

Lesson Twenty

THE HILL OF DIFFICULTY

We resume our study of *Pilgrim's Progress* with the Pilgrim walking along the straight and narrow way, which is the way of the cross. This is the way of true salvation through trust and dependence upon the work of Jesus Christ and His guidance through this life. He is walking along with the individuals that we met last week who were entitled Formalist and Hypocrisy, which were two forms of insincere religious beliefs. That is, they were nominal church members. Previously in our study the Pilgrim met with Simple, Sloth and Presumption, who were not IN the way, but a little way OUT of the way. When Christian tried to witness to them, they had no interest at all in the things of the gospel. But these two individuals, Formalist and Hypocrisy, did not come into the way by the gate or by the cross. They came in by jumping over the wall. We need to use our imagination as we see what Bunyan would be telling us. Within the true way of salvation through faith in Christ, there are going to be those who are nominal in their external profession, those who would be Formalists and those who would be Hypocritical.

Now tonight we come to what is known in the book as The Hill of Difficulty. As they are walking on down the way, in the middle of their path is a Hill, and that Hill is called Difficulty. This is something that every Christian ought to be aware of, particularly younger Christians. That is, in your Christian experience, there are going to be difficulties. It is not going to be a smooth flowing road all the way to heaven. There are going to be some times when some real difficulties are going to come into your path. So I want us to read this and watch carefully how Christian reacts to this difficulty, and how Formalist and Hypocrisy react to it. We won't be able to deal with all the encounters in the Hill of Difficulty tonight, but we will at least try to get Pilgrim to the top of the Hill. Beginning with these words:

I beheld then, that they all went on till they came to the foot of the hill Difficulty at the bottom of which was a spring. There were also in the same place two other ways, besides that which came straight from the gate; one turned to the left hand, and the other to the right, at the bottom of the hill; but the narrow way lay right up the hill, and the name of the going up the side of the hill is called Difficulty. Christian now went to the spring, and drank thereof to refresh himself, and then he began to go up the hill, saying,

***The hill, though high, I covet to ascend;
The difficulty will not me offend;
For I perceive the way to life lies here;
Come, pluck up heart, let's neither faint nor fear,
Better, though difficult, the right way to go,
Than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe.***

The other two also came to the foot of the hill, but when they saw that the hill was steep and high, and that there were two other ways to go; and supposing also that these two ways might meet again with that up which Christian went, on the other side of the hill; therefore they were resolved to go in those ways. Now the name of one of those ways was Danger, and the name of the other Destruction. So the one took the way which is called Danger, which led him into a great wood; and the other took directly up the way to Destruction, which led him into a wide field, full of dark mountains, where he stumbled and fell, and rose no more.

I looked then after Christian, to see him go up the hill, where I perceived he fell from running to going, and from going to clambering upon his hands and his knees, because of the steepness of the place. Now about the midway to the top of the hill was a pleasant arbor, made by the Lord of the hill, for the refreshment of weary travelers. Thither, therefore, Christian got, where also he sat down to rest him: then he pulled his roll out of his bosom, and read therein to his comfort; he also now began afresh to take a review of the coat or garment that was given to him as he stood by the cross. Thus pleasing himself a while, he at last fell into a slumber, and thence into a fast sleep, which detained him in that place until it was almost night; and in his sleep his roll fell out of his hand. Now, as he was sleeping, there came one to him, and awaked him, saying, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways, and be wise."¹ And with that, Christian suddenly started up, and sped him on his way, and went apace till he came to the top of the hill.

What does the Hill of Difficulty stand for? It is simply what its name represents. The pathway that leads to heaven is the straight and narrow way, which is the way of the cross. The song we sing, "*The Way of the Cross Leads Home*"² is certainly where this narrow path leads. It is that cross which speaks of sacrifice and self-denial, and it is on this pathway that

¹ Proverbs 6:6

² By Jesse Brown Pounds

the true Christian is walking along with the nominal mock Christians. That they encounter the Hill of Difficulty simply means that in the road leading from the cross to eternal life, there are going to be difficulties in your experience. I don't know where the idea came from that once you become a believer in Christ, all your problems are solved and there are no more difficulties to face. That certainly is not Biblical. There is a great deal of difficulty if you are going to follow the way of the cross. Even today we are still dealing with that idea. We sing the song, "*The Old Rugged Cross, the Emblem of Suffering and Shame.*"³ This will be what will happen as the Christian follows the way of the cross up over a difficult period in his life. He still has to trust the cross and his faith in what Christ is doing in his life at that time. We find that the "mock" Christians will not want to identify with the difficulties of a cross in their life. The cross says, "I die daily." It is a daily thing, and something that we bear. Before we are ever crowned, we must bear a cross. The "mock" Christian will be the one who looks for an easier way when difficulties comes into his pathway as opposed to a life of sacrifice and self denial.

Lets look now at this particular thing. We have come to the bottom of the hill where Bunyan says, "There was a spring." The pilgrim would go up to and drink of the fresh water that is in that spring before he goes on up the hill. Halfway up the hill when he seems to not be able to crawl any further in his difficulty, he is going to find a period of rest that the Lord is going to give him. Bunyan would have us to know that the formal Christian and the hypocrite are strangers to the spring that dwells at the bottom of the Hill of Difficulty. They are also strangers to the pleasant arbor that is up in the middle of the Hill of Difficulty because they are always avoiding difficulty and going out into these by-paths in order to try to avoid the pathway of duty. It is only the Christian who loves the Lord Jesus Christ in his Person and His work that knows what it means to drink at the spring of God's refreshing grace.

What does this spring stand for? It stands for the pure doctrine of the gospel. It simply would tell us that if you are going to face difficulties, you will need a grasp on what the gospel is. How horrible and how tragic it is for individuals to try to go up the Hill of Difficulty without a thorough grounding in the pure gospel of Jesus Christ! It is interesting in the last half of Bunyan's book in which Christiana and the children make their journey, when they come to the stream at the Hill of Difficulty, the water is all muddy. Bunyan is telling us in this

³ Rev. George Bennard

that from the time he wrote the first portion of the book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, until he finished the second portion, there had been a great departure from the preaching of the pure gospel of the grace of God. So he was saying that it was so hard to find pure

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doctrine. How true that is today. No matter where you look today, there is so much "muddy water" that you have to taste in order to get a few sips of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, before the individual goes up the Hill of Difficulty, he is going to have to understand and have a grasp on what the gospel is in its pure form, clear as crystal.

Then we come to the point where this spring was at the bottom of the Hill, there were two other ways. One led around to the left and one led off to the right into a period of woods. The other one went off of a cliff, and the individual that took that way fell off and was destroyed. This is simply setting forth that wherever the way of the cross goes, there are going to be byways. These byways will let formal and mock Christians remain by external profession without having to sacrifice in that profession. Formalist and Hypocrisy saw how difficult the hill was going to be, and they saw Christian struggling to go up the hill, and said, "Lets take these other two ways." They were saying, "we are all Christian, and he is having a lot of difficulty in his Christian experience, so lets go around this way and maybe we will all meet at the same place on the other side of the hill." So it is important to see that the way of the cross is a straight and narrow way, and yet all along that way there will be bypaths that we will be encountering before we finally find the Christian entering into the Celestial City. Those are the ways that Formalist and Hypocrisy will use. They will do so in order that without renouncing Christ, they can just avoid the difficulty of having to serve Him. That is, they can say, "I'm a Christian, but I will just go my OWN WAY. I don't want to live a life of self-denial, I don't want to have to deal with any difficulty that might come into my path. I want it to go smoothly and easy all the way. I don't want to identify with the cross. I don't want to have to identify with sacrifice which the Lord of the cross would have me to walk therein." So they would remain nominal Christians in the sense they were external in their profession and yet they would always take the easy way.

Christian went up to the spring and drank there of the pure doctrine of the gospel. What does this give him? It gives him strength to go through difficulties. What might some

of the difficulties be? Maybe the loss of a loved one. It may be the loss of a companion. It may be the loss of finances. It may be some marital problem or with your children. There can be many problems or doubt, fears, or turmoil. If you have been a Christian very long, you know what difficulties are, and how many times in your own experience that you have encountered these difficulties in your Christian life. But nevertheless, if we have drunk at the spring of the pure doctrine of God's grace, then it will sustain us and enable us to go through those difficulties. Again, how important we see that the Scripture emphasizes that we not only have an experimental religion, but we have a knowledge to go with our religion. This is why I think that we are seeing a deterioration already in what was called the "Jesus Movement." Many observers thought it was going to be a great movement among our young people several years ago. Now what is the one problem with the Jesus Movement with our youth? They had a great zeal and a great interest in the things of the Lord, but there was one thing it didn't have. It didn't have "knowledge" and therefore when difficulties and trials came, many of them evaporated. That simply was telling us again that in your Christian life, you are going to have to be exposed to the revealed knowledge that God has given in the Bible, and you are going to have to depend upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit to teach you those things that are revealed in the Book. A religion which is just based on emotions only will not last and will not stand when difficulties and perilous times and trials come. So drink at the spring. Read all you can. Pray all that you can and commune with the Lord of the Hill that He might give you grace in times of difficulties.

Lets look briefly at Formalist and Hypocrisy. We see that they were resolved to go in those ways that went around the Hill. The name of one of those ways was "Danger."

They wanted to identify with the external form of Christianity without having to identify with the cross of Christianity. They wanted a crown without a cross.

The name of the other was "Destruction." What did these men want? They simply wanted happiness without godliness. They wanted to identify with the external form of Christianity without having to identify with the cross of Christianity. They wanted a crown without a cross. Beloved, there is no

such thing. Before our Lord was crowned with resurrection glory, He had to undergo the cross. You and I bear that cross, and the more that you and I bear up and stand and witness for the old rugged cross, the more the world is going to have less use for us. They are going to persecute us, mock and make fun, and they are going to do all these things to try to

discourage us in our embracing the doctrine of the cross. So these individuals, Formalist and Hypocrisy, wanted the identification of being a Christian, but yet they did not want the cross that goes with the life of a Christian. One of those ways was called "Danger" and we read that it led into a great wood. What does this represent? It is a warning for a nominal "mock" Christian who goes out of the way. Now remember, they are not really in the way to begin with. We have to use our imagination. They did not come in by the cross. They just hopped over the wall. This means they could have come in by baptism, good works, or whatever you want to call it. Because they don't want to identify with the cross, there will be some error or erroneous teaching which will lead them astray "into the woods," and you will never find them, because they are led into a delusion by Satan himself. The other way was called "Destruction" and that was the way that went around by a field and then by some high mountains, whereby one of them fell off and was destroyed. That was complete apostasy, turning against of the things of the doctrines of the cross. A personal relationship with Christ is what the mock Christian will not become involved in.

Then we read, ***"I looked then after Christian, to see him going up the hill, where I perceived he fell from running to going, and from going to clambering upon his hands and his knees, because of the steepness of the place."*** Have you ever experienced a period in your Christian life in which you encountered some difficulties? Then it seemed like more difficulties piled upon that difficulty, so that you slowed down because of the difficulties in your Christian experience. Then more difficulties came so that it seemed as if you were just barely crawling along. Christian has come down to virtually a stand-still. He is struggling upwards, but notice he is going on. He loves the Lord and knows he has had a work of grace, but yet he is dealing with something like, "Oh, I miss that child! Oh, I miss that husband, that wife! Lord, I have just got to have that person back in order to go on. I can't go on without them!" These are the difficulties some are struggling with. So he is crawling his way upward. What we need to see is where did Christian go in his time of difficulty? We read that ***"now about the midway to the top of the Hill was a pleasant arbor, made by the Lord of the Hill, for the refreshment of weary travelers."*** Those of you who are true Christians here tonight, could say that in the midst of the Hill of Difficulty God has granted grace to enable you to be refreshed in times when it seems you can go no

further. *As the song writer would say, "Where could I go but to the Lord?"*⁴ Where can I go in times of difficulties? When that which would cause me to want me to turn back, when it seems I have no strength to go on, I just want to give up and turn my back upon Christ, the church, and my Christian friends. I just want to go out and be in a house somewhere so no one would bother me. I just want to be by myself. When those times come, then right in the middle of the Hill of Difficulty, we go to the Lord, because where else could we go?

I want to invite your attention to John chapter 6 to show that this occurs in the Bible, and to see that there are difficulties for the life of a disciple or a would-be disciple of Jesus. Our Lord has just given some very hard teaching to the flesh of man. In verse 37 He said, **"All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out."** In verse 44, He said that **"No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him; and I will raise him up at the last day."** These statements offended the people when they saw that salvation was in God's hands, not in man's hands. This was a hard doctrine for them to take, so we read down in verse 60, **"Many therefore of His disciples when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?"** Now notice, Jesus Himself, was misunderstood by His doctrine because His doctrine was a hard doctrine to be understood. Then in verse 61, **"When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples murmured at it, He said unto them, Doth this offend you?"** Does it offend you that I have the keys of salvation in my hand? Does it offend you that I am the bread of life? Does it offend you that I am the water of life, and that no man comes unto me except the Spirit of God draws him? Does that offend you? Look at verse 62 - **"What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where He was before? It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray Him. And He said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto Me, except it were given unto him of My Father."** Now notice verse 66, **"And from that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him."** They would not embrace His doctrine at this particular point. So Jesus turns to the twelve, verse 67 - **"Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered Him, Lord,**

⁴ by J. B. Coats

to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." Where can I go? Where can I go? Only to the Lord, seeking refuge for my soul. Only to the Lord. Only He has eternal life. Only He has salvation, ***"And we believe and are sure that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon; for he it was that should betray Him, being one of the twelve."***

There are many things which will offend in the Christian life. Beloved, this is why it is so important right now to you who are here this evening. I don't care if you have professed Christianity for 50 or 60 years, or whether you have just professed it for a few days, make sure that you are anchored into the cross of Jesus Christ. Make sure that you are proud of that old rugged cross. Make sure that when others would mock and make fun of the cross, you can say, "that is my standard, that is my salvation!" A few years ago I remember watching on Television a baseball game in Los Angeles. A player of the Chicago Cubs named Rick Monday was playing center field, and they were playing the national anthem. While they were running the flag up, somebody ran out on the field, grabbed the flag and started to set it on fire. Mr. Monday, in center field ran out there and beat the guy up. He received a standing ovation because he was not going to allow the American flag to be desecrated by someone who would set it afire and burn it before all of those people. Now beloved, that gives us a standard that we stand by. I'm an American, and I am not ashamed to say that whenever they play the national anthem, it still sends shivers up and down my spine, it always has done that. I hope it always will. But I want to go a little bit further. What about the standard when the old rugged cross is raised up and the world would mock it and make fun of it? Does it offend you, or do you clam up and say, "I don't want anybody to know that I identify with that flag?" If there is a tendency to do that, make sure you get that straightened out even now, less there come a time because of offense that you go back and you wind up somewhere in the woods or in destruction. Make sure now, and you can do that, even in your own heart right now. Does it offend you when people talk about the cross? When someone starts laughing about it, do you just say, "Oh well, it doesn't bother me?" Or does it make you bleed in your heart? Do you realize that it is your Savior they are talking about, or does it offend you? Settle that once and for all, so that when you are in the midst of difficulties, you will not have the temptation to run back into the world and the things of the world. I want us to look also at the fact that as our Lord asked the question, ***"Will you also go away"*** Peter then looked to Him and said, ***"Lord, where shall we go, You have the***

words of eternal life." (John 6:68). Peter was saying to Jesus, "You have the true doctrine, You have the true teaching, where else would we go?"

Now lets look at some other things here in the midst of the Hill of Difficulty. The Hill of Difficulty has spiritual provision within it. In the midst of trials, tribulations and difficulties God will send spiritual provisions to enable you to live off of them in the midst of that difficult period. I invite your attention to two passages of Scriptures. The first one is in I Corinthians chapter 10. Some of you may be going through a difficult time right now. You may be on the Hill of Difficulty. I know where I am in my spiritual life in relation to Bunyan's book and I have to watch myself there. I've gone through the Hill of Difficulty. I can honestly say that, but there may be some more hills to go over, and I know what it means to try to climb up the Hill of Difficulty. But some of you may be struggling right there now. What is your answer? What do I do, Pastor, while I am in the midst of this? Look at I Corinthians 10:13 - **"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful,"** did you hear that? God IS faithful, **"who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."** In the midst of the Hill of Difficulty, there will be a spiritual refreshing arbor, a place where you will be refreshed in the midst of that difficulty. Now look over in II Corinthians 12:8-9. Paul is given a thorn in the flesh. He has asked for the Lord to remove this difficulty from his Christian life, and he says this - **"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness."** What can we say again, Pastor Gables? Simply this. I don't care what your difficulty is, how extreme it is, there has no difficulty taken you, but such as is common to man, and God is faithful, He will grant grace in the midst of the Hill of Difficulty to enable you to refresh yourself there in a spiritual arbor. Oh, what a faithful promise that is! Beloved, only you know that when that time comes. I can quote that out of the Bible to you, but you won't know what it is until you have gone through the difficulty. That is, it is at that time that God takes the promise and makes it a reality. Now we can know it in our head as far as the promise, but it is not until we are in the midst of the Hill of Difficulty that God comes and refreshes our soul. The Psalmist would say, **"He restoreth my soul,"** and that is what He did here for the Pilgrim in the midst of the hill.

So the Hill of Difficulty has spiritual provisions within it. Let me give you some personal experiences in my life, but I won't take a great deal of time in enumerating them. But I can

say this to you before God, when I was going through the Hill of Difficulty, oh how I prayed that God would remove that hill. I prayed, "God, I can't take it, it is too much for me bear. God please remove it so that I might have more joy, and that I might be enabled to serve you better. God get me out of this circumstance that I can better serve you over here on this clear field." However, I can honestly say before God tonight, if I had it to do over again, I wouldn't ask God to remove that difficulty because of how Jesus Christ manifested Himself to me in the midst of that hill. I would never have known the Lord as I have been privileged to know Him now had He not revealed Himself to me in the midst of difficult times. So if you are going through a difficult time, there may come a season of refreshment in which the Lord will reveal Himself to you that you wouldn't trade all the world for it. God bless you in whatever your difficulty is in this, because the Lord has the means of making Himself real in times like this. That which was theoretical, then becomes real, and you know it is real because of what He has done for you and in you.

Now we have to go on very quickly, because we have to bring this to a close. You say, "Pastor, that is thrilling." Yes it is, but let me give you another warning. You ask, "there is a need for a warning after God has restored your soul and given you ease, rest and peace,?" Yes, because in our life we can experience temptations in periods of ease as well as in times of difficulty. When was it that our Lord was tempted by the devil? What had just taken place in His life? It was after His baptism and hearing the voice from heaven, **"this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."** (Matthew 3:17). In other words, here is a great high point in the life of the Lord, but then immediately what happens, but temptations by Satan? Now watch, some of the most perilous times in your Christian life will be when God has given you some great manifestation of Himself, and blessed you in an unusual way, that you can become most vulnerable to the temptations of Satan in that hour. Wherever there is a mountain top victory, when you are rejoicing there on that mountain, don't go to sleep, because it could be right then that Satan has a way of coming into our life and taking us into a period of ease whereby we lose our usefulness for the Lord in His service. Oh, I hope we learn these valuable lessons. When difficult times come, let us learn to cling to the cross even though it means self-denial and sacrifice, because in the midst of those times, the Lord will reveal Himself. When He does reveal Himself, let us not be lulled into a sense of ease, believing that we've got it made, because Satan can enter in at the point after our greatest points of victory. I look back in my own experience again and see that I've had more difficulty in dealing with the devil in times of prosperity than in times of difficulty. What do

you mean by that? Simply this. Usually when there are difficult times in my life, I find myself clinging to the promises of the Lord, but usually when things are going easy for me, then it isn't always the case. I don't know if that is true with the rest of you or not. But I hope that as you walk through your Christian experience in your life, that you lay hold on this principle. Difficulties will come. But in John 16:33 Jesus said, **"In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."** While you are feeding off of that special manifestation of God's grace in the midst of difficulty, don't go to sleep there like the Christian did and lose your roll of assurance of the gospel setting you back in your Christian experience.

We are going to have to close there tonight, but we are going to see that this experience here in the midst of the hill delays the Christian in his progress. We will see him backsliding right here in the midst of spiritual prosperity. I am personally acquainted with many preachers who God was working in their life, and they were progressing at such and such pace. They were having incredible results. But now today they are full of pride with no humility. What happened? They began to take the credit for what God had done. They began to boast in what they were doing and had done. What has happened? They left their dependence upon the Lord, and they are going to have to do what Christian did. They are going to have to go all the way back to where they left off depending on the Lord, in order to be restored to fellowship with Him. You see, beloved, that wherever we sin, we have to go back to that point where we lost fellowship with the Lord. We have to go back and find that roll wherever it is. It may be in our Bible reading. Have you quit reading your Bible? Have you quit praying? Then you are going to have to go back and take up where you left off in order to go on. It will delay your spiritual progress.

So may God seal these things to our hearts tonight as we learn from the Hill of Difficulty that these are simply things that every Christian will face in their pathway to heaven. The way of the cross leads home, let us pray.

Father, as this man is now experiencing difficulty in his new found Christian faith, I pray if there are those here tonight that are experiencing that same difficulty, that You might give them grace to go on, and that You might lead them to that spiritual arbor of rest where they might be refreshed from the temptations and the trials that would drain them, that they might have the joy of being restored to the joy of their salvation, that they might have their

soul restored as the Psalmist did. And I do pray for these sheep that are present tonight that they may be enabled to follow the Great Shepherd as He leads them on, and we pray that the Great Shepherd might strengthen and comfort them on their upward journey. Help them to see that they are not a Christian because they have difficulties, but help them to see that your Son Himself had to set His eye toward the cross, that enabled Him to die for our sins, that He went on and endured that difficulty in order that we might have eternal life. He did that for the joy that was set before Him, and I pray that You might restore unto us that joy and enable us to look beyond this time of difficulty that we might be in to enable us to see that we will soon be safely home in the arbor, safely home in your bosom, that we may be enabled to look back on our pathway and just thank you for every thorn that was placed in our pathway. Every thorn that was put upon the precious brow of your Son, every thorn that was put in our side as you permitted the Apostle Paul to have put in his, yet we believe that even today, if we could call Paul back he would thank you for those thorns. So Father, when these times of difficulties come give us grace to stand so that your name might be honored in our lives, for we ask it in Jesus' lovely name, Amen