

46. The Pilgrimages

A man is travelling through the vast plains of the Balkan States in South-eastern Europe, through the burning hot sandy plains of Asia Minor. Hunger pangs and fierce thirst torment him. But he moves on steadily. He braves many dangers, ignores thirst and hunger, and toils on diligently. The end goal is still so far away!

"Where are you going, lonely traveller?"

If we asked him that question, he would briefly raise his weary head, and a strange gleam would shine in his eyes.

"Where am I going? To the Holy Land, to Jerusalem!"

He has left home and its security to face unknown dangers to reach that goal. He does not know if he will ever return. There is a considerable risk of meeting with an accident, getting sick, or dropping from exhaustion on this long journey. The danger of being attacked and abused by robbers is not imaginary. He wouldn't be the first victim because many before him have been beaten and stripped naked. And yet he still goes! He braves all the dangers that surround him. He endures all the difficulties he must struggle with daily.

He handles the fierce heat of the day and the bitter cold at night.

Jerusalem is his ultimate destination. Despite everything, that thought gives him courage and strength to keep going, no matter how difficult it is.

If we ask: "To Jerusalem? What do you want to do there?"

The solemn answer would be:

"Don't you know? I am going to Jerusalem to pray at the tomb of the Lord Jesus, the Saviour. I want to see where the Son of God walked around centuries ago with His disciples. I am going to the places where the Saviour performed miracles, where He suffered insult, scorn, and slander, where He was crucified and died, where He lay three days and three nights in the grave, but where He also rose from the dead. I want to stand on the spot from where He ascended to heaven."

Then he would keep walking on and on, hoping he would finally reach Jerusalem.

Amazed, we stare at the retreating form of that strange man and sympathetically shake our heads or shrug our shoulders. Why would that traveller



The routes the pilgrims took to travel to the 'holy Land' worldhistory.org

want to go and pray at the tomb of the Lord Jesus?

We can pray to God anywhere, can't we?
It is unnecessary to make such a far and dangerous journey, for we can pray to God anywhere at home too! Not *where* we pray is important, but *how* we pray! It all depends on if we pray sincerely! *That* is the main thing.

Yet many old and young people travel from West European countries to the Far East with that same aim. At times, we see whole groups making this trek. Many travel the last part by ship over the Mediterranean Sea. Almost daily, these travellers arrive in Palestine. It is usually busy at the places where Jesus has lived and performed His many miracles.

But why do those people do that?

Well, that is quite a story, and this chapter will tell you something about that.



The Pilgrim. Travelling to the Holy Land.
Painting by David Teniers the Younger. Wikipedia.org.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

In chapter 27, we told you about relics. We wrote that Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, had travelled to the land of Canaan to visit the holy places to pray. During that visit, she 'found' the cross of the Lord Jesus. At least, that's what she believed!

That example got a following. Many people began to travel to the Holy Land, their name for Palestine. They called that journey a *pilgrimage*. And the travellers who made that journey were called *pilgrims*.

At first, it did not happen *that* often, but the idea took hold, and pilgrims began to travel to the land of Canaan regularly.

In 638, the Mohammedans conquered Jerusalem. This did not improve things for the pilgrims. They were abused and sometimes arrested. The Muslims ridiculed and insulted them in all sorts of ways.

But the pilgrimages continued.

While Charlemagne was emperor, many pilgrims complained to him about the treatment they received from the Mohammedans. This king of the Franks took immediate action. He wrote a stern letter to the caliph, the Muslim king, demanding that he put a stop to such wicked behaviour. That was not allowed! His followers must leave the pilgrims in peace! And it helped!

The Muslim caliph had so much respect for the mighty emperor of the west that they stopped molesting the pilgrims. The pilgrims even received some favours and got permission to build some churches in the Holy Land.

One of the Muslim rulers permitted the Christians to build a hospital in Jerusalem so that the sick pilgrims could receive proper care. However, the Mohammedans did not do that out of love for the Christians but for their own gain.

They thought:

"Let the pilgrims come; the more, the better; we can make a pretty penny out of them." Besides, the pilgrims took different goods along that were unknown in the eastern countries. So, they were

happy for many pilgrims to come, for they could trade with them. The years passed by swiftly. Then Charlemagne died. Dark days began for Western Europe. The Vikings came and destroyed all their prosperity on their raiding trips. Those terrible raids lasted for two hundred years!

The year 1000 drew near. The general opinion of the people of Western European countries in those days was that the world would end that year. Then Christ would appear on the clouds. They firmly believed that. It was a time of darkness and confusion. Misery and poverty reigned supreme as a result of the invasions by the Vikings.

Hadn't the Lord Jesus foretold that hard, dark days would come before He would return?

Weren't they supposed to observe the signs of the times?

Well, weren't they hearing of wars and rumours of wars? Famine and pestilence were everywhere. Aren't those the signs of the times? There was no doubt about it! The day of judgment would come in the year 1000! Why precisely in that year?

Well, that was a nice number according to them. That was the most obvious. But many dreaded the day of judgment. They were not sure that they would go to heaven. What could they do to increase their chance of salvation?

They would go to the Holy Land! They would pray at the tomb of Jesus. If the Lord Jesus returned



Praying at the tomb of Jesus

and found them there, He would see how much they thought of Him! Then, as a reward, He would take them to Himself into eternal glory!

Poor, misguided people! We can't *earn* anything! God's people may go to heaven, not because they *deserve* to, but because Christ has obtained salvation for them through His suffering and death. But those people knew no better! They thought they could earn salvation by going on a pilgrimage. They believed that God would be pleased with their pilgrimages. Thousands and thousands of pilgrims travelled to the land of Canaan. They headed for the Holy Land in large groups, which sometimes looked like armies. That's where they would await the day of judgment.

But what about their possessions? Their houses and estates? Their cattle and furniture? Well, they wouldn't have any more use for them because they wouldn't be coming back. The Lord Jesus would come, and then everything would burn up anyway!

Do you know what they did? They gave their possessions to the church! That would count as another good work and help to earn their salvation! Many gave everything they possessed to the church. However, they forgot one thing. If the world did end, the *church* wouldn't have any use for their goods *either*, as God would destroy it on the day of judgment!

The year 1000 drew near. Tension mounted everywhere. When would Jesus come?

Spring arrived.

It became summer. Nothing happened.

It became autumn. Nothing happened.

It became December. Perhaps they thought Jesus would come back on New Year's Eve.

But the year 1000 passed by as usual.

It became 1001.

It became 1002.

* * *

DASHED HOPES AND DECEITFUL DEALINGS

Nothing happened. The day of judgment did not come! The people began to realise that they had made a mistake.

And they *had* because the world *still* exists! How long still? Even the angels in heaven do not know when that great day of the Lord shall come. Only God knows that.

The world did not end, and the pilgrimages continued. Many pilgrims who were in the Holy Land gradually returned home. At their homecoming, they were honoured by their friends and acquaintances. They were the centre of attention with so many incredible stories to tell! When a pilgrim described the dangers he had encountered or outlined the difficulties he had overcome, his audience listened with open mouths.

Pilgrims became men of status. The scarier his stories, the higher he rose in their estimation! Besides that, many of them had taken a memento home. That had to serve as a souvenir of the long journey which he had undertaken. One had brought home a small bottle of water from the Jordan River. Another proudly showed a small bag of pebbles that he had picked up on the bank of the Jordan. And feeling very important, a third one showed a small bag of sand he had filled at the tomb of Jesus. The people touched those souvenirs with a level of respect and reverence. They tried to get some of it for themselves. They

were usually successful if they were happy to pay for it! And they were!

The pilgrims sold all the souvenirs they had taken from the Holy Land for high prices because everyone was keen to have a little water from the Jordan, a pebble, or some sand in his possession. Soon the people were paying vast sums of money for them!

They kept them as valuable relics!

The pilgrims soon ran out of Jordan water and their other mementos. That was a pity when business was booming! They had already made a nice profit! So what did they do? They secretly refilled the little bottle with water out of the well behind their house! And shamelessly, the "holy" pilgrim declared to new buyers that it was genuine Jordan water. Another pilgrim filled his little bag with sand from his garden and, with a sincere face, sold that sand as coming from the tomb of Jesus! Delighted, the buyers went away with their 'prize'.

Foolish, gullible people!

Those dishonest pilgrims did so much lying and cheating! They did not care at all about the truth! But the people believed everything a pilgrim told them. Although they were the biggest cheats, the people thought they were holy men and readily paid large sums of money for their worthless rubbish.

THE SELJUKS CONQUER JERUSALEM

In the year 1076, the Seljuks conquered Jerusalem. They were a Turkish tribe from Asia Minor who had only just converted to the Mohammedan religion. They were half-savage, cruel, and pitiless. They trampled down and destroyed the holy places. With increasing irritation, the Seljuks observed the great multitudes of pilgrims visiting the sacred sites annually. They did not trust the pilgrims. They believed them to be spies who secretly tried to discover their weak areas under the cloak of holiness. So the Seljuks reviled and scorned the pilgrims.

They often suddenly attacked the praying multitudes and treated them rudely and cruelly. Those Turks abused and beat the pilgrims till their blood flowed.



Flasks (ampulla) made from lead were an important form of pilgrim souvenirs. They would be filled with Holy Water at a shrine, such as Canterbury in England. Holy Water was believed to heal the sick.
<http://www.internationalschoolhistory.net/>

They arrested others, imprisoned them and sold them as slaves. That's why many never saw their native country again but spent years in cruel slavery till they died.

When their relatives heard that the Seljuks had arrested their family members, they offered a high ransom to deliver the captive pilgrims. When the Seljuks heard this, they tried to capture wealthy pilgrims to charge high prices in return for the prisoners' freedom! When those pilgrims arrived home again, they told everyone in Europe what had happened to them. With vigorous gestures, they provided a detailed report of the abuse and the torments they had endured. The people in Western Europe were highly indignant when they heard those appalling stories. It became a topic of many angry and bitter discussions.

The question arose in the hearts of thousands: "Can't anyone do anything about this? Can't we somehow help our brothers in the Far East?"

But that would not be easy, and Jerusalem was so far away!

Sure, they made plans to conquer the Holy Land and drive the Seljuks out of the holy places. But it got no further than making a few plans because carrying them out was so difficult.

However, the complaints continued, and many who left full of courage never returned. The bitterness increased.

Pope Gregory VII believed that they had to recapture Palestine from the Seljuks. He hoped Henry IV, the German emperor, would take on that battle. However, there was a bitter hatred between Gregory VII and Henry IV about appointing bishops.

Because of that, nothing came of Gregory's hopes. In those circumstances, the pope was too proud to ask anything of the emperor.

He refused to ask a favour from his enemy. So the pilgrims remained defenceless, helpless against the cruelties of the Seljuks. But the resentment increased in the hearts of the Christians.



A 17th-century depiction of the Siege of Jerusalem, 1099. (Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images)

The number of pilgrims decreased considerably. It had simply become too dangerous! Many no longer dared to make that pilgrimage. But they did not completely stop. Time and again, some people braved everything and attempted the perilous journey to the holy tomb. Finally, vast Christian armies marched to Palestine to drive the Seljuks out. I hope to tell you something about that in the following chapters.

QUESTIONS

1. Identify Helena. Why did many want to imitate her example?
2. What is a pilgrimage? What were some of its goals?
3. How did the Mohammedans treat the early pilgrims?
4. What changes occurred in the treatment of the pilgrims?
5. Why did the Mohammedans alter their behaviour toward the pilgrims?
6. What prophecies seemed to be fulfilled as the year 1000 approached? What conclusion did they reach?
7. Why did thousands go to the Holy Land? What did they do with their possessions?

8. What serious error did these pilgrims make?
9. What did the returning pilgrims do with the souvenirs they had taken home?
10. What other practices occurred in the 'trade of relics'?
11. Who were the Seljuks?
12. Why did they often capture wealthy pilgrims?
13. What effect did this have on the Europeans?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why are exact predictions concerning the return of the Lord Jesus wrong? Prove your answer from Scripture.
2. Read Luke 24. What did the angel say to those seeking Jesus in the tomb? What application can we take from this text?

Israel continues to be a popular destiny for pilgrimages.



Thousands of pilgrims heading for the Jordan River. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2018-01-18>



Pilgrims are baptised in the Jordan on the spot where John baptised Christ. <https://people.com/tv>