

THE WAY OF HOLINESS

In this life, it is easy for the Christian to be discouraged. Discouraged at his own sin, and at the sin of those around him. It is easy for him to think, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." (Isaiah 6:5)

John Bunyan depicts the life of the Christian in his classic literary work, *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the story, the main character, Christian, leaves the City of Destruction for the Celestial City. It is an arduous and perilous journey, and Christian may never wander from the path, lest he perish in the way. Some time in their journey, Christian and his companion, Hopeful, leave their difficult path for the easier By-Pass Meadow. They must spend the night in the Meadow, and the next day the Giant Despair, who owns it, captures them, and places them in the dungeon of his Doubting Castle. After much suffering, Christian despairs of life. His friend, Hopeful, however, encourages him, by reminding him of passing through other trials. After much prayer, Christian remembers something, and he says to Hopeful, "What a fool am I, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key in my bosom called Promise; that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle." True enough, the key opened all the doors, and enabled the two to make their escape; and so they returned to their path. Bunyan's depiction of the Christian life as a journey along a path is a brilliant one, yet he did not create the metaphor. Rather, he got it from the Scriptures. The Scriptures in many places depict the life of God's people as that of pilgrims, walking a righteous path through hills and valleys.

The prophet Isaiah, after prophesying the destruction of the nations, also prophesies the renewal of God's people. He said, The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the LORD, *and* the excellency of our God. Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them *that are* of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come *with* vengeance, *even* God *with* a recompence; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame *man* leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water: in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, *shall be* grass with reeds and rushes. And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it *shall be* for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err *therein*. No lion shall be there, nor *any* ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk *there*: And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isaiah 35:1-10)

Isaiah here depicts the world as a moral wasteland, void of any virtue. In this world, God's enemies oppress His people. It will not last, however. God promises His people that the world's morally deserted condition will change. It will blossom anew. It will have the beauty of Carmel, the majesty of Lebanon, and the fertility of Sharon. God will be glorified in the world. Those who are fearful and doubting should have reason to be encouraged.

In Isaiah's prophecy, God promised that He would bring new life to the world: the blind will see, and the deaf will hear. The lame man will not merely walk; he will leap. The dumb man will not merely speak, he will sing. It will be like water in the desert. God will transform the wilderness. He will change the world. He will change it from a moral wasteland, to a glorious moral garden.

How does God accomplish this? He accomplishes it through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who fulfills this prophecy. He came to heal the world, to renew it, to rejuvenate it. When He began His earthly ministry, He read out in the synagogue from another passage of Isaiah's prophecy: "because the LORD hath

anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *them that are bound*.” (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:16-20) He then told the congregation, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” Matthew 9:32, 34) During his earthly ministry, He continued these gracious, healing acts. Saint Mark tells us, “And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech him to put his hand upon him. And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain. And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published *it*; And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.” (Mark 7:32-37)

This physical healing is not God’s primary concern, however. No, God’s primary concern is spiritual. These physical healings are good in themselves, but they stand for something greater. Isaiah says, “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.” Saint Paul is a perfect example. He opposed Jesus, and persecuted His body the Church, imprisoning Christians, and putting them to death. In all this, he believed he was doing God a favor. (John 16:2) He had not eyes to see the truth, although it was staring him in the face. So, Jesus revealed himself to Saint Paul, and the revelation blinded his physical eyes, as symbolic of his spiritual blindness. Later, God healed him, and gave him back his sight, as symbolic of his new spiritual understanding.

Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, said, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide *is* the gate, and broad *is* the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait *is* the gate, and narrow *is* the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” (Matthew 7:13, 14) Saint John wrote in the Revelation, “And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither *whatsoever* worketh abomination, or *maketh* a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.” (Revelation 21:27) The highway we walk on this earth is a spiritual path that leads to a heavenly Jerusalem, a city where God dwells. The path is narrow, and we must turn not to the right nor to the left. The gates open not simply to anyone, but to Jesus’ disciples alone.