

Make straight paths for your feet. —Heb. 12:13

Introduction

Hymn 310

The hymn that we just sang tells of a journey to an eternal city in a distant land. The journey winds through strange and foreign lands. It spans many years. The path is difficult and fraught with danger. It brings weariness, toil, and fear. The story this hymn tells is true, it is no fairy tale or fiction. It is at the same time an old story and a new story. It is the story of Abraham and Sarah (Hebrews 11:8–19) and it is our story. When we begin to follow the Lord Jesus, dear brothers and sisters, we begin a long and difficult journey to eternal life. It is a journey that, as one hymn states, goes through a “great wilderness of sin and woe.”

We frequently encounter the term wilderness journey in hymns and sermons. It is certainly an apt metaphor for the life of a child of God. Nowadays technology insulates us from the hardships characteristic of life and travel in the wilderness. Thus we probably need to make a conscious effort and use some imagination to appreciate all that this metaphor conveys. We will now try to do that.

Most of us make numerous trips to the grocery store, the library, the mall, or church. We don't usually give the trip itself much thought. And with good reason, the trip is short, the route familiar, and help is near if it is needed.

When we go on a longer journey, we usually take more care. If we drive, we see to it that our gas tank is full, the tires are good, the spare has air in it, and so on. We make sure that we know the way or have directions or a map. We take note of travel conditions and, if we're wise, we make provisions for emergencies: in the north for the snow and cold of winter (shovel, blankets, candles, food, water, etc), and in the south for the heat of summer (water, shade, sunscreen, etc.). We do this because we wish to make it safely to our destination.

A wilderness journey requires even more care. There are no motorized vehicles, no stores, no restaurants, no motels. We can't go home for the night if we're scared, or don't feel well, or things just aren't going our way. Trails are usually narrow, uneven, rough and unmarked. In the wilderness we are at the mercy of the elements. If we get lost, hurt, or ill we must rely on our travel companions or, if we are alone, ourselves. Our well-being depends on well-thought out plans, prudent caution, good provisions, and the right equipment.

What would you think and how would you proceed, dear brothers and sisters, if

tomorrow you were required to begin a trek across a great, unfamiliar expanse of wilderness? Your destination on the other side is nowhere in sight. You would probably wonder how you will cross it, how you would find your way, if you have a family, how you would get them cross it. You would probably be worried about what kinds of provisions and equipment you will need and what kinds of dangers you will encounter.

Dear brothers and sisters, before us lies a journey through a great wilderness. From here we cannot see heaven, our destination. How will we find our way? How can we reach our goal? Do we have the equipment and provisions that we need? We do. Our Heavenly Father has provided the necessary provisions and clear directions.

Compass, Map, and Trail

When we travel into an unfamiliar wilderness, we need a both a compass and a map in order to find our way. If we have a compass but no map, we don't really know where we are or where to go. If we have a map but no compass, we don't know which way to hold the map or which way to go. When we pay attention to and follow our map and compass we will be able to find our way.

God has given us a compass and map for our journey also. Our compass is our conscience. It points us in the right direction by reminding us that we are before God's face every moment and demanding that we do that which we know to be right and forbidding us to do that which we know to be wrong. Our map is God's Word. It reveals God's will, what before Him is right and wrong. It shows us the way to heaven. The psalmist says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105).

We need to pay close attention to our map and compass. If we begin to follow our own notions, we will get lost. Solomon writes, "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 16:25). We also want to make sure that we are using the right map. If we have the wrong map, we will become hopelessly lost and confused. September 11th provides us an extreme and tragic example. Nineteen men, by all accounts acting according to their conscience, killed over 3000 people in an act of terror. They were using the wrong map. They did not follow God's Word.

Besides a compass and map, God has provided us a trail through the wilderness. It is narrow, but it is marked clearly with the footprints of the former saints. Sometimes there may be a temptation to conclude that earlier generations have taken a wrong turn and thus dismiss their understanding or teaching on various issues. Certainly, their teachings, like the teachings of all men, must be examined in the light of God's Word. But we should not, supposing ourselves to be wiser than them, lightly dismiss their teachings. Jeremiah writes, "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (Jer. 6:16).

Avoid slippery and dangerous places

Wilderness trails often include dangerous and slippery places. In these places one must be very careful. It does not pay to be reckless or indifferent to the danger. We could easily fall and be injured or fall to a place from which we cannot escape. We encounter such places in our spiritual journey as well. We want to avoid injury. The author to the Letter to the Hebrews gives this advice: “Make straight paths for your feet.” (Heb. 12:13). He means that we should avoid places of temptation and remove from our life things that hinder our faith. The Bible includes some specific instructions about what we should avoid. It, for example, mentions where we go and what we do and with whom we spend our time. Solomon writes, “Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away” (Prov. 4:14, 15).

Many kinds of temptations may produce slippery places for us. The psalmist, for example, admits that envy of the prosperity of the ungodly had become a dangerous, slippery place for him: “But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped” (Ps. 73:2). The entertainment offerings of this world are an especially dangerous place in modern life. Technology makes it possible to bring them into our homes, cars, computers, offices, or, with portable devices, wherever we go.

The content of these materials is often offensive and destructive, wounding the conscience and feeding the desires of our sin-corrupt flesh. Content may be offensive in a number of ways, for example, message, graphics, language, or music. Another danger lies in the position that entertainment may attain on the totem pole of our priorities. Even in cases where content is not offensive, the materials or activities may consume so much of our time and attention that we no longer have time for God’s Word and Christian fellowship. They become our master instead of our servant.

The Apostle Paul gives sobering advice: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting life” (Gal. 6:7, 8). What we read, what we listen to, and what we see affect our thoughts and actions. If we choose to feed our sin-corrupt flesh and neglect the nourishment of our spirit, our flesh will overpower and consume us and we will be left in the wilderness.

Provisions for the Journey

We cannot trek through a wilderness without water and food. The demands of wilderness travel require that we eat and drink more than we do in normal circumstances. If we do not drink sufficient water and eat the right kinds of food, we cannot sustain ourselves. We become weak and weary. It is then that we are most prone to injury and confusion. We need to make a conscious effort to drink and eat. Often by the time we recognize the symptoms, for example of heat exhaustion, we are already in great danger.

Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. God provides the food and drink necessary for our souls by His Word and

Sacraments. He also refreshes us through fellowship with Christian brothers and sisters. If we neglect these, we will become spiritually weak and exhausted. David, unable to be at the services of God's children, cried of his great thirst: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (Ps. 42:1).

When we live in a time of abundant services, we may, supposing we have eaten and drunk enough, get lazy about nurturing our inner man. It pays to consider what the angel said to Elijah just before he made a long wilderness journey. Having eaten and drunk, Elijah rested and then the angel of the Lord woke him and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for thee" (1 Kings 19:7).

The enemy of souls deceived the children of Israel during their wilderness journey. He caused them to despise the food God provided. They began to loath the manna. They complained that the bread of heaven, which had formerly tasted like honey, now tasted like oil. They longed for more appealing food. The enemy of souls attempts to accomplish the same deceit in our midst.

God's children have found fellowship with Christian brothers and sisters to be such a precious gift that they have sometimes called it the "sacrament of fellowship." Paul said, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16). In these times, if ever, we need opportunities to share our psalms, to speak of the way and journey, and to encourage one another. Yet it seems that these days life's busyness threatens to squeeze this important element out of our lives. God will surely bless us, as He did the believers of Malachi's time, if we reserve time to gather and discuss the matters of salvation. Malachi writes, "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (Mal. 3:16, 17). In this day and age our inner man seems to be engaged in a fierce competition for our time and attention. We are often preoccupied with the cares of this life and may easily forget to eat and drink spiritual food and drink.

Wonderful Escorts

It is safer to travel in the wilderness with companions. They are able to help us when we encounter difficulties. In choosing companions for a difficult trip, we don't look for individuals who might actually endanger us by reckless behavior or indifference. On the contrary, we look for those who understand the dangers and are able to help us deal with them.

The same applies to our spiritual journey. The Preacher writes about this in Ecclesiastes: "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how

can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:9–12). Jesus said that He will be wherever two or three are gathered in His name. Thus where there are two children of God there is a rope of three strands, for our strength, the Lord Jesus, is with us.

God also provides us companions, escorts for our journey. When we seek friends, we want to choose individuals who are sincerely believing, who will help us to overcome dangers and remain on the way of life, friends who will provoke us to good works not evil. It is an unfortunate fact, that among God’s children, there are those who recklessly disregard God’s Word and the instruction of His congregation. They do not make good escorts. The Apostle Paul teaches how we ought to relate to such disobedient brethren: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). Dear brothers and sisters, when we have companions who are reckless, who disregard the Word of God and the instruction of His congregation, we want to admonish them with love. We want our speech to be gracious but seasoned with salt.

The Armor of God

God has given us the equipment we need to overcome the dangers in this wilderness of sin and woe. As he wrote his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul observed the Roman soldier who guarded him and compared his weapons and armor to the equipment that God provides for our use in our struggle against sin and temptation. He said, “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6: 10, 11). He then identifies the components of this armor: truth, righteousness, faith, hope, and the Word of God, and the gospel of peace. It would be foolish and dangerous for a soldier to go into battle without all his armour and weapons. Likewise it would be foolish of us to try to cross a vast expanse of wilderness without the proper gear. It would be foolish of us to leave these weapons behind and unused in our spiritual battle. Let us briefly consider these weapons and how we can use them.

Truth: It is difficult to move and it is difficult to defend ourselves against the enemy’s attacks if we are entangled in a web of lies. That’s why Paul tells us to gird our loins with the truth. I want to especially mention is one essential, fundamental truth that we ought to keep in mind. It requires honesty, above all, with ourselves and that truth is: I am chief among sinners. When we can acknowledge this truth, many temptations, pride for example, are diminished. The Bible says that the truth shall make you free.

The breastplate of righteousness: Because our salvation is not in our own works, but the merits of Christ, the enemy is unable to slay us with accusations of our unworthiness. When the righteousness of life follows the righteousness of faith, we leave him less ammunition for his accusations.

The shield of faith: Faith is belief in things not seen. Faith in God and His Word, help us to deflect the arrows of doubt which the world and enemy of souls fire at us. The world challenges us with many positions that are contrary to the teachings of God's Word. When we believe God we don't demand that we must know and understand every issue. We believe and trust God and His Word and, like children, accept that which we cannot see and understand.

The helmet of salvation: The helmet of salvation is hope (1 Thess. 5:8). Faith and hope are similar; they both pertain to things unseen. Faith pertains to things present, hope to the future. Our hope is the resurrection. Paul says if there be no resurrection of the dead, we have believed in vain.

Our brother Niilo Rauhala's writes in one of his poems:

*So little
we speak of heaven,
even though the sunset is, like the arm of day
still outstretched
toward us.*

*Niin vähän
me puhumme taivaasta,
vaikka illan kajo on kuin
päivän käsivarsi
yhä ojentunut
meitä kohti*

We live the evening of time. The sky has begun to glow as the sun sets, but there is still a little daylight left. Yet, brothers and sisters, it seems that we speak so little of heaven. The hope of heaven gives us strength. We need to speak of our hope or it will die in our hearts and we with it.

God's Word: Not only is it food for our souls, it is a weapon with which we can overcome the attacks of the enemy of souls. When we are able to rely on God's Word, we do not need to rely on our own wisdom.

The gospel of peace: Our feet are shod with the gospel of peace. We need it because our feet become soiled with the dust of sin on this journey. At the end of each day's journey, we can wash that dust away. On this journey we often stumble and suffer injury or the enemy is able to wound us. The gospel is a medicine that heals all our wounds. When a brother or sister wants to have his or her feet washed or needs the medicine of the gospel, we remember and heed Christ's example and humbly serve our brothers and sisters by preaching the gospel of forgiveness to them.

Conclusion

God has given us many helps for our wilderness journey: compass, map, a path, good instructions, food and water, escorts, and the best equipment. Have we used them to our advantage or have we neglected to use them? I'm sure that many of you will admit, as I do, that often we have not used the gifts our Heavenly Father has provided. We find that we are poor travelers. We have often been short-sighted. We have often forgotten these helps or perhaps been too foolish to recognize their benefit.

I'd like to close with encouraging words from the Prophet Isaiah, "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" (Isa. 35:8-10).

Jon Bloomquist