

**Hamster Wheel and Temptation:
Biblical Theology of Pilgrimage**

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A pilgrim's journey, in their decisiveness to seek the unknown, embark on foreign land, in hopes of exploring the remedies that come with it. A pilgrimage can oftentimes challenge a person in three areas of their life: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. The vulnerability and the legitimacy of placing oneself in the vast terrain outside of their comfort zone allow for the body, mind, and soul to be active and alert—becoming fragile to the surrounding areas at the moment. The misconception as to what a pilgrimage is and the purpose behind why it's done is to misunderstand what the journey is all about. Not that it is a straight and simple path, from one point to the other—rather a demanding task that may have them dragging their feet on the windy roads that are steep on their inclines as well as their declines, quite literally! The purpose of this paper is to further elaborate on the Biblical purposes behind the pilgrim's journey—both to the physical destination and the spiritual areas of their inner being. In doing so, we are to also look to the Biblical characters in reflecting on how they have been transformed by their own pilgrimage.

The “American dream” brings about the many great aspects to life that allow its citizens to live a life that's full of materialistic joy and leisure. At the end of the day, it is in exchange for hard work and being on the “grind.” This is the American lifestyle, and it is nothing short of being enslaved to one's desires to fulfill their materialistic dreams of leisure when the time comes. Much of this pays tribute to the hamster and its hamster wheel. While the hamster keeps his eyes on the prize, he stays on the wheel, running in place until he inevitably tires himself out. As you can tell, it is only sensible to ask why this little hamster continues to run even after realizing that he is not getting any closer to its reward that's clearly out of bounds. Why is it that we keep running after this prize as well? The definitive choice of the journey does not come so easily. The comprehensible notion behind the fight for stability and comfort tugs on a person and their psychological well-being if and when they decide to leave it all behind to explore the world.

The first of many reasons why we keep running after the reward is because we are actively wired to continuously work hard for an outcome. Understanding and accepting that working hard to buy your success is the reality of today, and with the modern common mentality of “no pain, no gain” there is not much else to say except we are living the great American scandal. While there is truth to keeping ourselves active, we as God’s image-bearing people, are created to be workers. Within the Creation account, in which God had assigned Adam to tend to the garden, God rests on the seventh day. We often forget that God desires for there to be a day of rest, in that it allows for us to have dedicated moments in dwelling in the presence of God, for we are to rely on Him to provide for us in this day of rest. Being trapped in this spinning hamster wheel and keeping our eyes on the materialistic end goal should instead be fixated on God’s presence, in this present moment.

Fixating our eyes on God’s presence can go about many ways in the context of pilgrimage. Many who pursue their pilgrimage do not have God or even religion in mind, however, their understanding of what a pilgrimage actually entails comes down to this one simple idea—to step away from their daily lives in hopes of returning changed, escaping from their realities when diving into the spiritual. The preparation for the journey ahead is oftentimes glanced over and even underestimated, both in the limitations to the body—but also in the mind. According to the CDC, an explanation of why physical activity is important is stated in this, *“Being physically active can improve your brain health, help manage weight, reduce the risk of disease, strengthen bones and muscles, and improve your ability to do everyday activities.”* Preparation oftentimes involves pushing the body past your limitations in order to endure and even strengthen both your mind and body. Delving deeper in allowing for vulnerability and openness to change cannot happen with ritualistic rhythms, but rather by getting off the wheel.

The synoptic gospels, show the life of Jesus from the moment of Mary's conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit to His ascension into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. With all the events that had happened in between, one of these included his journey as a pilgrim—first on his own and later with his disciples. With Jesus being the primary example of how we, as followers of Christ should live, why then should we disregard the spiritual journey that Jesus had taken through his own pilgrimage? Before we are to take a look over how Jesus had begun his pilgrimage, we must take a look at what led Jesus on the pilgrimage in the first place. Within the latter half of chapter three in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus came to his cousin, John the Baptist, at the Jordan River to be baptized (v.13-14). After John had consented to baptize Jesus (v.15), Matthew concludes the chapter by explaining that, “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him, I am well pleased’” (v.16-17). This was important because Jesus publicly reveals His divinity, through his Father's proclamation, which came like a dove.

The significance of Jesus' baptism in the passage above was that it was not necessarily required of Jesus to even do so in the first place, since Jesus did not have any sin to repent of. The symbolism behind his action was “...to completely identify Himself with sinful man” (EnduringWord.com) in that Jesus was sent down to earth, taking on the full wrath of God against sin, by bearing our own sins on the cross. In understanding this, one of the first recorded moments in the synoptic gospels was his baptism illustrating himself dying in our place, and rising once again. Why is this important to bring up? The comparison to be drawn here is that we are to die to our old selves, leaving what's behind, in order that we can enter into a new life. In the same way, we must leave behind the hamster wheel in order to break our old rhythms.

In viewing Jesus and his divine nature through his baptism, we can also view the human nature of Jesus immediately after—as he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted by Satan for forty days and forty nights. According to EnduringWord, the commentary explains that “Jesus did not need to be tempted to help Him grow. Instead, He endured temptation both so that He could identify with us (Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15), and to demonstrate His own holy, sinless character.” In Jesus’ pilgrimage, we can see that the Spirit of God had called him into the wilderness. Pilgrimages can sometimes occur for us when we least expect them to, for it is God who calls us to make the decision to leave our comfortable lives. Beginning the journey is to take that first step in desiring to understand who we are, but also the one who has called us. This is not always the case for some who are feeling called to simply see the world with the final destination being a spiritual landmark or even the relics of an important figure within history. The journey begins with a call to action, to be asked to step off the hamster wheel and make the decision to just go!

We can see that Jesus decided to fast for forty days and forty nights, it was obvious he was hungry. When Satan himself came to Jesus, tempting him to turn what was stone into bread to satisfy his hunger, Jesus refutes in saying “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4). To go on a pilgrimage involves fasting—from the physical food, but also from the mental stress from the business in everyday life. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness not to feast on stone turned into bread, but rather to fast, and to be in solitude, allowing for his time and devotion to be spent in turning to God and depending on Him. To neglect the importance of taking care of physical needs and isolating ourselves from society is by no means what is being said. Rather, the importance of fasting on the walk is to intentionally focus on what we need and give them all to God.

To trust in God and in His plans for us comes with the understanding of our limitations—especially without Him. Jesus had been taken to the highest point within the temple of the holy city, being tested by the devil to use his divine authority to put his life at risk, for Satan knew that Jesus could command the angels to provide for him a graceful decent (Matthew 4:5-6). However, Jesus then refutes again by saying, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (v.7) and once more in understanding God’s sovereignty when saying “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” (v.10) when offered the earthly kingdom through Jesus’ submission to Satan (v.8-9). Jesus knew that there are no shortcuts around the cross and certainly not when it involves submitting himself to the devil. What Jesus’ actions are teaching here in his pilgrimage is that temptations will come about on your journey.

The journey itself will sometimes take you to the peaks of the mountain, but in order to share this remarkable account, you must go back down—for this enables us to humble ourselves in order to resist further temptations. God allows for temptation to fall on our path in reminding us that we cannot make the journey on our own, for we need Him in everything we do and everywhere we go. Much like the hamster wheel which tempts us to keep running after the desires of this world, God is telling us to step off that wheel and step away from the very thing that gets us nowhere. This is done so that we can focus our time and energy on God who is sovereign over all things, and in doing so, our reward is to be in the presence of God when our time on earth is done. The pilgrimage is a symbol of life for wherever we go, we are to walk on the path that may lead us to those steep hills until we reach our final destination. In doing so, we experience all that happens in between which brings us closer to God through growth in our minds and souls.

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