

BONA FIDE TRAVELLERS

A SERMON

Preached on Sunday Morning September 27th, 1863

By Mister JAMES WELLS

At the Surrey Tabernacle, Borough Road

Volume 5 Number 249

“For we are strangers before you, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.” 1
Chronicles 29:15

IT is a great thing to be able to make a right use of all the parts of God’s truth; and this brevity of human life appears to have been with David a very powerful reason why he should, while he lived, do all he could to forward the cause of God, according to the advice given by Solomon, “Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither you go.” And the Savior said, “I must work the works of him that sent me while it is day: the night comes, when no man works.” This is the use that the ancients made of the brevity of human life, and the Lord help us to make the same use of it.

We may, then, in our text notice the doctrines which are here taught. The first doctrine here taught is this, that we have set before us *a people who are strangers with God, but no more strangers to him*, secondly, that *these people are bona fide travelers*, “sojourners, as were all our fathers;” and then the last doctrine sets before us *two reasons why they are thus so earnestly sojourning to a better world*, namely, because “our days on the earth are as a shadow,” and then, because “there is none abiding.”

First, then, just a word in a way of description of *that people who are strangers with God but are no more strangers to him*. The first attraction I will notice to bring a stranger, to bring the man who is a stranger to God, to bring him to God, and thus, though he is a stranger with God, yet he is with him, one with him, and never to be a stranger to him again, never to be severed from him. Solomon sets forth this attraction in a beautiful way: “Moreover,” he says, “concerning the stranger, which is not of your people Israel, but is come from a far country for your great name’s sake.” For your great name! Just look at three things in that great name. First, that of judgment. This was one thing that so deeply affected the mind of Rahab. She heard of God’s judgment upon the enemies of his people, and this moved her with solemn fear to be found an enemy to such a God as this. And then mercy. She saw mercy; she saw what the Lord did for his people, in drying up the sea, and sustaining them through the wilderness, and that there was not anything too hard

for him; that also would attract in a way of hope. And then the third thing would be that of eternity; she would see that he was a God from eternity to eternity. And so, in the 63rd of Isaiah, it is there said the Lord led his people through the deep, "to make himself an *everlasting* name;" there is eternity; and that he gave them rest, to make himself a glorious name. Now, then, the sinner begins to see that there is something in the name of the Lord; that there are judgments that must come upon that sinner if he live and die a stranger to God; and then led to see that there is mercy, all the mercy that the vilest sinner can need, this, again, attracts him. And then, again, he is led to see, as I have said, that there is eternity; and he begins to reason, and say, What are all earthly possessions, in comparison of that life that will never die, and of that kingdom into which the people of God are brought? And thus the stranger becomes attracted; thus it was that we were drawn to God, and thus it is we are still drawn to God, and thus it is we shall still be drawn to God, and thus it is we walk with God, and thus it is we love God, and thus it is we know God, and thus it is we are strangers with him; we know but little as yet, we have a great deal yet to learn, and we often meet with strange experiences, and strange trials, and strange circumstances; we know but little of him as yet; there is only a whisper of his ways as yet known; the thunder of his power who can understand? But bless the Lord, we know something of him essential to the salvation of the soul, and all the circumstantial shall follow in due time. Again, the stranger, the man who has hitherto been a stranger, and is thus drawn towards God, the Lord says of such, that he will bring them to his holy mountain. Now that, I think, means two things, first, that he will bring them to the perfection of Christ's work while they are here; and then that he will bring them to his holy mountain of eternal glory at the last. I think it includes those two things: 56th of Isaiah, "Also the sons of the stranger will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer." And if we take the house of prayer to mean the church, it is true; and if we take the house of prayer to mean Christ, it is still true that "I will bring them to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar." At that time, when they used to serve God with some expense to themselves, if a man were grateful to God he would not mind the expense of a lamb, if he had the money to pay for it; he would not mind the expense of an ox; he would not mind the expense of the first fruits, and he would not mind the expense of the distance; some came a long way, even some that had no saving knowledge. Hence the eunuch; he came a long way, brought his chariot, and brought his gifts; the wise men brought their gifts. "Their sacrifices shall be accepted upon my altar." So that their services cost them something, just to denote the reality of their gratitude. And so it is now; it has been so in all ages; the Lord's people serve him at some sacrifice, and if they do not, then their services are very poor, and not pleasing in his sight. But these strangers, then, were to be made joyful in God's house of prayer; for the temple was to be a house of prayer for all people, as Solomon shows in his prayer, as a type of the dear Savior, who is the great meeting-place of God and man. But let us look at this stranger; let us look at his character; let us see what he is. "Also, the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord." Now how were they joined to the Lord? Why, by faith in Jesus Christ, by faith in his perfect work. And until you are brought to receive the perfection of Christ's work, and joined to the Lord by the perfection of that work, until then you are not joined truly because all the time you admit duty-faith, or free-will, or something for the creature to do, then you are not joined to the perfection of Christ's work; because if the work of Christ were perfect once it is perfect for ever, and if you had no hand in devising it, and if you had no hand in accomplishing it, and if you have no hand in continuing it, then it is independent of you altogether. So that to be joined to the Lord truly is to be joined to the perfection of Christ's work in the eternity of it, and that will join you to God's love, and join you to electing grace, and join you to predestinating mercy, not

appointing you to wrath, but to obtain salvation by Jesus Christ, and will join you to God in all the relations he bears. Now, then, the sons of the stranger, that thus join themselves to the Lord, being thus brought to receive him, to serve him, and to love his name, serve him first, and then love him; the love comes afterwards; not love him first and serve him afterwards, but they are to serve him first and to love him afterwards; the love comes afterwards. Why, say you, how is that? Well, it really is so. I cannot say that I first loved God when I began to serve him. I began to serve him. I dreadfully misunderstood the nature of the Lord's service at first, but I was determined to serve him somehow or another. I first got the old duty-faith prayer-book, and I was determined to serve him that way; and then I had another prayer-book, and I was determined to serve him that way; and then I had "Alarm to the Unconverted," and that, by-the-bye, after I was converted, and I determined to serve him that way. And I went off and heard ministers that knew not much more than myself, were all blind together; but I was determined to serve God. But the love was not come yet. By-and-bye, when the Lord unfolded to me his eternal mercy, and I saw the perfection in Christ, and the blessedness of being one with him, then love flowed into my soul, and I could plainly say, I love my Master. Now, mark, to serve him, to love his name, and to be his servants. First, here is the service, a sort of apprenticeship to see whether you love him; then comes the love, and then comes the confirmation, "to be his servants," that is, to be his forever; the word servant there signifies one that has given himself up forever, one that is settled down forever, one that is satisfied forever; he shall be his servant forever. "Every one that keeps the sabbath from polluting it;" there must be no human works connected with the mystical sabbath; Christ is the mystical sabbath, he is the eternal sabbath, and you pollute that sabbath if you do any manner of work as a kind of make-up, because it would indicate that the release is not entire; "and takes hold of my covenant." Now, these, then, are the strangers that are thus attracted, and that are thus joined to the Lord; and then those clauses describe the nature of the unity, to serve him, and to love his name, and to be his servants, and to keep the sabbath of rest from polluting it, and to take hold of his covenant. "Them will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer." I am sure there is not anything, next to the positive enjoyment of the Lord's presence, more dear to the child of God than that, I mean connected with your experience, than that of being enabled to read out your interest in these things; because, if we can see our own character described among those that are thus blessed, then God is on our side, and the conclusion is natural, if God be for us, who can be against us?

I will give one more sample of the stranger. We who were strangers, thus attracted, and thus brought to know the Lord, the apostle Paul speaks thus of us, who were strangers to God, but now being brought to know the Lord, though strangers with him we are not strangers to him: "You who sometimes were afar off, but now in Christ Jesus," that is it, "now in Christ Jesus," by faith in Christ Jesus, by your hope in Christ Jesus, by being brought to renounce all other confidence, and place your hope in Christ Jesus; "but now in Christ Jesus you who were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ." The holiness of God to a sinner is terrible, but the blood of Christ is such as to take away all antagonism and establish eternal unity between the soul and the holiness of God. The infallible justice of God is a terror to the sinner when he sees that, without seeing mercy; and yet such is the blood of Christ that it answers all demands of justice, brings us into the peaceful embrace of everlasting love, and all our sins are silenced, everlastingly taken away, and the Lord thus, by the blood of the everlasting covenant, becomes the God of peace. Now in Christ Jesus made near by the blood of Christ. Now then, says the apostle, "You are no more strangers;" no; I know his name, I know his holy mountain, I know his house of prayer, I know his mercy, I know

his lovingkindness, I know his covenant, I know the rest that Christ has entered into, I know the Lord now in these relations. How sweet the truth that “you are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints;” and not only citizens, but are of the royal household, “the household of God;” and not only so, but you are to be for the Lord’s portion, “for an habitation of God through the Spirit,” God dwelling with the people, and the people with him; so that they are no more strangers. Let us then sum up this part before I leave it, First, has the name of the Lord thus drawn us near to him, and have we been favored thus, by faith in the eternal perfection of Christ, to join ourselves to the everlasting God, to serve him and to love him? Can we love him, and do we love him, and is it a grief to us that we do not love him more, and are we at least desiring to be his servants forever, that, so far from wishing to get away from his service, our solemn prayer is that he would keep us near to himself, that we may serve him in that holiness and in that righteousness which he has provided for us, that we may thus serve him all the days of our life? We never could have served him in holiness if he had not provided a holiness in which to serve him, and that holiness is Christ, who is our sanctification; and we serve God in Christ; there it is that all spiritual sacrifices are acceptable, in Christ Jesus. And to serve him in righteousness; but we never could serve him in the wedding garment if he had not provided that garment; we never could serve him in the robe of victory, in the robe of freedom, the robe of citizenship, or whatever characteristics we give to this righteousness, we never could serve him in that righteousness if he himself had not provided it. When I preach in Christ’s holiness, and preach in Christ’s righteousness, then I am preaching in Christ’s spirit; and when you can hear in his holiness, his blood cleansing from all sin, and in his righteousness justifying from all things, then you are close to God, and God is close to you; then you are near to God, and God is near to you; then you are like God, you are like Christ; for wherein lies the image of God but this putting on of the new man, Christ Jesus, which after God is created in holiness, in knowledge, in righteousness, and everything that harmonizes with the perfections of the Most High?

But second, *these persons are bonk fide travelers*; we are “sojourners, as were all our fathers.” I will take the three fathers that are referred to chiefly. Now Abraham was in Egypt, and he had his troubles there, as we all have in the world; but the Lord appeared for him, and he was wonderfully enriched there, servants, and silver, and gold, and cattle; he became very rich; yet it was, nevertheless, the land, not of his rest, but of his sojourn. There was something to Abraham somewhere better than all this, and therefore he did not feel at home in Egypt, he still looked to the city which had foundations. And he would meditate like this: Here am I, and the Lord certainly has blessed me very much temporally, turned my foes into friends, overruled my very error to my good; yet there is something somewhere better than all this, and I will try to travel towards that; because all these riches will presently make themselves wings and fly away. What is that? There is God’s sworn covenant in the promised seed; “In you and in your seed.” What means that “your seed”? It means the promised seed; it means the Son of God; it means the great Melchizedek; it means the King of Righteousness, the King of Peace; it means a life that will never die; it means a kingdom that can never be moved; it means an inheritance where no evil or adversary can ever occur; yea, it means that God will be all in all, that he will be my shield while I am here, and my exceeding great reward when time shall be no more. That better life, that better country, that better world, that better end, that better inheritance, where the inhabitants shall say, “The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.” We are not to blame people for being rich; God makes them rich; and to despise a man because he is rich is to despise God, who has made him rich. We may complain of a man if he does not make a good use of his riches and does not

consecrate some of them to God; then we may justly complain. Nor are we to despise a man because he is poor, because God makes poor as well as makes rich. We may complain, if the man is weak enough, because the truth subjects him to rather even more poverty than usual, and the man would rather give up the truth than endure the poverty; that would be a bad sign, certainly. So I say, with Abraham here, the Lord made him rich; and the Lord, made David, by his victories, rich; and he made a good use of his riches, and devoted much of them, as you see, unto the service of the Lord. But let Abraham have what riches he might, still it could not dethrone the promised seed; it could not becloud a sworn covenant; it could not hide from his eyes that better country; so that he was still a sojourner. Happy is the man that can retire into his own mind, and say, Well, I profess to be going to heaven, do I mean what I profess? Am I really concerned to be saved by the Lord Jesus Christ, and am I really concerned to walk in his ways, and am I really concerned to hold fast his truth firm unto the end, so that I may be found at the end in that peace that passes all understanding? Happy the man that is thus a bona fide, or, as the words mean, a genuine, real, and faithful traveler; that he is what he professes to be, a sojourner on the earth. He has his comforts and his interests; but still that one interest that he has in Christ, whatever interests he has on earth, that interest he has in Christ surpasses all other interests; and the one does not clash with the other; there is no necessity for that that I see. They will, if we make them, clash; they do not else. I do not see that godliness is to hinder a man from being industrious, or to hinder him from being careful, to hinder him from being prudent, or to hinder him from getting money, if the Lord so order it. No. If we withhold more than is fit, and so make the interests clash, then that is another thing; but they do not necessarily. Neither do poverty and the interest we have in Christ clash one with the other; for if I am poor, and though I have food today, do not know how it will be tomorrow, or next week, or the week after next, the Lord knows what I need, and I shall have it. And all the difference between the poor man and the rich man is this, the rich man is trusting to the goodly portion of the goods, and the Lord keeps the other in his own hands; so that the rich man, after all, is only supplied, and the poor man gets enough. And so, when you come to the end, it will be, he that had much had none over, and he that had little had no lack. So that, bless the Lord! he knows how to deal with us in all these respects. The great thing is, then, to be kept straight on, just as those were you read of in the 11th of Hebrews. They say just as you do: you may take them as a sample of the fathers. What did they travel in the light of? Why, in the light of what I must confess I could not get another step if my path were not strewed with the same thing. "Not having received the promises;" yes, "these all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off." There are the promises. They were afraid to look at the precepts. We have made so many holes in our manners, and come short here, sinned there, and made so many crooks, we shall be discouraged if we look at that. And so, they saw the promises, "and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed" that they were seeking after the eternal realization of them, "that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." But, says Satan, I'll make some of you tired of this. I'll make you sick of this pilgrimage, this religion. And so you read there of the all manner of tortures to which they were put, as well as in the early ages many Christians were; and yet it is said to their honor, or rather to the honor of that grace that sustained them, that when they were robbed of their property, robbed of their liberty, and put to all sorts of tortures that men could inflict, What do you say now? will you go on in your pilgrimage now? will you be a traveler still? will you still despise the things the world so prizes? and will you still go on? Yes not accepting deliverance, because they desired a better resurrection; and so God was not ashamed to be called their God. My hearer, to hold fast the promise, to hold fast the truth, and still to go on, we need all the grace, I had almost said, that God can give. Oh, we should soon cease to pray, soon cease to believe, soon

cease to be spiritual, soon cease to be heavenward, soon cease to be heavenly-minded, if he who began the work did not carry it on, and that by his almighty power. Isaac was in Gerah, and very much blessed there. He sowed in that land and had a hundredfold; and yet Isaac had something better than that. God had given to him the same promises that he had given to his father Abraham, and so Isaac was glad to get away, and glad to go on his journey; kept his eye and his heart upon the promise God had given to him. Promise again, you see: The Lord had promised Isaac that he would bless him. What a mercy that the way is so sure that we go on by promise! what a mercy it is the way is so sure! Bless the Lord! there is no person can come into the way and spoil it; there is no ravenous beast can devour the promises; there is no lion shall be able so to alarm us as to drive us back away from the promise. It was upon the promise that Isaac looked. Why, it was his native air, I was going to say, the promise was. He was a child of promise; he appreciated the promise, gloried in the promise; and it was by the promise of God, in other words, by the faithfulness of God to the promise, that Isaac still persevered and went on. Just so with Jacob he was a sojourner in Padan-aram twenty years, and we see how wonderfully the Lord blessed him, enriched him. He felt grateful too. "I passed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I am become two bands." He knew the Lord was the author of these blessings he had; but then that was Jacob's natural feeling; he had an inward experience beyond that. Jacob, when he came to die (words I have to preach from this afternoon; it does not seem right to quote them now, but I cannot help it), Jacob, when he came to die, said, "I have waited, O Lord" till my flocks became very large? No. Till my silver and gold accumulated beyond all precedent? No. Till I acquired such dominion as to be the greatest man in the world? No; none of these things. He brings out at the last his hidden experience, "I have waited" through all my pilgrimage, "O Lord, for your salvation." A great many sins, Lord, but your salvation swallowed them all up; a great many crooks, Lord, but your salvation put them all right; a great many enemies, but your salvation has overcome them all; a great many necessities, but your salvation has supplied them all. "I have waited for your salvation." And thus, he got safe to the end of his course. Abraham walked in the light of the promise; Isaac walked in the light of the promise; Jacob walked in the light of God's salvation. And if you lay hold of God's yea and amen promises, and of God's eternal salvation, you will never go back. No; in comparison of those promises, and in comparison, of that salvation, everything else will appear little, and not worth going back for. Bless the Lord, then, that while we are strangers with him, and sojourners on the earth, we have something better to seek after.

Now I would be one of the last to say a single word to cool the ardor of young people in their industry; but I may say here, you young people, I hope you are industrious, the best thing you can do, and prudent. The Lord bless you! it will save you ten thousand sorrows. Now, you young people, in addition to being industrious, the Lord will be with you, even in that, the Lord does not approve of laziness; there is not a word said all through the Bible in favor of the sluggard. Now if, in addition to your being industrious, and wishing to occupy a comfortable, respectable position in human society, if, in addition to that, you are drawn to Jesus Christ, if you are drawn to God, if you are drawn to Calvary's cross, if you are drawn into the love and mercy of God, what a happy young man, what a happy young woman, you are! What a mercy for you, through grace, thus to begin to remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days shall come, old age with all its infirmities will overtake you, when you shalt say, "I have no pleasure in them." But while your natural pleasures will thus decline, and the streams of human comfort dry up, there will yet remain unto you a fountain that will ever flow, there will yet remain unto you the tree that bears fruit all the year round; there will be yet remaining unto you joys unmingled and unbounded;

and though the outward man perish, the inward man shall be renewed day by day. The Lord awaken those that are not awakened; the Lord make those concerned that are not concerned; the Lord bless you in every sense of the word, and then I shall rejoice that I was led to say a word to encourage you, if you have the least concern whatever in your mind to believe; and therefore I should rejoice that I was led to say a single word that would encourage you to pray to God, however feeble your prayer may be; bless his holy name, he attends the feeblest cry that ascends from the soul in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But I come now to the close of our subject; “Our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.” They are a shadow not only because of their brevity, but they are of necessity in their circumstances a shadow to the soul. Even the natural man has never found real rest and real satisfaction in anything temporal to his soul; there is an uneasiness, there is a restlessness. And we see in the world what all sorts of devices there are; see in London what all sorts of refined amusements we have for young people; and in some of those amusements there is no harm, I can see no harm in them, not in themselves; but the time is bad, late at night, and the association is sure to be bad. And if you wish to come to ruin, you young people, any of you, if you wish to blast your prospects in life, if you wish to spoil all taste for lawful business and industry, attend those refined inventions of the devil. Nevertheless, what I say is true, that the very existence of such things says too much; people praise them up, but they are indicative of that universal dissatisfaction which the souls of men feel. They want something, and they don’t know what; and they invent this, and invent that, and invent the other, and it’s all a failure. What did a nobleman some time ago say? He would give five hundred pounds to any man that could invent a new pleasure. He had run the giddy round of human pleasure so far, was willing to give five hundred pounds to anyone that could invent some new amusement, some new pleasure. Alas! alas! these things say too much for the devil. The devil wants to persuade us and to persuade them that there is satisfaction in his ways; but they are sure to betray their want of satisfaction. So that our days are as a shadow, even to the wicked man; but it will not be a shadow to the wicked man when he shall lift up his eyes in hell. Now the people of God do not betray their cause like that; no; you don’t find them going from one God to another, and from one religion to another. They are settled down in God’s love, and they are satisfied with it; they are settled down in what Christ has done, and they are satisfied with it; they are settled down in the grace of God, and they are satisfied with it; they are settled down in God’s truth, and they are satisfied with it. You will not find them running from God to God, and from religion to religion; no; they have one God, they have one Mediator, one Spirit to teach them, one gospel, one end, and they are quite satisfied. So that, so far from their sighing, from their mourning that their days on earth are so few, why, when they are in their right mind they can say, All the better, all the better, all the better, all the better; for at the end there is a peace in perfection I have never yet realized, and glory to be enjoyed when time shall be no more; there is nothing for us to dread in the departing hour.

And then our text brings before us the fact, I apprehend the object of preaching is not merely instruction, but to stir up the pure mind by way of remembrance, our text brings before us the solemn fact that we must die. “There is none abiding;” cannot stop; no man can stay the spirit in the day of death.

The Lord help you to make yourself somewhat familiar with that great event, and see so much of Jesus as, like Simeon in the discovery of what Christ is as your salvation, to feel less shrinking

back from it, and a greater willingness when the time shall come to depart. What a wonderful change will death bring about! If we contemplate the change, how wonderful it is! Look at it. Let me in conclusion just take a fourfold view of the change, just to show the utter impossibility, in our present state of things, of comprehending it. The first wonderful change, or the first part of the wonderful change, will be the separation of the soul and the body; we shall become, as it were, I was going to say, two persons. What a mystery is this! we cannot imagine what the soul is apart from the body. And the second thing is the entire cessation of all our senses. The sight is darkened entirely, the taste is gone, the scent is gone, hearing gone, touch gone; not a sense left out of all the five senses; each is dead. The third is that the soul exists by itself. How it sees, how it speaks, how it walks, how it hears, that I cannot say; it does all those things, but how we cannot say. But what a change it is! Then the fourth thing is not only separation between soul and body, the body ceasing, the soul existing by itself; but the transition of the soul into an eternal world. And what is said of the soul in that world? What will your soul be when you go into that world? I speak to the Christian. What will my soul be? What is the soul of every Christian that departs? for absent from the body, present with the Lord. Here it is: "The spirits of just men," justified in Christ, "made perfect;" your spirit perfectly holy, perfectly righteous, perfectly happy, perfectly safe, perfectly glorious, in perfect possession of perfect glory, and all your associations perfect, everything perfect as far as the spirit is concerned. And then see before the spirit what a pleasing prospect. The soul and body, as the old divines used to say, bid each other good night, and they will meet in the morning, the resurrection morning; the soul and the body will meet again; the body then like the soul, immortal, incorruptible, holy, like unto Christ's glorious body. What a meeting will it be in that morning, after the soul and body have been apart all night, all the night of time, until the morning comes, the angel descends, the voice is heard, Christians rise again, change is wrought, reunion takes place, and all appear, their sins and sorrows at an infinite distance, to be heard of no more forever! Then shall begin that new and never-ending song from voices, the voices of untold millions, and shall roll on forever; then shall we glorify God in that perfection which he has promised in his holy word, and which our souls sometimes sweetly anticipate.