

Reaching the Celestial City

The River of Death

Receiving another glimpse of the Celestial City, Christian and Hopeful discover to their shock a river of death between them and the City. New fears arise; their souls are discouraged. They see no bridge or alternate route, and the water is deep. How will we do in the swelling of Jordan? (Jer. 12:5). They are told that the measure of faith determines the depths. "You shall find it deeper or shallower according to your trust in the King." Christian and Hopeful resign themselves to face the water. Almost at once Christian begins to sink. He doubts if he will ever reach the other side. He forgets God's dealings with him in the past. His sins rise up before him. Hopeful does what he can to hold Christian's head above water. He commends the word of God to Christian and directs him to the Lord Jesus: "Be of good cheer, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole."



Not every child of God dies with such great struggles as Christian. For Christian, he is afraid of death (Heb. 2:15). Death and dying can make us afraid because we have to meet God, we have a life to account for, and even with the justifying grace in Christ and the gift of eternal life there can be these dark shadows that make us afraid. That is why we need the Lord to keep our head above water, encourage us, exercise our faith, and take up His promises (Is. 43:2).

The Procession into the City



Having crossed the river of death they are welcomed by two shining angels. Hopeful and Christian are led up to the City on a great hill. As they are led there they are comforted with sweet talk telling them about the beauty and glory of that place. There sin, suffering and sorrow will be a distant memory, tears wiped away. There is fellowship with the Lord and the Lord's people.

Since heaven is aware of these two pilgrims drawing near, there is anticipation of their arrival. A company of the heavenly hosts gives a good report about these men. Then the great shout and chorus is heard saying: "blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb." Several trumpeters salute them.

Over the gate is written: "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life and may enter in through the gates

into the city” (Rev. 22:14). They request entrance into the city, and are introduced as those who have left the City of Destruction for the love of the King of heaven. They deliver their certificates which are found to be genuine. The King commands the gate be opened, and they receive apparel that shone like gold, as well as instruments of praise, crowns of life, and they hear the invitation: “Enter ye into the joy of our Lord.”

The End of Ignorance

Pilgrim’s Progress ends in a very shocking way. Bunyan turns back to see Ignorance approaching the river of death. He seems to make progress without much fear and hesitancy as he makes use of a nearby ferry-man named Vain hope, who gives a trouble-free crossing (Ps. 73:4). But a peaceful death is no guarantee of entrance into heaven, just as a struggle in death is no indication that he has entered into hell. Bunyan: “He that dies quietly, suddenly, or under consternation of spirit, may go to heaven or may go to hell; no man can tell whether a man goes, by any such manner of death. The judgment, therefore, that we make of the eternal condition of man must be gathered from another consideration, to wit, Did the man die in his sins? Did he die in unbelief? Did he die before he was born again?”



Ignorance is rowed over the river.

Ignorance ascends the Hill, but he is alone. When he reads what is written on the gate he thinks that his obedience will qualify him here, but he does not realize he is not justified and sanctified. He knocks and is examined. He says that he has eaten and drunk in the presence of the King, is acquainted with the teachings of the King. While he fumbles for his certificate he never owned one and is speechless. He is commanded to be bound hand and foot and to be cast into the by-way to hell. Bunyan concludes: “then I saw that there was a way to Hell even from the gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction.”

Questions for Discussion

1. Christian and Hopeful responded very differently in the River of Death. Hopeful’s feet could touch the bottom, but Christian’s feet could not. How are we to understand the difference?
2. As you think about your own future death, what thoughts and feelings come to mind? What does it mean to be prepared for death, and how can you prepare yourself for it?
3. Interestingly, Bunyan does not end the story with Christian and Hopeful. Instead, he describes a man named Ignorance attempting to enter the Celestial City. What happened to Ignorance? What do you think Bunyan is trying to communicate?
4. As you think back over this allegory which is your favourite character in the story? What did you learn from that character?

