

The Pilgrims (An Allegory)

by Hannah More

Hannah More's sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing our temporary status as pilgrims and preparing for our eternal inheritance through faith and spiritual diligence.

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-21, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 3:2, 1 Timothy 6:7, Hebrews 11:13, James 5:3, 1 Peter 2:11, 2 Peter 3:13

Topics: "Eternal Perspective", "Pilgrimage of Faith"

Description

Hannah More emphasizes the journey of life as a pilgrimage, where believers are reminded to live in faith as strangers on earth, preparing for their eternal home. She illustrates how many are distracted by earthly desires and neglect the preparation needed for their ultimate destination, often clinging to temporary pleasures instead of focusing on the eternal promises of God. The sermon warns against the folly of hoarding earthly treasures, which cannot be taken into the afterlife, and encourages believers to use their time wisely in preparation for the journey ahead. More calls for a shift in focus from the transient to the eternal, urging the faithful to embrace their identity as pilgrims and to seek the things above. Ultimately, she reassures that God provides a better inheritance for those who remain faithful.

Transcript

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." Hebrews 11:13

"Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul." 1 Peter 2:11

I thought I was once upon a time traveling through a certain land which was very full of people; but what was rather odd, not one of all this multitude was at home--they were all bound to a far distant country. Though it was permitted by the Lord of the land that these pilgrims might associate together for their present mutual comfort and convenience, and each was not only allowed, but commanded to do the others all the services he could upon their journey, yet it was decreed, that every individual traveler must enter the far country singly.

There was a great gulf at the end of the journey, which every one must pass along and at his own risk, and the friendship of the whole united world could be of no use in passing that gulf. The exact time when each

was to pass was not known to any; this the Lord always kept a close secret out of kindness; yet still they were as sure that the time must come, and that at no very great distance, as if they had been informed of the very moment. Now, as they knew they were always liable to be called away at an moment's notice, one would have thought they would have been chiefly employed in packing up, and preparing, and getting everything in order. But this was so far from being the case, that it was almost the only thing they did not think about.

Now I only appeal to you, my readers, if any of you are setting out upon a little common journey, if it is only to London or York, is not all your leisure time employed in settling your business at home and packing up every little necessity for your expedition? And does not the fear of neglecting anything you ought to remember, or may have occasion for, haunt your mind, and sometimes even intrude upon you unseasonably? And when you are actually on your journey, especially if you have never been to that place before, or are likely to remain there, don't you begin to think a little about the pleasures and the employments of the place, and to wish to know a little what sort of a city London or York is?

Don't you wonder what is going on there, and whether you are properly qualified for the business or the company you expect to be engaged in? Do you never look at the map? And don't you try to pick up from your fellow-passengers in the stage-coach any little information you can get? And though you may be obliged, out of civility, to converse with them on common subjects, yet do not your secret thoughts still run upon London or York, its business, or its pleasures? And, above all, if you are likely to set out early, are you not afraid of oversleeping, and does not that fear keep you upon the watch, so that you are commonly up and ready before the porter comes to summon you? Reader, if this be your case, how surprised will you be to hear, that the travelers to the far country have not half your prudence, though bound on a journey of infinitely more importance, to a land where nothing can be sent after them, and in which, when they are once settled, all errors are not recoverable.

I observed that these pilgrims, instead of being upon the watch, lest they should be ordered off unprepared--instead of laying up any provision, or even making memorandums of what they would be likely to need, spend most of their time in crowds, either in the way of business or diversions. At first, when I saw them so much engaged in conversing with each other, I thought it a good sign, and listened attentively to their talk, not doubting but the chief turn of it would be about the climate, or treasures, or society they would probably meet with in the far country. I supposed they might be also discussing about the best and safest road to it, and that each was availing himself of the knowledge of his neighbor, on a subject of equal importance to all. I listened to every party, but in scarcely any did I hear one word about the land to which they were going, though it was their home, the place where their whole interest, expectation, and inheritance lay; to which also great part of their friends had gone before, and where they were sure all the rest would follow.

Instead of this, their whole talk was about the business, or the pleasures, or the fashions of the strange country which they now were merely passing through, and in which they had not one foot of land which they were sure of calling their own for the next quarter of an hour. What little estate they had was transitory and not real, and that was a mortgaged life-hold dwelling of clay, not properly their own, but only lent to them on a short, uncertain lease, of which seventy years was considered as the longest period, and very few indeed lived in it to the end of the term; for this was always at the will of the Lord, part of whose choice it was, that He could take away the lease at pleasure, knock down the stoutest inhabitant at a single blow, and turn out the poor, shivering, helpless tenant naked, to that far country for which he had made no provision.

Sometimes, in order to quicken the pilgrim in his preparation, the Lord would break down the dwelling by slow degrees--sometimes he would let it tumble by its own natural decay; for as it was only built to last a certain term, it would sometimes grow so uncomfortable by increasing wear, even before the ordinary lease was out, that the lodging was hardly worth keeping, though the tenant could seldom be persuaded to think so, but fondly clung to it to the last. First the thatch on the top of the dwelling (the hair) changed color, then it fell off, and left the roof bare; then "the grinders (the teeth) ceased because they were few;" then the windows (the eyes) became so darkened that the owner could scarcely see through them; then one prop fell away, then another, then the supports became bent, and the whole fabric trembled and tottered, with every other symptom of a falling house.

On some occasions, the Lord ordered His messengers (illnesses), of which he had a great variety, to batter, injure, deface, and almost abolish the frail building, even while it seemed new and strong; this was what the Landlord called giving warning; but many a tenant would not take warning, and was so fond of staying where he was, even under all these inconveniences, that at last he was cast out by ejection, not being prevailed on to leave his dwelling in a proper manner, though one would have thought the fear of being turned out would have whetted his diligence in preparing for "a better and a more enduring inheritance."

For though the people were only temporary tenants in these crazy dwellings, yet, through the goodness of the same Lord, they were assured that He never turned them out of these habitations before He had on His part provided for them a better one, so that there was not such another Landlord in the world; and though their present dwelling was but frail, being only slightly equipped to serve the occasion, yet they might hold their future possession by a most certain position, the Word of the Lord Himself, which was entered in a covenant, or title-deed, consisting of many pages; and because a great many good things were given away in this deed, a Book was made of which every soul might get a copy.

This indeed had not always been the case, because, until a few ages back, there had been a sort of monopoly in the case, and "the wise and prudent," that is, the deceitful and fraudulent, had hidden these things from the "babes and sucklings," that is, from the low and ignorant, and many frauds had been practiced, and the poor had been cheated of their right; so that not being allowed to read and judge for themselves, they had been sadly deceived. But all these tricks had been put an end to, more than two hundred years ago. When I passed through the country, and the lowest man who could read might then have a copy, so that he might see himself what he had to trust to; and even those who could not read might hear it read once or twice every week at least, without pay, by learned men, whose business it was to teach this Book to the people.

But it surprised me to see how few comparatively made use of these vast advantages. Of those who had a copy, many laid it carelessly by, expressed a general belief in the truth of the title-deed, a general satisfaction that they would come in for a share of the inheritance, a general good opinion of the Lord whose Word it was, and a general disposition to take His promise upon trust; always, however, intending, at a "convenient season," to inquire further into the matter; but this convenient season seldom came, and this neglect of theirs was translated by their Lord into the forfeiture of the inheritance.

At the end of this country lay the vast gulf mentioned before; it was shadowed over by a broad and thick cloud, which prevented the pilgrims from seeing in a distinct manner what was going on behind it, yet such beams of brightness now and then darted through the cloud as enabled those who used a telescope (faith) provided for that purpose, to see "the substance of things hoped for;" but it was not every one who could

make use of this telescope; no eye indeed was naturally disposed to it; but an earnest desire of getting a glimpse of the invisible realities, gave such a strength and steadiness to the eye which used the telescope, as enabled it to see many things which could not be seen by the natural sight. Above the cloud was this inscription: "The things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." Of these last things many glorious descriptions had been given; but as those splendors were at a distance, and as the pilgrims in general did not care to use the telescope, these distant glories made little impression.

The glorious inheritance which lay beyond the cloud, was called "the things above;" while a multitude of insignificant objects, which appeared contemptibly small when looked at through the telescope, were called "the things below." Now, as we know it is nearness which gives size and bulk to any object, it was not surprising that these ill-judging pilgrims were more struck with these trinkets and trifles, which by lying close at hand were visible and tempting to the naked eye, and which made up the sum of "the things below," than with the far-off glories of "the things above;" but this was chiefly owing to their not making use of the telescope, through which, if you examined thoroughly "the things below," they seemed to shrink almost down to nothing, which was indeed their real size; while "the things above" appeared the more beautiful and vast, the more the telescope was used.

But the surprising part of the story was this, not that the pilgrims were captivated at first sight with "the things below," for that was natural enough; but that, when they had tried them all over and over, and found themselves deceived and disappointed in almost every one of them, it did not at all lessen their fondness, and they grasped at them again with the same eagerness as before. There were some cheerful fruits which looked alluring, but on being opened, instead of wholesome fruit, they were found to contain rottenness, and those which seemed the fullest often proved on opening, to be quite hollow and empty. Those which were most tempting to the eye were often found to be wormwood to the taste, or poison to the stomach; and many flowers that seemed most bright and gay, had a worm gnawing at the root.

Among the chief attractions of "the things below," were certain little lumps of yellow clay, on which almost every eye and every heart was fixed. When I saw the variety of uses to which this clay could be converted, and the respect which was shown to those who could scrape together the greatest number of yellow lumps, I did not much wonder at the general desire to pick up some of them. But when I beheld the anxiety, the wakefulness, the competitions, the tricks, the frauds, the scuffling, the pushing, the turmoiling, the kicking, the shoving, the cheating, the scheming, the envy, the malignity, which were excited by a desire to possess this article; when I saw the general scramble among those who had little to get much, and of those who had much to get more, then I could not help applying to these people a proverb in use among us, that "gold may be bought too dear."

Though I saw that there were various sorts of trinkets which engaged the hearts of different travelers, such as a measure of red or blue ribbon, for which some were content to forfeit their future inheritance, committing the sin of Esau without his temptation of hunger; yet the yellow clay I found was the grand object for which most hands were scrambling and most souls were risked. One thing was extraordinary, that the nearer these people were to being turned out of their dwelling, the fonder they grew of these pieces of clay; so that I naturally concluded they meant to take the clay with them to the far country, to assist them in their establishment in it; but I soon learned this clay was not useful there, the Lord having declared to these pilgrims, that as they had "brought nothing into this world, they could carry nothing out."

I inquired of the different people who were raising the various heaps of clay, some of a larger, some of a smaller size, why they discovered such unceasing anxiety, and for whom. Some, whose piles were immense, told me they were heaping up for their children; this I thought very right, until on casting my eyes round, I observed many of the children of those very people had large heaps of their own. Others told me it was for their grandchildren; but on inquiry I found these were not yet born, and in many cases there was little chance that they ever would be. The truth, on a close examination, proved to be, that the true genuine heapers really heaped for themselves--that it was in fact neither for friend nor child, but to gratify an inordinate appetite of their own. Nor was I much surprised after this to see these yellow hoards at length began to "corrode, and their rust became a witness" against the hoarders, and would "eat their flesh as it were fire." (Your gold and silver have become worthless. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh in hell. This treasure you have accumulated will stand as evidence against you on the day of judgment. James 5:3)

Many, however, who had set out with a high heap of their father's raising, before they had got one-third of their journey, had scarcely a single piece left. As I was wondering what had caused these enormous piles to vanish in so short a time, I beheld scattered up and down the country all sorts of odd inventions, for some or other of which the vain possessors of the great heaps of clay had traded and bartered them away in fewer hours than their ancestors had spent years in getting them together. O, what a strange unaccountable hodgepodge it was; and what was ridiculous enough, I observed that the greatest quantity of the clay was always exchanged for things that were of no use that I could discover, owing, I suppose, to my ignorance of the manners of that country.

In one place I saw large heaps yellow clay spent in order to set two idle, pampered horses to running; but the worst part of the joke was, the horses did not run to fetch or carry anything, but merely to let the gazers see which could run fastest. Now this gift of swiftness employed to no one useful purpose, was only one out of many instances I observed of talent employed to no end.

In another place I saw whole piles of the yellow clay spent to maintain long ranges of buildings full of dogs. These provisions could have supplied some thousands of pilgrims who were sadly in need, and whose ragged dwellings were exhausted for lack of a little help to repair them.

Others were spent in playing with white stiff bits of paper painted over with red and black spots, in which I thought there must be some trickery, because the very touch of these painted pasteboards made the heaps fly from one to another, and back again to the same, in a way that natural causes could not account for. There was another proof that there must be some magic in this business, which was, that if a pasteboard with red spots fell into a hand which wanted a black one, the person changed color, his eyes flashed fire, and he discovered other symptoms of madness, which showed there was some witchcraft in the case. These clean little pasteboards, as harmless as they looked, had the wonderful power of pulling down the highest piles in less time than all the other causes put together.

I observed that many small piles of yellow clay were given in exchange for an enchanted liquor, which when the purchaser had drunk to a little excess, he lost all power of managing the rest of his heap, without losing the love of it.

Now I found it was the opinion of sober pilgrims, that either hoarding the clay, or trading it for any such purposes as the above, was thought exactly the same offense in the eyes of the Lord; and it was expected that when they would come under His more immediate jurisdiction in "the far country," the penalty fixed to

hoarding and squandering would be nearly the same.

While I examined the countenances of the owners of the heaps, I observed that those who I well knew never intended to make any use at all of their heap, were far more terrified at the thought of losing it, or of being torn from it, than those who were employing it in the most useful manner. Those who best knew what to do with it, set their hearts least upon it, and were always most willing to leave it. But such riddles were common in this odd country. It was indeed a very land of paradox.

Now I wondered why these pilgrims, who were naturally made erect, with an eye formed to look up to "the things above," yet had their eyes almost constantly bent in the other direction, riveted to the earth, and fastened "on things below," just like those animals who walk on all fours. I was told they had not always been subject to this weakness of sight, and proneness to focus on earth--that they had originally been upright and beautiful, having been created after the image of the Lord, and that He had placed them in a superior habitation, which He had given them years ago; but that their first ancestors fell from it through pride and disobedience--that upon this, the inheritance was taken away, they lost their original strength, brightness and beauty, became as dead, and were driven into this strange country; where, however, the Lord showed them mercy and restored life through His Son; and His likeness; for they had become disfigured, and had grown so unlike Him, that you would hardly believe they were His own children, though, in some, the resemblances had become again visible.

The Lord, however, was so merciful, that instead of giving them up to the dreadful consequence of their own folly, as He might have done without any impeachment of His justice, He gave them immediate comfort, and promised those who in due time His own Son should come down and restore them to the future inheritance which He should purchase for them. And now it was, that in order to keep up their spirits, after they had lost their estate through the folly of their ancestors, that He began to give them a part of their former title-deed. He continued to send them portions of it from time to time by different faithful servants, whom, however, these ungrateful people generally abused, and some of whom they murdered.

But for all this the Lord was so very forgiving, that He at length sent these rebellious ones a proclamation of full and free pardon by His Son, who, though they abused Him in a more cruel manner than they had done any of His servants, yet after having "finished the work His Father had given Him to do," went back into "the far country," to prepare a place for all those who believe in Him; and there He still lives, pleading for those he still loves and forgives, and will restore to the purchased inheritance on the terms of their being heartily sorry for what they have done, thoroughly desirous of pardon, and convinced that He is able and willing to "save to the uttermost all those who come unto God by Him."

I saw, indeed, that many old offenders appeared to be sorry for what they had done; that is, they did not like to be punished for it. They were willing enough to be delivered from the penalty of their sin, but they did not heartily wish to be delivered from the power of it. Many declared, in the most public manner, once every week, that they were very sorry they had done amiss--that they had "erred and strayed like lost sheep;" but it was not enough to declare their sorrow ever so often, if they gave no other sign of their penitence. For there was so little truth in them, that the Lord required other proofs of their sincerity besides their own word, for they often lied with their lips and deceived with their tongue. But those who professed to be penitents were neither allowed to raise heaps of yellow clay, or to keep great piles lying by them useless; nor must they barter them for any of those idle vanities which suddenly reduced the heaps; for I found that among the grand articles of future reckoning, the use they had made of the heaps would be a principal one.

I was sorry to observe many of the fairer part of these pilgrims spend too much of their yellow heaps in adorning and beautifying their dwellings of clay, in painting, whitewashing, and enameling them. All these tricks, however, did not preserve them from decay, and when they grew old, they even looked worse for all this cost and varnish. Some, however, acted a more sensible part, and spent no more upon their decaying dwellings than just to keep them whole and clean, and in good repair, which is what every tenant ought to do; and I observed that those who were most moderate in their care of their own dwellings, were most attentive to repair and warm the ragged dwellings of others.

But none did this with much zeal or acceptance but those who had acquired a habit of overlooking "the things below," and who also, by the constant use of the telescope, had gotten their natural weak and dim sight so strengthened as to be able to discern pretty distinctly the nature of "the things above." The habit of fixing their eyes on these glories made all the shining trifles which compose the mass of "things below," at last appear in their own smallness. For it was in this case particularly true, that things are only big or little by comparison; and there was no other way of making "the things below" appear as small as they really were, but by comparing them, by means of the telescope, with "the things above."

But I observed that the false judgment of the pilgrims ever kept pace with their wrong practices; for those who kept their eyes fastened on "the things below," were reckoned wise in their generation, while the few who looked forward to the future glories, were accounted by the heapers, to be either fools or mad.

Most of these pilgrims went on in adorning their dwellings, adding to their heaps, grasping "the things below" as if they would never let them go, shutting their eyes instead of using their telescope, and neglecting their title-deed as if it was the parchment of another man's estate, and not of their own, until, one after another, each felt his dwelling tumbling about his ears.

Oh, then what a busy, bustling, anxious terrifying, distracting moment was that! What a deal of business was to be done, and what a strange time was this to do it in! Now to see the confusion and dismay, occasioned by having left everything to the last minute. First someone was sent for to make over the yellow heaps to another, which the heaper now found would be of no use to himself in crossing the gulf--a transfer which ought to have been made while the dwelling was sound.

Then there was a consultation between two or three masons (physicians) at once, perhaps to try to patch up the walls, and strengthen the props, and stop the decay of the tumbling dwelling; but not until the masons were forced to declare it was past repairing--a truth they were rather too willing to keep back--did the tenant seriously think it was time to pack up, prepare, and be gone.

Then what sending for the 'wise men' who professed to explain the title-deed; and Oh, what remorse that they had neglected to examine it until their senses were too confused for so weighty a business! What reproaches, or what exhortations to others to look better after their own affairs than they had done! Even to the wisest of the inhabitants, the falling of their dwelling was a solemn thing--solemn, but nor surprising; they had long been packing up and preparing; they praised their Lord's goodness that they had been allowed to stay so long; many acknowledged the mercy of their frequent warnings, and confessed that those very dilapidations which had made the house uncomfortable had been a blessing, as it had set them on diligent preparation for their future inheritance, had made them more earnest in examining their title to it, and had set them on such a frequent application to the telescope, that "the things above" had seemed every day to approach nearer and nearer, and "the things below" to recede and vanish in proportion. These desired not to be "unclothed, but to be clothed with their heavenly dwelling;" for they knew if the

earthly tent they lived in was destroyed, they had a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." Hebrews 11:13

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