not so crushing or so difficult to bear; because such things as these cannot touch their true treasure, or affect their real interest. For them the royalties and glories; the honors and rewards; the delights and indulgences of men -- have no attraction. They are children of a sublimer realm, members of a greater commonwealth, burgesses of a nobler city than any upon which the sun has ever looked. Foreigners may mulct an Englishman of all his spending money; but he can well afford to lose it, if all his capital is safely invested at home, in the Bank of England. How can a dukedom in some petty principality present attractions to the scion of an empire, who is passing hastily through the tiny territory, as fast as steam and wealth can carry him, to assume the supreme authority of a mighty monarchy? The pilgrim has no other desire than to pass quickly over the appointed route to his home -- a track well trodden through all ages -- fulfilling the duties, meeting the claims, and discharging faithfully the responsibilities devolving upon him, but ever remembering that here he has no continuing city, and seeks one which is to come.

The immortal dreamer, who has told the story of the pilgrims in words which the world will never let die, gives three marks of their appearance:

First: "They were clothed with such kind of raiment as was diverse from the raiment of any that traded in that fair. The people, therefore, of the fair made a great gazing upon them; some said they were fools, some they were Bedlams; and some they were outlandish men."

Secondly: "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 that from one end of the fair to the other they seemed barbarians to each other."

Thirdly: "But that which did not a little amuse the merchandisers was, that these pilgrims set very light by all their wares; they cared not so much as to look upon them, and if they called on them to buy, they would put their fingers in their ears, and cry, TURN AWAY MINE EYES FROM BEHOLDING VANITY, and look upwards, signifying that their trade and traffic was in heaven."

Evidently this type of man was well known when the great dreamer dreamt -- and long before. For the Apostle Peter wrote to scattered strangers (1 Peter 1:1), and reminded them AS STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS, to abstain from fleshly lusts. And long before that day, in the sunniest period of Jewish prosperity, David, in the name of his people, confessed that they were STRANGERS AND SOJOURNERS AS WERE ALL THEIR FATHERS; and that their days on earth were as a shadow on the hills, now covering long leagues of landscape, and then hastening away, chased by glints of brilliant sun.

We left the patriarch moving leisurely southward; and thus he continued to journey forward through the land of promise, making no permanent halt, till he reached the place of Sichem, or Shechem, in the very

heart of the land, where our Lord in after-years sat weary by the well. There was no city or settlement there then. The country was sparsely populated. The only thing that marked the site was a venerable oak, whose spreading arms in later ages were to shadow the excesses of a shameful idolatry [see Judges 9:27-46; 1 Kings 12:25]. Beneath this oak on the plain of Sichem, the camp was pitched; and there, at last, the long silence was broken, which had lasted since the first summons was spoken in Chaldea, "And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him" (Genesis 12:7).

He did not, however, stay there permanently, but moved a little to the south, to a place between Bethel and Ai; where, according to Dr. Robinson, there is now a high and beautiful plain, presenting one of the finest tracts of pasturage in the whole country.

Three things then engage our thought: the Tent, the Altar, and the Promise.

(1) THE TENT. -- When Abraham left Haran his age was seventy-five. When he died he was one hundred and seventy-five years old. And he spent that intervening century moving to and fro, dwelling in a frail and flimsy tent, probably of dark camel's hair, like that of the Bedouin of the present day. And that tent was only a befitting symbol of the spirit of his life.

He held himself aloof from the people of the land. He was among them, but not of them. He did not attend their tribal gatherings. He carefully guarded against inter-marriage with their children, sending to his own country to obtain a bride for his son. He would not take from the Canaanites a thread or a sandal-thong. He insisted on paying full market value for all he received. He did not stay in any permanent location, but was ever on the move. The tent which had no foundations; which could be erected and struck in half-an-hour -- this was the apt symbol of his life.

Frequently may the temptation have been presented to his mind of returning to Haran, where he could settle in the town, identified with his family. Nor were opportunities to return wanting (Hebrews 11:15). But he deliberately preferred the wandering life of Canaan to the settled home of Charran; and to the end he still dwelt in a tent. It was from a tent that he was carried to lie beside Sarah in Machpelah's rocky cave. And why? The question is fully answered in that majestic chapter which recounts the triumphs of faith. "Abraham dwelt in tents, because he looked for the City which hath the foundations" (Hebrews 11:9 RV). Precisely so: and the tent-life is the natural one for those who feel that their fatherland lies beyond the stars.

It is of the utmost importance that the children of God should live this detached life as a testimony to the world. How will people believe us, when we talk about our hope, if it does not wean us from excessive devotion to the things around us? If we are quite as eager, or careworn; quite as covetous or grasping; quite as dependent on the pleasures and fascinations of this passing world --as themselves: may they not begin to question whether our profession be true on the one hand; or whether after all there be a real city yonder on the other.

We must not go on as we are. Professing Christians are too much taken up in business cares, in pleasure-seeking, in luxury, and self-indulgence. There is a slight difference between the children of the kingdom and the children of this generation. The shrewdest observer could hardly detect any in their homes, in the education of their children, in their dress, or in their methods of doing business. They eat, they drink; they buy, they sell; they plant, they build; they marry, they give in marriage -- though the flood in already breaking through the crumbling barriers to sweep them all away.

Yet how is it to be altered? Shall we denounce the present practice? Shall we inveigh against the reckless worldliness of the times? This will not effect a permanent cure. Let us rather paint with glowing colors that City which John saw. Let us unfold the glories of that world to which we are bound. Let us teach that even here, the self-denying, resolute, and believing spirit may daily tread the golden pavement, and hear even the symphonies of angel harps; and surely there will come into many a life a separateness of heart and walk which shall impress men with the reality of the unseen, as no sermon could do, however learned or eloquent.

(2) THE ALTAR. -- Wherever Abraham pitched his tent, he built an altar. Thus the Pilgrim Fathers, on the shores of the New World, set up their altars of worship even before they reared their homes. And long after the tent was shifted, the altar stood to show where the man of God had been.

Ah, it would be a blessed token of our religious fervor if we could set up altars in every house where we pass the night, and in every locality where it might be our hap to live, setting the example of private and family prayer, which would live long after we had passed away. If we would only dare to do it, the very Canaanites would come to revere the spot where we had knelt, and would hand on the sacred tradition, stirring coming generations to kneel there also, and call upon the name of the Lord.

Let us also remember that the altar means sacrifice, whole burnt-offering, self-denial, and self-surrender. In this sense the altar and the tent must ever go together. We cannot live the detached tent-life without some amount of pain and suffering, such as the altar bespeaks. But it is out of such a life that there spring the most intense devotion, the deepest fellowship, the happiest communion.

If your private prayer has been lately hindered, it may be that you have not been living enough in the tent. The tent-life of separation is sure to produce the altar of self-denial and of heavenly fellowship. Confess that you are a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth; and you will find it pleasant and natural to call on the name of the Lord. We do not read of Abraham building an altar, so long as he dwelt in Charran; he could not have fellowship with God whilst living in open disobedience to Him; or as long as he was ensconced comfortably in a settled life. But out of the heart of the real pilgrim life there sprang longings, desires, and aspirations, which could only be satisfied by the altars which marked his progress from place to place.

But Abraham's altar was not for himself alone. At certain periods the whole clan gathered there for common worship. A motley group that, in which slaves bought in Egypt or Ur mingled with those born in the camp; in which children and parents, young and old, stood in silent awe around the altar, where the patriarch stood to offer their common sacrifice and worship. "I know Abraham," said God, "that he will command his children and his household after him" (Genesis 18:19). He, in whom all families of the earth were to be blessed, practised family religion; and in this he sets a striking example to many Christians whose homes are altar-less. Would that Christians might be stirred by the example of the patriarch to erect the family altar, and to gather around it the daily circle of their children and dependents, for the sweetening and ennobling of their family life! Many an evil thing, like the gargoyles on the cathedral towers, would be driven forth before the hallowing influence of praise and prayer.

(3) THE PROMISE. -- "Unto thy seed will I give this land" (Genesis 12:7). As soon as Abraham had fully obeyed, this new promise broke upon his ear. And it is ever thus. Disobey -- and you tread a path unlit by a single star. Obey, live up to the claims of God -- and successive promises beam out from heaven to light your steps, each one richer and fuller than the one before. Hitherto God had pledged Himself only to show the land: now He bound Himself to give it. The separated pilgrim-life always obtains promises.

There was no natural probability of that promise being fulfilled. "The Canaanite was then in the land." Powerful chieftains like Mamre and Eschol; flourishing towns like Sodom, Salem, and Hebron; the elements of civilization -- all were there. The Canaanites were not wandering tribes. They had settled and taken root. They built towns, and tilled the land. They knew the use of money and writing; and administered justice in the gate. Every day built up their power, and made it more unlikely that they could ever be dispossessed by the descendants of a childless shepherd.

But God had said it; and so it came to pass. "The counsel of the Lord standeth fast for ever; the thoughts of His heart to all generations" (Psalm 33:11). I know not what promise may be over-arching your life, my reader, with its bow of hope; but this is certain, that if you fulfil its conditions, and live up to its demands, it will be literally and gloriously fulfilled. Look not at the difficulties and improbabilities that block the path, but at the might and faithfulness of the Promiser. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but His words shall not pass away." Not one jot or tittle shall fail (Mark 13:31; Matthew 5:18; Luke 16:17). And promise after promise shall light your life, like safety lighthouses at night along a rocky coast, which pass the vessel onward, till at the last the rays of the rising sun shine full on the haven where the mariner would be.

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