

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENES THAT GLORIFIES GOD
Devotion in Transition

Introduction

According to a Christianity Today article entitled, “Love Where You Live,” the U.S. Census Bureau reports that Americans today are becoming less mobile, planting their roots and staying where they are for longer. The report indicated in April 2009 that the previous year only 11.9 percent of Americans moved, the lowest in recorded U.S. history.¹ While more Americans than ever are making themselves more permanent homes in their communities, singles are frequently among the number who find within themselves a sense of rootlessness. Not having a nuclear family of their own to belong to, or to care for, singles can struggle with wondering where they do belong, or where their roots are to be placed. Should they also settle down in one community for the long haul, or should they use their singleness as an opportunity to be more mobile than they would be able to if they had the responsibilities of a spouse and children? Maybe the experience being a student and being away from your friends and family has left you feeling disoriented and unsure of yourself and what you should be doing with your time.

If you find yourself struggling with questions like this one because of a sense of rootlessness, our hope is that this study will give you some guidance for how to think about this sense, and the struggle you face because of it, and help you to maximize your life in devotion to Jesus Christ. In this study, we want to answer the question of where, as Christians, our roots truly lie, and what fruit that should bear in our lives in this world.

Your Roots are in Heaven

No longer rootless

In Ephesians 2:19, the apostle Paul tells us where our roots as Christians truly lie. He says, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” The word translated here “aliens,” could also be translated “sojourner,” or “pilgrim.” A pilgrim is a traveler who resides in a place not his home. This is what Paul says we all once were. We were rootless, disconnected, without a home. Because of Christ, however, we are no longer rootless, but we find our roots as members of the Church.

Rooted in Christ

Although we were once rootless, Paul tells us in Philippians 3:20 where our roots have now been planted, when he says, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” According to Paul, our roots as Christians are in heaven. Our roots are where Christ is. Our life “is hidden with Christ in God”, Paul writes, and so our roots are in heaven, where Christ is (Col 3:3). Heaven, not

¹ Collin Hansen, “Love Where You Live.” *Christianity Today*. August 3, 2010.

earth, is where our stability comes from. In Christ, not in earthly families, do we find our true sense of home and belonging. You see, as those who trust in Jesus Christ, we have been united to him. He has taken away our sin, and through union with him by faith we experience all the benefits that come through him. Just as a plant soaks up the nourishment it receives from the ground through its roots, so our faith in Christ and the work he accomplished for us in his death and resurrection gives us access to “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3). Our faith in Christ are the roots that connect us to all that he has accomplished and promised to be for us.

Continued rootlessness

Although we have been given these roots in Christ, in 1 Peter 2:11, we are urged: “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” The word translated here “sojourners,” is the same word translated in Ephesians 2:19 as “aliens”. And so, there’s a sense in which we are no longer pilgrims, and another sense in which we are. As a result of our roots, our ultimate stability, our sense of belonging, being found to lie in heaven, rather than on earth, the Christian remains a pilgrim with respect to this world. Even though our ultimate sense of rootlessness has been removed, our roots have been planted, as it were, in heaven, and so we remain rootless to this present world. We are like our father in the faith, Abraham, of whom Hebrews says: “By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:9-10). Like Abraham, our roots have been planted in the future, with Christ in heaven, and that makes us foreigners in the places we presently live.

So what does all of this mean for singles, or for any of us? In thinking through the struggles relating to this sense of rootlessness that many of us feel, what we need to be reminded of is this: with regard to this world, we *are* rootless. This present world is not our home. We are pilgrims. C.S. Lewis wrote, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”² In other words, because heaven is our true home, we *should* experience a certain degree of alienation from this world. Because our roots are in heaven, we *should* have a sense of rootlessness in our present existence. The deep desire we have for a place to belong—to really, truly belong—should remind us that that place is not here, it is in the future, it is in heaven, where Christ is. So, if you struggle with a sense of rootlessness, don’t seek to entirely remove it. Instead, embrace it. Let that sense of rootlessness remind you that your roots are not planted primarily in this world, but in another. Your stability, comfort, and community are all found ultimately in Jesus Christ, and you will experience these things in their fullness only when Christ returns, or when you end your earthly pilgrimage upon death.

² C.S. Lewis,

Bear Fruit in this World

Theologian John Zizioulas sums up what we've been observing when he writes that the "ecclesial identity...has its roots in the future and its branches in the present."³ While our roots are with Christ in heaven, the fruit that results is grown in this present world. To switch back to the other metaphor, although our true home is heaven, we still must make use of temporary dwellings on earth. In Jeremiah 29, God speaks through the prophet to the exiled people of Jerusalem, and he tells them, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:5, 7). Though the people of Israel were pilgrims in a land not their own, they were nevertheless called to involve themselves in that land, to bear fruit in it, both for the good of the city and for their own good.

In the New Testament, Christians are also called to seek the good of the communities in which they live. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." In Galatians 6:10 he tells us, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." And, finally, in Colossians 3:23-24, Paul connects this fruit we are to bear with the hope that we have in heaven, when he writes, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ." To return to the agricultural metaphor, then, as Christians, our roots are in Christ and his promise of an inheritance for us, but the fruit we bear in this world is seen in what we do with our temporary residence. Having our roots in heaven with Christ gives us a sort of flexibility with respect to this world, enabling us to embrace both mobility and stability for the sake of the gospel's advance. In bearing fruit in our world, we are able, and called, to think creatively how we can be both mobile and stable, in different ways, out of our devotion to Christ.

Godly mobility

So, if our roots are truly found in Christ in heaven, what sort of mobility should characterize our lives on earth? One of the marks of a Christian who is finding their roots in heaven is that they are willing to suffer for the sake of Christ. Mobility often can entail discomfort. It is instable, and would usually be rejected in favor of a more stable life of ease. A great example of the sort of mobility that should mark our lives as Christians can be seen in Hudson Taylor, the pioneer missionary to inland China in the late nineteenth century. In Hudson Taylor's desire to see the people of China embrace Jesus as their Savior, he left the place that was familiar to him, and went to a place that was very unfamiliar. During his years in China, Hudson also endured the deaths of a daughter, two sons, a pair of stillborn twins, and the death of his wife, and yet he continued the work God had called him to. How in the world could Hudson Taylor have suffered so much, if he was looking for the roots of his soul to be supplied with nourishment from anywhere

³ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*. Page 59.

but in heaven with Christ? His rootedness in Christ allowed Hudson to bear the fruit of mobility, to be flexible and to see even his own family members as temporary gifts of God, to be enjoyed and loved, but surrendered ultimately to him.

There are various ways in which we can see the fruit of mobility in our own lives also, even if we are not called to foreign missions work. Think, for example, of the man or woman serving in the military. A calling that often requires a lot of relocating from one location to another can be sustained by the believer who has his or her roots firmly planted in Jesus. A truck driver or business person who finds him or herself traveling frequently can also endure that sort of mobility because of an awareness of where their roots truly lie. Think also of those who are called to be students for a number of years. Moving from your home to another state or country in order to pursue the degree or profession God has called you to can be the fruit of having your roots planted in your true home, your heavenly country.

Worldly mobility

Mobility can be a sign that you have found your roots in Christ rather than in this world, but it is also possible that mobility can indicate that your roots are in this world, rather than in Christ. Jonah's flight to Tarshish was a sign he was running from God, rather than being willing to suffer for him by going to Ninevah. He was willing to be mobile and leave his home, but only on his own terms. In 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul writes of Demas, who, "in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Demas' mobility was not a result of having his roots planted in Christ, but as result of having them planted in this world. His mobility indicated that he thought this world was his home. He forgot he was a pilgrim.

So what mobility, or instability, do you see in your life that may be a result of having your roots too planted in this world? Do you make changes in your life that betray that you think this world is your true home? One of the questions you should ask yourself to judge whether your mobility is a godly or a worldly mobility is this: Can I do this, or make this change, even while deeply trusting that my life is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3)? Or ask this question: Is my mobility motivated by a desire to love and serve others, or a desire to serve myself? This is perhaps the best way to decide whether your mobility is godly or worldly. For Demas, his mobility in leaving Paul was not motivated by love, for otherwise he would have stayed. 1 Timothy 1:5 says, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." So ask yourself, when facing a difficult decision, "is this decision motivated by love?" The heart of one whose roots are planted in Christ desires to be a blessing to others; to help and serve others, wherever they are, and so the judge of whether your mobility is a godly mobility is whether it is driven by this heart of love.

Godly stability

The fruit of godly stability in a believer's life relates to godly mobility as the other side of the same coin of having one's roots planted in Christ. Think about it,

Hudson Taylor's mobility in leaving England for China would not have been as admirable had he not been willing to also plant himself there for the next 51 years like he did. Taylor bore the fruit of mobility, but he also evidence fruit of stability for the sake of Christ. There is a sort of stability that is needed by Christians called to missions work overseas, that is willing to endure the discomfort not only of being mobile and leaving one's home, but in also enduring the discomfort of remaining in that place for a longer length of time.

In the Christianity Today article noted above, Collin Hansen explains the struggle of one church in the city of Chicago that finds its most active young members frequently relocating away from the city, when attention is turned to raising a family. Hansen quotes a pastor of that church, who says, "A city gets transformed when neighborhoods marked by the gospel are redeemed," Kerr says. "To do that, we need to stay 20 or 30 years. We need young people who will say, 'Chicago is my city.'"⁴ The kind of stability that should mark the life of a Christian, whose roots are planted in Christ, is the kind of stability that is willing to stay put in a city if that is what will be most effective in advancing the gospel.

Are you aware of areas in your life where stability, rather than mobility, will be the most fitting fruit of your devotion to Christ? One area of stability that should mark the life of every Christian is the stability that is seen in being grounded in God's Word. Are you rooted in the Bible? Do you plant yourself in it every day, seeking to resupply your roots with Christ's nourishment through it? Psalm 1 says that the person who meditates on God's Word will be "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Ps 1:3). It is reading and thinking about God's Word that we remember where our roots truly lie, and so we must seek to establish stability in our lives of reading the Bible. For some, Bible reading plans are helpful ways of getting more stable in their time in the Word. For others, having a devotional to accompany their reading of God's Word is a helpful tool to keep them getting back into it each new day or night. Whatever is the most helpful for you, do it. Cultivate a stable, disciplined approach to God's Word.

You may also want to ask yourself what your involvement in the body of Christ looks like. For many, but perhaps especially for students, who find themselves in a place of transition where they may spend half their time in one place and half their time in another when school begins, the stability of regular participation in a church can often be neglected. One of the ways that finding your roots in Christ should manifest itself is in developing a stability with respect to church involvement. Do you drift from one church to the next, without settling down and making a church your own? Don't church-hop. Find a church, and then commit yourself there, being a blessing to those who are there, while also letting them bless you. Again, the criterion to help us in decisions of whether to move or stay is this: Is this motivated by a heart of love for others and faith rooted in Christ?

Worldly Stability

⁴ Collin Hansen, "Love Where You Live." *Christianity Today*. August 3, 2010.

But what sign is there that your stability may not be motivated by love, or rooted in Christ by faith? Stability that is not rooted in Christ is rooted in the world. The most obvious sign that we have a worldly stability then, is that we bear the fruit of the world, rather than of Christ. After exhorting us to remember that we are pilgrims in this world, Peter urges us, “abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Pet 2:11). Are you regularly giving in to impulses you have to behave in ways that are sinful? That’s a sign you are planting your roots in this world, rather than in Christ. You are becoming stable, at home, in this world, instead of the one you really belong to. If you find yourself becoming stable and comfortable in this world, remember—your roots to this world have been cut, and have been planted with Christ in heaven. So bear fruit in keeping with where your roots truly lie.

Conclusion

The experience of feeling rootless and disconnected is a common one, but one that many singles can relate to. How to be devoted to Christ in the midst of this feeling, and especially in the midst of difficult decisions as a result of being in transition, can be helped by a reminder of where our roots truly lie. Remembering that we are united to Christ, and so our home is in heaven with him, is the ultimate guide for discerning when, and in what ways, mobility or stability are the best options for us. Only when our hope is firmly rooted in Christ can we navigate the difficult waters of life and decision-making, being guided by devotion to Christ and love for others.