

Pilgrim's Progress (11) – The Delectable Mountains

Isaiah 33:15-17

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Now turn with me, if you would, to the prophecy of Isaiah.

Isaiah 33 is like a psalm — it feels like a psalm, it reads like a psalm. It's a depiction of the judgment that will befall Assyria, who at this point in Judah's history is their most inveterate enemy, and the prophet is foreseeing a day when Assyria will be no more, when sin will be utterly banished from Judah, and from Zion and from Jerusalem.

There's something of an idealism that comes as the prophet begins to glimpse the future, and what seems to be taking place here is typical of what many of the prophets do from time to time (and we give it a very technical name: we call it *prophetic foreshortening*). It's like when you're standing at a distance from two mountains. They look as though they're on top of each other, but when you drive or walk up to those mountains you see that they're separated by a great gulf. And the prophet is foreseeing the coming of the days of Messiah, but he's seeing beyond that; he's seeing actually the new heavens and the new earth. So, it's a little glimpse of heaven brought about by the ministry of Messiah that Isaiah is talking about.

Now before we read the passage together (and I'm going to read verses 15-17), let's come before God in prayer. Let's pray.

Gracious God, again we bow in Your presence. We are a needy people. We feel it in particular this week as we have been somewhat ravaged by all of the news; and we get weary of it, the brutality of it, the realization that this is indeed not the heavenly city after all. This is a sinful, sin-cursed world in which we live, and we pray now for that comfort of the Scriptures. Bring it home to our hearts. Give us now a moment of respite from the burdensomeness of the world, and grant, O gracious God, that You would draw near to us, and that we might be enabled to draw near to You, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hear the word of God in Isaiah, chapter 33, and beginning at verse 15:

He who walks righteously, and speaks with sincerity,
He who rejects unjust gain,
And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe;
He who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed,
And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil,
He will dwell on the heights;
His refuge will be the impregnable rock;
His bread will be given him;
His water will be sure.
Your eyes will see the King in His beauty;
They will behold a far-distant land.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His word.

And you will appreciate immediately you look at the title of the sermon, and as you will remember, we're looking at *Pilgrim's Progress*. We're almost at the end of the journey. There's one more stop that we need to make, and that of course will be Heaven and we'll reach the end of *Pilgrim's Progress*. But tonight we're in the Delectable Mountains.

I was thinking this week, and particularly this afternoon, what in the world are we doing? When I'm sure CNN and Fox and CBS and all the other news channels are just information overload on all of the ravages of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath...and here we are — typical of evangelical Christians with their heads in the clouds — thinking about heaven and ignoring the plight of the world! Well, we need a glimpse of heaven. Every now and then, for us to be of any earthly good, we need our heads in the clouds because we need to know where it is we are truly going. And we need to be reminded that this world is not our home, and that here we have no continuing city; that here moth and rust doth corrupt, and that we see all around us the effects of the curse of a fallen world and cosmos.

And so tonight we want to catch up with Christian and Hopeful as they climb mountains. Two of these mountains are going to be distressing, but one — one is going to be a wonderful, wonderful time.

Now, you remember Hopeful and Christian have spent some time in Doubting Castle, the Castle of Giant Despair and his wife Diffidence — something you remember which Bunyan deliberately set as having taken place from Wednesday morning until midnight on Saturday. And we remember that Christian eventually (remember?), after descending into the very depths of despair -even to the point at one moment of thinking of taking his own life, he was in such despair - he puts his hand in his pocket, you remember, and discovers a key called Promise. And he discovers that key as a result of Prayer. It was Prayer that led him to put his hand in his pocket and discover the sweet Promise of God.

“Have we trials and temptations?”

Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.”

Why does Bunyan tell us that it took place from Wednesday morning to Saturday evening? Well, one of the reasons is because he wants to have Hopeful and Christian sing this wonderful song that they sing upon their release at midnight, probably because we think of Paul and Silas at midnight in the Philippian jail, and God coming in His sovereignty and providential intervention and enabling their release. But, more than that, for the very obvious reason that the next day is going to be the Lord's Day. And if you remember this is John Bunyan who's writing this, the Lord's Day is going to be of enormous significance to John Bunyan as a Puritan. We'll come to that in a minute.

Christian and Hopeful escape from the Dungeons of Doubting Castle and they traverse the Stile that they should never have gone across in the first place, and then they erect a Pillar, a monument, to warn fellow travelers not to go down this path.

Then they go on their way and they're singing as they go, and they come to a region that they had glimpsed before, back when they were in the Palace Beautiful. They glimpsed a place in the distance called Delectable Mountains. (There's a very marvelous piece of music written by Ralph Vaughn Williams called *The Delectable Mountains*, based indeed on this...it lasts about twenty minutes, if you're interested in searching after that.) But Bunyan has introduced us to the Delectable Mountains.

I saw in my dream that on the morrow he got up to go forward [this was back in Palace Beautiful], but they desired him to stay until the next day also. And then, said they, we will, if the day be clear, show you the Delectable Mountains, which, they said, would yet further add to his comfort. So he consented and stayed.

“When the morning was up, they had him to the top of the house and bid him look South. So he did. And behold, at a great distance he saw a most pleasant mountainous country, beautified with Woods and Vineyards and Fruits of all sorts, and Flowers; also with Springs and Fountains, very delectable to behold. And then he asked the name of the country, and they said it was Emmanuel's Land. And when thou comest there from thence, said they, thou mayest see to the Gate of the Celestial City.

When he gets to these Delectable Mountains, he will be able to see the very Gate of the Celestial City. Now, these Delectable Mountains are once again described in this agricultural and garden imagery (reminiscent, of course, of the Garden of Eden), and very reminiscent of the way the Book of Revelation begins to describe the new heavens and the new earth — gardens and orchards and

vineyards, and fountains of water — and on the top of the mountains they encounter Shepherds, four of them: Knowledge, Experience, Watchful, and Sincere.

Now who are they? Who are these four Shepherds? What does this place represent in Bunyan's allegory? Now, some have suggested that what Bunyan is trying to describe here is something which mature Christians from time to time experience, namely, experiences of glory — visions of the coming kingdom in all of its beauty, a sight of the Savior in all of His attractiveness, a little foretaste of that which is to come.

Now Rosemary and myself were in the Swiss Alps back—oh, it feels like a year ago now, but it was probably just a couple of months ago—and we went on a beautiful Sunday when there were absolutely no clouds whatsoever in the skies. Took a train, and up the Mountain of Jungfrau, all 10,000-11,000 feet of it, through the mountain for about 45 minutes, and emerged on the very top of the Jungfrau with snow everywhere! As you were sweltering in the Mississippi heat and I was there...on the Lord's work, you understand; somebody has to do these things...the picture...I took the picture as we emerged from this train, and there before me were the very top of Europe, the very top of the Swiss Alps in all their grandeur and majesty...and the vision! The air was clear and the vision was great!

And Bunyan is saying sometimes in our spiritual experience we get moments like that...we get days like that. And sometimes it happens on the Lord's Day. It happens when you're reading the word, and you're listening to the word being expounded in the company of God's people in this extraordinary provision that God has made for us.

Now there are several important lessons to learn, and I want to think about four of them.

I. The pattern of the Lord's Day.

The first of them is this: the pattern of the Lord's Day. It seems to me that we need to pause for a moment and catch this reference that Bunyan seems to be making. The importance of this pattern of one day in seven that's different from all of the rest — a day that we gather together for the worship of God; the Lord's Day of the new covenant, following as it does the pattern of the Sabbath, a cycle of one day in seven — not six followed by one, but one followed by six — because in the new covenant there is something now that is fulfilled and something that is complete, and something of enormously climactic significance about the Lord's Day.

In Exodus 31, Moses refers to the Sabbath as a sign and seal of God's covenant

just as baptism, just as the Lord's Supper, just as Passover, just as circumcision and all these things were signs and seals of God's covenant. So the Lord's Day, the Sabbath day of the old covenant, was a sign and seal of God's covenant.

And here is Bunyan saying through this allegory something that's surely a biblical truth and a biblical pattern for us: How sweet a thing it is for us to gather together on the Lord's Day; that the Lord's Day is something to be enjoyed; that there are to be moments of enormous pleasure, of spiritual insight, when we gather together on the Lord's Day. It is, as one RUF minister once said in this church — I think it was Men of the Covenant meeting that he was speaking at — “It is the WalMart of God.” You know WalMart. You go into WalMart and you discover something that you never knew you needed! You walk around, and you say ‘I need that!’ And the Lord's Day is like that. God shows us and gives to us, and provides for us, and encourages us, and motivates us, and challenges us. We sing that song after the RUF tune very frequently here in the church, *O Day of Rest and Gladness*. It's a day of rest, but it's a day of great gladness, and Bunyan, I think, here seems to be wanting us to see that. This is indeed a day of gladness.

II. The provision of godly elders.

And the second thing is the provision of godly elders. Yes, these Shepherds — four of them — Knowledge, Experience, Watchful, and Sincere. And Bunyan describes these Shepherds as feeding their flocks. There are many terms in the New Testament for an elder, and one of them is for a shepherd, or a *poimen* in Greek, and there is a *presbuteros* or a presbyter, and another is *episcopas*, or a bishop. And here is Bunyan saying one of the great provisions of God is the provision of shepherds, shepherds who care for the sheep, shepherds who are prepared even to lay down their lives on behalf of their sheep.

I still remember my late father in winter evenings, in the bleak midwinter of Wales when the snow was coming down and the sheep were giving birth to their lambs in January instead of April...and if you don't understand why, then I'll tell you afterwards, but it was to do with rams breaking out too early and so on...and we needn't go into that now...it was the sheep giving birth to their lambs in the middle of the snow, and I still have this vision of my father with his huge coat on, with the snow blowing in his face, and carrying lambs in his great coat, and sometimes just a little face popping out here.

Here is Bunyan giving us a glimpse of the provision of godly elders. Be careful, pay careful attention, Paul says in his farewell words to the elders at Ephesus, pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for, to shepherd the church of God which He obtained with His own blood.

III. The perseverance of the saints.

And then a third thing that Bunyan seems to be teaching here. Not only the pattern of the Lord's Day and the provision of godly elders, but the perseverance of the saints...the perseverance of the saints.

Christian and Hopeful find themselves near themselves near three Hills, two of which are warnings of danger. Have you noticed as you've been reading and reminding yourselves of *Pilgrim's Progress* this summer how many times Bunyan will give warnings of danger? Every other page, it seems, Bunyan is warning about dangers: that the Christian life is arduous and stressful, and there are all kinds of enemies — the world, the flesh, and the devil — seeking to bring us down. And even now within sight of Beulah Land there are more dangers to come before they will get to Beulah Land, and even on the very edge of entering into Beulah Land there will be another considerable danger crossing the river that gets into Beulah Land.

Now, the first Hill is called Error, and it's brought about the death — this hill brought about the death of Hymeneus and Philetus, a reference, of course, to the second chapter of Second Timothy, Hymeneus and Philetus. Their teaching "...will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymeneus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth." And here is this sad sight within sight of Beulah Land of those who have wandered away from the truth, and Christian and Hopeful are being warned about wandering away from the truth. And this hill of Error slopes up innocently enough, but on the other side there is a precipice, down which you fall into a very considerable Well.

Now, another Hill is called Caution, and Christian and Hopeful can see men blinded by Giant Despair wandering among the tombs. And the pilgrims look at each other and weep for the sadness of it. And then the Shepherds show them a door in the side of the Hill, from which they can hear the cries of torments and the smell of brimstone, and "This is a by-way to Hell, a way that Hypocrites go in." What's Bunyan saying? He's saying...is he denying that God's true people will get eventually to Heaven? No, he's not. But he is saying that it's possible to profess to be a child of God, that it's all too possible to say that you are a Christian and even to convince others that you are a Christian, but in actual fact you are a Hypocrite; and so strive to make your calling and election sure. Persevere in the means of grace, Bunyan is saying through this allegory.

IV. The future.

And then a fourth thing, and it's the main thing, and it's what I want you to go home with. It's what I want to give you as a way of preparing for yet another week for probably difficult and burdensome news, and that is a prospect of what is to

come...the prospect of what is to come.

Christian and Hopeful come near now to the foothills of the Delectable Mountains, and they come to a ridge called Clear. And from that ridge they can see, with the help of what Bunyan calls Perspective Glasses — binoculars — something like the Gate, and also some of the glory of the place. Now, you understand, they're not in Heaven yet. They're on the Delectable Mountains, and they're on a ridge called Clear, and they can see in the distance something that looks like the Gate of Emmanuel's Land, the Gate of the Celestial City itself, and something of the Glory shines forth from it.

It's the vision Isaiah is depicting way back in the seventh century B.C., as he's contemplating the ravages of Assyrian forces and what they've done to the capitol city, and what they will do to the capitol city of Jerusalem, and what the Babylonians will do after that...and glimpsing now in the future a day when all of this will be reversed and the city will be rebuilt. And he's not thinking of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus so much: he's thinking of something so much more than that. He's thinking in ideal terms: when sin will be no more, when glory will shine in all of its majesty and greatness.

Now, the truth is that there is more danger ahead for Christian and Hopeful before they get to this place. But Bunyan is saying that every now and then, sometimes when we read our Bibles early in the morning and engage in a sweet time of prayer and fellowship with the Lord, sometimes when we're listening to a sermon, sometimes when it's listening to How Great Thou Art or Great Is Thy Faithfulness — we're singing one of the familiar songs of Zion, and it all comes flooding to us, and we catch, as it were, a glimpse now.....

We've seen this week glimpses of the earthly city in all of its ugliness: its brutality, the ravages of sin, the ugly truth that this is not heaven. This is not heaven. This is the fallen world, this is the world that's cursed by God, and moth and rust corrupt and ravage and cause decay.

And Bunyan is drawing, I think, on the experience of Moses. You remember when he went to the top of Mount Pisgah, he viewed...he caught a glimpse of the promised land. I want you tonight to pray to God that He will give you a glimpse of the promised land amidst all of the things that you have to do and all of the things that you want to do, and all of the realities and the brutalities of what's facing a lot of people and a lot of the Lord's people.

Some of you dear people here tonight perhaps are from the coast; you've come here to take refuge by the provision and kindness and Southern hospitality of friends and neighbors here. I was speaking to many such folk this morning. And oh! that God would give to you tonight, especially to you, that He would lift you up in spirit and place you on the Delectable Mountains on that ridge called Clear, and that you would catch a little glimpse of the Gate of the Celestial City, and

something of the glory that emanates from that City, to motivate you, to energize you, to strengthen you, to remind you and me that we are pilgrims on our way to the Celestial City.

We're not going to be here forever. Our life is 'three-score years and ten, and if by reason of strength, maybe four-score years; yet is their strength weariness and trial.' And some of you know that all too well. And Bunyan is saying, 'Can you think of some blessed hour when the Lord met with you on the Delectable Mountains, where your soul was lifted and your eye beheld something of what God was preparing for you?'

Maybe everything is falling apart all around you. It may be a family in turmoil; maybe you've lost your job. Maybe your home has been ravaged by a tree that's fallen on it. And oh! can I say it? Without in any way meaning to be disrespectful or insensitive, maybe you've lost everything...you've lost everything. I've been trying to think about that this week. What does it feel like to lose everything? My CD's...what would I do? Photographs...the bits of furniture that have been handed down from generation to generation to generation...the things of enormous sentimental value... I can't begin to imagine what that's like. And I'm saying the only thing — the only thing — that can fill that void is a little glimpse of the glory to which God is calling you.

If God has weaned you away from the attachments that we all have to the things of this world, if this is what it's done — to wean us away from the things of this world in order that we might catch a glimpse of glory — then perhaps it begins to make just a little bit of sense...just a little bit of sense.

Yes, there are Hills of Difficulty and there are Valleys of Humiliation, and there are Vales of the Shadow of Death, and there is Vanity Fair, and Castles of Despair, and all of these are to be traversed. But there are also, from time to time, Delectable Mountains. Thank God. Thank God that from time to time there are Delectable Mountains where, on a clear day, you can just about see something of the Gate and some of the glory of the place. And may God fill our hearts with it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, as we bring to a close our worship together in the Lord's house on the Lord's Day, we thank You for the little glimpses that You give us of glory; that here we have no continuing city. And be pleased now, we pray... [tape ends]

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