**The Hill Difficulty**

Decisions! Decisions! Decisions! … There were three possible ways stretching out before them as the three men, - Christian, Formalist, and Hypocrisy, - continued on their journey. In front of them there was a steep path that led up the Hill Difficulty. Also, to the right there was another path, and one more to the left.

The Hill Difficulty seemed to be quite obviously the best route to take, but it wasn’t called the ‘Hill Difficulty’ for nothing! It would sorely test any faithful pilgrim. It called for patience and perseverance. It represented all kinds of trials and distresses that taking the other two paths might initially avoid. However, the Hill Difficulty was a necessary prerequisite to succeed further along the road to the Celestial City.

Christian has already been through the Slough of Despond, and he has also faced other great threats to his faith, so he is not afraid of this latest challenge. He has been to the foot of the cross, where he left his burden … and now he comes to drink from the spring, and he was determined by God’s help to climb that hill … no matter how difficult! He had ‘put his hand to the plough’, and he wasn’t for turning back! He is refreshed as he drinks from the pure waters and he trusts in the promise, **Is. 49:10** They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. **11** And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted. In his mind and heart, Christian concluded, “Better, though difficult, the right way to go, Than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe”.

Formalist and Hypocrisy, though, had a completely different opinion. They saw other options … other courses open to them, and they concluded there must be an equally good and much easier route to take. The hill is far too steep and far too high … and surely at least one of the two options before them might possibly, - maybe even probably, - get them to the same place, without too much effort. And, even though they didn’t know for sure … they went on nevertheless. One of them went along the way called “Danger” … and you can be very sure the road sign wouldn’t have been very prominent. The route would have looked promising and attractive … but it wouldn’t have been until further on down the road that the danger was **really** apparent … too late to turn back though. It led into a great wood where there lurked all kinds of dangers.

Notice how the other road is described, “the other took directly up the way to Destruction”. It was uphill. It looked more like the real thing … There would have been a certain level of ‘difficulty’, - but nothing like the Hill Difficulty. …
But, at least, the travellers on this particular path could initially boast a little about what they would face. This particular path led into a vast open area, in the shadow of the dark mountains. While walking through the area, this traveller stumbled and fell, never to rise again.

No matter whether we like it or not, every person who comes into this world is on a journey. There is a direction for everyone to take ... and there is only one of two destinations we shall eventually reach. There is, of course, only one way that leads to Heaven ... but it doesn’t hinder those who choose to travel in other different directions. ... When you speak to people who are not willing to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord, many of them will openly tell you they are hoping to get to Heaven by another means, - another path ... less stressful, less demanding ... and far more appealing.

Like Formalist, many of them have a religion of convenience, - a religious conscience that suits their lifestyle and agenda. ... And as Formalist and Hypocrisy embarked upon those paths that twisted and turned along the bottom of the hill ... they genuinely expected to meet Christian again, after he had conquered the Hill Difficulty.

We remember, of course, these two characters came onto the way by doubtful means. Rather than coming through the gate, - the proper and only means of true entrance, - they climbed over the wall for it was far handier, and less bother! ... And the person who starts on the Christian life looking for an easy journey will soon give up for they don’t have the patience and the tenacity to keep going on.

There is nothing made easy about becoming a Christian, - it takes determination to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved ... and it takes more than any determination we can muster, for we only become able to believe as a gift of God determinate grace. And because God’s grace was at work in Christian’s life, it was Christian’s purpose to conquer the Hill Difficulty in order to reach the other side ... where he would be so much closer to his destination. Yes, there is only one way for the child of God to be confident in our faith and that comes from the promise, that he/she that endureth to the end shall be saved (Mk. 13:13).

One evening, as a church member was leaving the service, this person said to me, “Am I really saved?” ... What a question to ask if you profess faith in Christ! You can take the road that leads round to the right-hand-side of the ‘hill’, or you can take the other road that leads round to the left-hand-side ...
but neither road will lead to anywhere other than Destruction and Danger. The journey required Christian to take the path whereby he must conquer the Hill Difficulty … and he was determined to do just that!

Did you notice who didn’t drink from the spring at the foot of the hill? Formalist and Hypocrisy didn’t kneel and drink. Jeremiah cried, 17:13 O LORD, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters. … Both Formalist and Hypocrisy decided to move on in their own strength! How sad when professing Christians decide to move on in their own strength alone. They see no need to attend the place where God’s people meet for prayer and Bible study … How sad when they neglect their own quiet times before the Lord … How sad when they deny the place of priority to the Lord Who sought them and bought them with the precious blood of His only-begotten Son! … God never blesses or rewards those who disregard His honour.

Christian, though, knelt down at the spring and refreshed himself from its waters … a well of living waters (Song 4:15). He knew he needed the strength and vitality to conquer the Hill Difficulty, and so he prepared himself for the upward journey that stretched out before him. … “Fail not for sorrow, falter not for sin, But onward, upward, till the goal ye win”.

He began with great strength, - he was running, - … but as the hill became steeper, he had to slow his pace, - you cannot keep running all the time! And, in fact, the further he progressed the more difficult the terrain became … After a time, he had to get down on his hands and knees in order to struggle along some of the path … such great care was needed! … It reminds me of one day parking the car at Craigmead on the Lomond Hills. The path from the car park to the bottom of the West Lomond is gently ascending, - it is a good wide and safe path. You come to a part, though, where there is another path on the left … and it is steep! … And the higher you climb, the steeper it becomes! … And you need to be careful where you put your feet … and you’re on your hands and knees before you reach the top! … That was the kind of climbing Christian had to do to reach the top of the Hill Difficulty … “It’s not an easy road, there are trials and troubles, And many are the dangers we meet; But Jesus guards and keeps so that nothing can harm us, And smooth the rugged path from our feet”.

There is also another aspect to consider in Christian’s conquering of this hill … Half-ways up he came across a most welcome place to stop for refreshment. God knows our needs, and He meets them. He provided this place for the weary traveller, Rom. 8:26 Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities.
We all need rest, - we have to accept we can’t keep going without stopping and regaining our strength … And so Christian found this very special place where he sat down to rest. He reached under his garment and he took out the roll from which he had been previously reading. By this same roll he was once again refreshed. You will notice how he kept the roll next to his heart, … the psalmist wrote, 119:10 With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. 11 Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Previously, Christian had stopped at the spring at the foot of the hill for a refreshing drink. Here now, on this occasion, he was drinking from a different source … the source of living waters … the Word of God. John wrote, I Jn. 2:14 the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one. D.L. Moody used to tell his congregation, “The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible” … Christian was depending upon the Word of God as His strength to continue on his journey to the top of the hill, and down the other side.

As well as looking at the roll, he also thought again about the privilege of wearing the coat he was given at the cross. That was a great day! These wonderful thoughts were going through his mind, and he was being grateful to God … “For all the Lord hath done for me, I never will cease to praise Him”.

However, having been refreshed … Christian stayed there longer than he needed … so long, in fact, that he went to sleep. He hadn’t finished the journey … there was still much more to be done. He had only made his way halfway up the hill … He had yet three-quarters more of the journey to do until he was over the top and down the other side to the bottom. … Much as we want to keep commending him, we’ve got to confess, … he was ‘sleeping on the job’. … He had slipped into the very condition he had found so deplorable earlier in Simple, Sloth, and Presumption.

But we must be fair … Christian differed from those three layabouts in that he had done something to earn a genuine rest. … I wonder who it was that came to him and gently reproached him … might it have been Evangelist again? … Christian was in such a deep sleep, the very precious roll that he loved and cherished slipped from his hand. … There’s a lesson there, isn’t there? If we don’t keep a good hold on the truth, tiredness and lethargy will steal it away!

Was he not deserving of a good sleep, though? Yes, he was … but not just yet … He hadn’t finished! You and I know what it is like … We work hard, and we sit down for a moment, and then our eyes start to blinker … and we fall asleep.
When we waken, - maybe even after only about ten minutes, - it’s sometimes hard to get back into doing what we were doing previously. … Well, Christian fell asleep even though he hadn’t finished.

Ah, but it was approaching night-time … yes, and what of it?! You have the roll, Christian … you have God’s Word, and God’s Word is a lamp unto [your] feet, and a light unto [your] path (Ps. 119:105). Therefore, you’re not finished yet, so keep on going! God is not a cruel taskmaster, but He understands our frame … and He knows that sometimes when we rest, we need to be wakened out of the deep sleep that would hinder us in our journey.

Halfways up the hill was good, but it wasn’t where Christian needed to be. He had still a long way to travel. Halfways up the hill, - like the grand old Duke of York, - is neither up nor down! So, when he was gently and graciously reproved he quickly awakened … and notice how John Bunyan describes it, “Christian suddenly started up, and sped him on his way, and went apace till he came to the top of the hill”. … He wanted to get there … and get there, he got!

It was tough, it was hard, it was exhausting … but when he made it to the top of the hill, he stood and looked around him … By the grace of God he had made it! It had not been an easy path to take, but it was the only one! No other path led to the summit of that hill … and God made sure he would arrive and conquer it! … That is grace, of course. “Grace led my roving feet To tread the heavenly road; And new supplies each hour I meet, While pressing on to God.”

It is God’s grace that began our journey to Heaven; it is God’s grace that accompanies us through the green pastures, and along beside the still waters … And it’s God’s grace that leads us through the valley and stays with us as we exhaust ourselves on the highest mountains of trials and difficulties … but He never forsakes us, - He travels the journey with us. … And each one of God’s people will make it to the top … He will see to it!

May the Lord encourage us through our study to keep going on, no matter how difficult it sometimes becomes … Never quit until we reach the top, - that is the goal we must achieve … “I want to scale the utmost height And catch a gleam of glory bright; But still I’ll pray till Heaven I’ve found, Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.” Amen.