

February 21

"And the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way". — Numbers 21:4.

The people of God are held forth under various characters in the Scriptures, and no one of them all is more common, more just, more pleasing, more instructive, than the image of strangers and pilgrims upon earth. And who knows not what a beautiful use Bunyan has made of it — "Ingenious dreamer, in whose well-told tale Sweet fiction and sweet truth alike prevail.

—— whose PILGRIM marks the road,
And guides the progress of the soul to God."

But what is there in the way to discourage the soul of the travellers heaven-ward? Much. Sometimes they are affected by the length of the way; for hope deferred maketh the heart sick. This was the case with Israel at this time; for instead of passing through the land of Edom, they had to fetch a compass all around the borders, and all this in a wilderness too, and under a burning sky. If a traveller, after supposing he was near his journey's end, was to learn that it was yet many miles off, all worn and weary, his heart would be ready to faint, and utter the cry of despondence, "I shall never reach it!" What Isaiah says, "They shall behold the land that is very far off," may be applied to the experience of Christians with regard to heaven. It is often remote in fact, that is, it is frequently long before they arrive there; for they are not removed hence, as soon as they are converted, but detained here, to be made meet for their destination, to honour their Redeemer, and to serve their generation. Hence many of them are longer on earth after they are called by grace, than the Jews wandered in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. But we refer to the slowness of their progress, the smallness of their attainments, and the nature of their apprehensions. "Once," says the soul, "I was ready to seize the blessing; but now it seems to recede as I advance, yea, the distance between me and the attainment seems to increase daily." "How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord; for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?" How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? "My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning." "O when will it dawn; when wilt thou come unto me?"

Sometimes they are discouraged because of the way, owing to the enemies that infest it. In the re-building of the second temple, we are told, that every man with one hand wrought in the work, and with the other held a weapon; this was sore labour. And the Christian's life is a warfare, as well as a pilgrimage; he moves on, bearing his sword, as well as his staff. Now to walk and fight too, and to contend every step of the way, and with adversaries possessing every thing to render them formidable; and as soon as one is vanquished, to see another rising up — this is arduous and trying. And what wonder, if, when without are fightings, within are fears?

Then the way shows many that are turning back in it, and this is often discouraging. We had heard of their setting off. Some of them had passed us near enough to be observed. They soon left us, seeming to surpass us, not only in gifts, but grace; and we not only hailed, but envied them. How wonderful and grievous to see them returning — vicious, or infidel, or lovers of this present world. We instantly remember, and apply to them the awful declaration, "If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him." But who can help thinking of himself? And what am I? And may not I also prove a cast-away?

Besides, these revolters never come back silent. They solicit us to return too. They assure us the way is impassable. They have tried it, and hope their experience will make us wise. Once they thought certain notions to be erroneous, and certain indulgences to be sinful; but they are more enlightened and liberal now. Such persons, too, never subside into neutrals. From friends they necessarily become enemies. They persecute, if it lies in their power. They always reproach and vilify, even in their own defence — defaming the party and the cause to justify their secession from them.

It is often discouraging, also, to find the way so narrow: "Narrow is the way that leadeth unto life." The difficulty, therefore, of getting on, is great. A way is made narrow by the near approximation of the sides, whether walls, ditches, or hedges, so that we have to press through; and can hardly do it without some injury on the right hand or on the left. In the exercise of every grace, and the performance of every duty, a Christian has to keep between two extremes. As to the use of the means of grace, he must neither neglect them nor idolize them. As to connexions and relations in life, he may sin by not loving them enough, or by loving them too much. Courage lies between rashness and fear; and frugality, between profusion and niggardliness; and confidence, between presumption and despondency; and patience, between despising the chastening of the Lord, and fainting when we are rebuked of him. And is it easy always to go, not only in the way of righteousness, but in the midst of the paths of judgment?

So far, generally, of the road. But there are particular parts that are peculiarly trying: such as the Slough of Despond, the Valley of Humiliation, the Hill Difficulty with the lions, and the deep cold River to be waded through, before the Shining City can be entered. A Christian knows what all this means, and sometimes finds it hard to believe that the way to glory lies through it all.

Am I then setting out for the heavenly world? Let me not prepare myself for surprise and disappointment, by expecting that every thing will be smooth, and flowery, and delightful. I cannot, indeed, look for too much from the promises of God,

they are so exceeding great and precious; but I must look for it in God's own order. I must deny myself, and take up my cross. I must not be slothful, but be a follower of them, who through faith and patience have reached the prize of their high calling.

Have I professed, and hoped that I am a Christian? Let me not conclude that I have no part nor lot in the matter, because my soul is sometimes cast down and disquieted within me. Have not those who have gone before me wept and groaned also? Are not the subjects of divine grace represented by their fear, as well as their confidence; by their sorrow, as well as their joy?

Yet let me endeavour to go on rejoicing. Let me remember, that there is much to encourage me because of the way: an unerring guide — an almighty guard — companions — strength to hold on, refreshments along the road; and the end of it perfect rest and peace and glory and joy. "Our journey is a thorny maze,
But we march upward still;
Forget these troubles of the way,
And reach at Zion's hill.

See the kind angels at the gates
Inviting us to come:
There Jesus, the forerunner, waits
To welcome travellers home.

There on a green and flowery mount
Our weary souls shall sit,
And with transporting joys recount
The labours of our feet."

Morning Exercises For Everyday In The Year
By Rev. William Jay