



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Discipline of Christian Pilgrimage  
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 19-27)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 On Pilgrimage in Italy  
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 74-78)

📖 Toward a Theology of Pilgrimage  
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 89-93)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to  
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### Christian Reflection

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# The Discipline of Christian Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is rooted in the soil of the human soul. This intentional mode of travel has been practiced through the centuries by Christians who are seeking to stretch their faith radically by discovering the God who invites us into sacred and risky intimacy.

### Prayer

O Lord, we long for the day when our feet will stand within the gates of the New Jerusalem. Until then, as we journey toward home, guide and protect your church. Bind us in unity, clothe us in truth, and keep us in peace.

We pray in the strong name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Hebrews 11:8-16

### Reflection

Pilgrimage typically involves traveling to places that are closely associated – through art, architecture, or a saint’s life – with God’s mission in the world. In its essence, “pilgrimage is a journey nearer to the heart of God and deeper into life with God,” Eric Howell explains. “The hope of all pilgrimage is realized when we have renewed eyes to be happily surprised by God’s mysterious presence in all times and places, even at home.”

After sketching the history of this practice, Christian George commends pilgrimage for Christians of all ages and abilities, “as a spiritual discipline that reflects our journey to God, that gives great energy to our sanctification, and that engenders a spiritual vitality that is both Christo-centric and community-driven.”

▶ *The history of Christian pilgrimage* draws on biblical travels to the festivals at the Second Temple in Jerusalem (537 bc-ad 70). Peter describes all believers as pilgrims (1 Peter 2:11), for they join Abraham’s walk toward a city built by God.

Christian George notes, “By the time Constantine’s mother, Empress Helena, brought pilgrimage into vogue by traveling to the Holy Land in 326, a living tradition of sancta loca, or holy places, pertaining to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had already materialized.”

Detractors from Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395) to the Protestant Reformers criticized the physical dangers and spiritual excesses of pilgrimage, yet the practice flourished in the medieval period and revived in the eighteenth century. Great European cathedrals, sites of martyrdom, and places where notable saints had served were added to the list of destinations. Even the Puritans, who objected most to the corruptions of pilgrimage, nevertheless “embraced biblical precedents like Abraham’s journey, Israel’s Exodus, and the sacred travels of the Magi, giving great exegetical and homiletical attention to the pilgrim psalms 120-134, Christ’s infant journey to Egypt, and New Testament passages like these.”

▶ *Pilgrimage today* “to places like Iona, Taizé, Skellig Michael, Mont St. Michelle, Mount Athos, Assisi, Jerusalem, and Rome...can serve as a unifying commonality among Christians of every denomination and tradition, [which] fosters reconciliation and ecumenism,” George notes. Anyone can practice the discipline of pilgrimage – children seeking to concretize their faith, young people hiking across Europe,



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or adults seeking spiritual renewal. “Those who cannot travel — the elderly, the poor, the hospitalized, or those with physical disabilities” practice pilgrimage by setting the Lord always before them. He explains, “some of the greatest pilgrimages I have ever taken have been in the midnight moments of my life, the hospital moments when I opened up the Bible and traveled to Jericho, where the walls came tumbling down. As an armchair pilgrim, I went to Egypt and saw the Red Sea stand up for God’s people to march through.”

“The discipline of pilgrimage reminds us to slow down and take life one step at a time. It reminds us that life is an emotional, physical, and spiritual journey that requires upward and inward conditioning. It moves us from certainty to dependency, from confidence to brokenness, from assurance in ourselves to faith in God,” George concludes. “A regular diet of spiritual disciplines like pilgrimage can splash our dehydrated Christianity with fresh faith and gives us a greater hunger for the holy.”

### Study Questions

1. According to Christian George, how has the discipline of Christian pilgrimage evolved through the centuries?
2. In what ways can the discipline of pilgrimage be valuable for one’s discipleship today?
3. What destinations for pilgrimage seem most worthwhile to you at this stage of your discipleship?
4. Discuss N. T. Wright’s view that a pilgrimage can be “a metaphor, even a sacrament, for and of the pilgrim’s progress through the present life to the life that is to come.”

### Departing Hymn: “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty —  
hold me with thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,  
feed me till I want no more,  
feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,  
whence the healing stream doth flow;  
let the fire and cloudy pillar  
lead me all my journey through;  
Strong Deliverer, Strong Deliverer,  
be thou still my strength and shield,  
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
bid my anxious fears subside;  
bear me through the swelling current,  
land me safe on Canaan’s side;  
songs of praises, songs of praises  
I will ever give to thee,  
I will ever give to thee.

*William Williams (1745); translated by William Williams and Peter Williams (1771), alt.*

*Tune: CWM RHONDDA*

# The Discipline of Christian Pilgrimage

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Introduce the practice of pilgrimage	Plan a pilgrimage for your group
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To sketch the history of Christian pilgrimage through the centuries.
2. To consider the ways a pilgrimage can be valuable for one's discipleship.
3. To help members plan a pilgrimage that they might take individually, share with family or friends, or share as a group.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Traveling Well (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," locate the tune CWM RHONDDA in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)) or Hymnary.org ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)).

## Begin with a Story

"Pilgrimage runs thickly through my veins," Christian George admits. "My parents named me for a pilgrim—Christian, the main character in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. For years I traveled the world, seeing how God intervened in time and space to accomplish his will through the lives of men and women who took seriously their faith. From monastery to monastery, I traversed the globe, chanting with monks at Taizé, France; climbing the staircase of Skellig Michael, Ireland; and walking up the breezy hills of Iona, Scotland.

"These pilgrimages made the past come alive. I saw the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Germany, where Martin Luther wrestled with Scripture; the Orthodox monastery of Penteli, Greece, where monks taught children to read and write; and the Franciscan monastery of Montelucio in Spoleto, Italy, where Saint Francis fasted and prayed.

"Being a pilgrim gave me a three-dimensional picture of God's interaction in this world. These journeys taught me that Christians were made for motion—progressing in our relationship with Christ, overcoming obstacles that rust our faith, and gaining stamina to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil. Most of all, they showed me that in order best to navigate the future, we need to travel back into the past." (*Traveling Well*, p. 19)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hebrews 11:13-16 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study introduces the discipline of Christian pilgrimage. For some members, this will be an opportunity to recall and share their pilgrimage experiences, and to consider how those travels continue to shape their discipleship. For other members, it will be an occasion to explore a new discipline, weigh its value for their spiritual growth, and discuss concerns they may have about the abuse of pilgrimage.

If the group would like to extend this study, schedule a second session to plan a short pilgrimage event that

your group can share. Eric Howell's *On Pilgrimage in Italy* provides an example of how to plan a pilgrimage, and the resources reviewed in John Gatta's *Toward A Theology of Pilgrimage* will help members choose a destination and prepare spiritually for their travels together.

### **Study Questions**

1. Over the centuries both the destinations and purposes for Christian pilgrimage expanded. In the early centuries Christian pilgrims mainly went to Jerusalem and the Holy Land to experience for themselves the places associated with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

In the medieval era additional destinations became popular – places associated with saints' relics, shrines for martyrs, sites of miraculous healing, and great church buildings with inspiring art and architecture. Motives also expanded during this time to include seeking physical healing for oneself or one's children, doing penance for sin, and gaining indulgences that were thought to reduce after-death punishment. George notes that Protestant leaders like Luther and Calvin strongly criticized such motives for pilgrimage and "posited a grace-based righteousness over against a salvifically meritorious expression of faith." In Protestant countries, opposition to pilgrimage became a badge for protesting the corruptions of the Roman papacy.

Puritan theologians drew on biblical stories to employ pilgrimage as a metaphor for every Christian's walk of discipleship. More recently, advances in travel and increased wealth have made pilgrimage possible for more Christians.

2. Christian George mentions that pilgrimage gives "a three-dimensional picture of God's interaction in this world"; as Eric Howell puts it, "there's nothing like actually being there" in the place where God has acted decisively. Pilgrimage helped George understand Christian life as a journey toward God and with God. Pilgrimage can "foster reconciliation and ecumenism" as it "exposes us to different [Christian] traditions that inform our thinking. Ours becomes a kaleidoscopic Christianity, and we see reality through sacred lenses, lenses that put flesh on faith and bones on Bibles," George adds. Howell emphasizes that pilgrimage can give us "renewed eyes to be happily surprised by God's mysterious presence in all times and places, even at home."

In *The Way of the Lord*, N. T. Wright notes how pilgrims become aware of the brokenness of the world, even in those places where God's actions have been so evident. This increased awareness can foster "a time of real growth and depth in discipleship" and be a "stimulus and an invitation to prayer" (10). Invite members to share the impact that their pilgrimage travels have made on their discipleship.

3. Encourage members to consider a variety of destinations closely associated – through art, architecture, or a saint's life – with God's mission in the world. Some of these may be world-famous and of significance to Christians of many traditions. Others will have local significance (to the Christian mission in your region of the country, to your denomination, etc.). Still other destinations will have personal or family significance (where a family member or loved one was baptized, experienced a call to ministry, was healed, etc.). Ask members to explain why their destination is significant at this stage of their discipleship.

Members might plan a pilgrimage that they can share as a group. Or, they might plan a pilgrimage that they can share with someone who cannot physically travel – for example, through books, documentaries, Internet resources, or personal photos and recollections.

4. The scripture reading and departing hymn use pilgrimage as a metaphor for our life of discipleship. A pilgrimage becomes a sacrament as God uses it to guide, restore, and encourage us in our progress through this life.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.