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Crossing the Desert

Wilfred Thesiger, who died in 2003, was a well-known explorer. He left a fascinating account of crossing the Eastern Sands of Saudi Arabia, to a place called Dhafara, in the company of a group of Arabs and their camels.

After travelling for a few days, they found a range of "mountains of sand", the Uruq al Shaiba, ahead of them. To avoid them, they would have had to spend a whole week travelling to the west and then, one assumes, spend another week travelling east on the other side of these mountains. There was no alternative; they had to cross over the Uruq al Shaiba.

They found a well whose sides had fallen in. They dug it out, only to find that the water was very brackish – full of salts and thus very unpleasant to drink. One of the Arabs made porridge in the evening, their only meal that day. And from then on they would only be eating gritty lumps of unleavened bread smeared with a little butter. Another of the Arabs poured water over Thesiger's hands. It was the last time they would be able to wash, even their hands, till they completed their journey. The next morning they offered the camels another drink. When some of them refused the water, the men held up their heads and poured it down their throats.

They loaded skins filled with water onto the camel's backs, trying to plug the little holes to stop the water dribbling away. The men walked; the camels had enough to carry without them. The next morning the party found a little dry vegetation and allowed the camels to graze for two hours before setting off again.

The next day again one of the men said to Thesiger that he had been told there was no grazing ahead and pointed out that the camels were in poor condition. So, he claimed, it would be madness to go on. Besides they were already short of food and water. But one of the men, named al Auf, told Thesiger: "We have come here to go to Dhafara. If you want to go on, I will guide you." They divided up the food and water and, for a huge price, Thesiger bought an extra camel. The remaining men and camels then set off.

A few days later they found a small patch of grazing and let the camels loose for an hour or two. They were worried about their supply of water, as

the skins were leaking. They had to press on; but it would have been folly to push the camels too hard; they were obviously suffering from thirst. The party stopped for something to eat; afterwards al Auf decided they must continue their journey. Thesiger describes their progress: "We rode on for hours along a salt flat. The dunes on either side, colourless in the moonlight, seemed higher by night than by day. Eventually we halted, and numbly we dismounted. I would have given much for a hot drink but I knew I must wait 18 hours for that. We lit a fire, warmed ourselves and lay down. I found it difficult to sleep. I was tired; for days I had ridden long hours upon a rough camel, my body wracked by its uneven gait. I suppose I was weak from hunger, for . . . the food we ate was a starvation ration. But my thirst troubled me most. I was always conscious of it."

The next day they found the range of sand dunes straight ahead of them and towering into the sky. "Will we ever get the camels over those dunes?" Thesiger asked. "Al Auf will find a way", he was told. And he did, carefully choosing slopes which the camels could climb and coaxing them to make their way upward, single step by single step, until they finally reached the top.

At last they reached a well very near Dhafara. Thesiger recounts: "The water here was only slightly brackish, delicious after the filthy, evil-smelling dregs that we had drunk the night before. We had passed another well but even our thirsty camels would not drink the bitter stuff. Here they drank bucketful after leathern bucketful." After all that effort they had reached the end of their journey. But to what purpose? Just to produce what Thesiger described as "a rather inaccurate map that no one was ever likely to use".

And why retell this journey? Because nearly 3000 years earlier a Queen travelled on her camels with a retinue of servants all the way from Sheba, in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, to Jerusalem. She may have been more organised than Thesiger; she and her party may have been able to carry better supplies of food and water; she may not have taken such a difficult route through the desert. Yet it must still have been a difficult and dangerous journey, and certainly very much longer than Thesiger's.

The Queen of Sheba went all that huge distance to hear the wisdom of Solomon; she wanted to hear particularly what he could tell her about the true God. And she was not disappointed; Solomon answered all her questions, even the most difficult. He told her far more than she expected to hear. So, no doubt, as she set out again on her journey back to far-away Sheba, with her servants and her camels, she felt that she had been well rewarded for all her trouble in travelling to Jerusalem. She wanted to find out about the Lord, and she did not consider the difficulties of the journey any reason for staying at home.

Many generations later, the Lord Jesus Christ was talking with some unbelieving Jews. He told them: “The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgement with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42). The wisdom of Jesus is far greater than Solomon’s was – He is a far greater person; He is God. But the Pharisees had no wish to learn the wisdom He had come to reveal; they did not feel their need of it at all. How different from the Queen of Sheba! She knew she needed to learn from Solomon’s wisdom – he had true knowledge about the true God – and she did not grudge any of the hardships of the long journey from Sheba to Jerusalem and back.

These Pharisees did not need to travel any distance to meet Jesus; they were right beside Him. Yet they made no effort to seek His wisdom. They did not realise how much they had to learn. Nor did they realise that He was the Prophet who had come from God. They did not want to listen to Him though He could tell them all they needed to know for the good of their souls. How different from the Queen of Sheba, who travelled that huge distance to meet King Solomon! And, remember, Jesus is so much “greater than Solomon”. How much more reason for the Pharisees to ask Him all their most difficult questions! Never was there one who could answer spiritual questions with greater wisdom or from deeper knowledge.

And what about ourselves? How do we respond to Jesus and His wisdom? Do you have to go far to learn His wisdom? No, you do not even need to leave home to meet with the Jesus. You may find Him in your Bible. He says Himself: “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39). And you can – and ought to – pray that He would show you “by His Word and Spirit the will of God for your salvation”.

Some readers may have to travel a long way to church. If so, do you sometimes complain about it? Then remember the Queen of Sheba; remember how far she had to travel to hear the wisdom of Solomon – a journey which must have taken her many days. She was not concerned about the long journey; she was so thankful to have found out the truth about God.

How thankful we should be to have heard about Jesus – the One who is altogether greater than Solomon! How thankful we should be to have heard about salvation through Him: that “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). So we are to look to Christ for salvation; we are to believe in Him. Then we will not perish in a lost eternity; we will be safe on the day of judgement; everlasting life in heaven will be ours.

Setting out on a Long Journey

Rev Donald Beaton

This article first appeared in *The Free Presbyterian Magazine* for September 1939 and has been slightly edited. When Mr Beaton wrote, he was expecting very soon to sail for New York at the beginning of a preaching tour, but the threatened outbreak of World War 2 caused a delay. Eventually his journey took him to the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Today we would not sail from one continent to another; we would fly. But Mr Beaton's article still has much to teach us.

I am setting out soon on a long journey. Naturally the prospect of setting out on such a journey awakens many thoughts. It is, however, short in comparison with a greater journey on which we all have set out already. And as no one can think of setting out, without preparation, on a voyage even to New York, so we ought to give serious attention to preparing for the greater journey to eternity.

1. *The Preparation.* The shortest journey requires preparation and, the longer it is, the more consideration it requires. Not many fail to prepare for a voyage to New York, but thousands upon thousands are quite unconcerned about their preparation for the greatest of all journeys. God has not left us without knowledge of what we need for this journey. If we are to see His face in peace, we must be clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and it is only through believing in Him that we can obtain this righteousness. The faith that receives Him is His own gift; so, in this matter, man has nothing to glory in.

2. *The Passport.* For a journey to other countries one has to obtain a passport. This passport is issued by His Majesty's Foreign Secretary. No one else has the right to issue a passport and, if they did, anyone who received it would find it utterly useless when he most required it. A photograph with a description of the bearer forms part of the passport, which is carefully examined by officers of the country to which one is going. And if the passport is not in the correct form, there is no admittance into the country. We need a passport for admittance into the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, for unless a man is born again he cannot enter into that kingdom. No degree of education, or sentimental religion – what begins with the feelings and ends there – will do. If we do not have the change that the Lord Jesus announced as necessary, we need not deceive ourselves by thinking we are ready for the kingdom of heaven.

3. *The farewells.* No one who sets out to cross the ocean can be altogether free from emotion. Loved ones are left behind and even the hope of returning home does not do away with the ever-present thought that many a change

may take place before the reunion they all hope for. But on the greatest of all voyages, the farewells may be for ever. It is very solemn when a godly father or mother takes farewell of their offspring, never to meet them again. This solemn and sobering thought has been blessed to many, and the bedsides of dying parents have been places where God has more than once met with weeping children. Happy are those who, in parting, have the assurance that all is well. They are bound together in the bundle of life and they can look forward to a happy eternity, where partings are for ever at an end.

4. *Drawing away from the shore.* I well remember the peculiar feeling I had, the first time I crossed the ocean, as the great liner drew out from the shore and turned her bow to the mighty waste of waters over which we were to sail for days on end. One cannot easily master that feeling, when many thoughts come surging through the mind: What has that ocean in store for me? Are there storms to be met that will shake my confidence? Will everything go well? Such thoughts arise and, with persistence, seek the mind's attention. There is a certain feeling of mystery about the sea even though it be a well-explored and charted ocean and even though thousands have sailed over it before. But if it is the first time for you, the knowledge that ships are crossing and recrossing that ocean every day cannot altogether remove this feeling.

So when the Lord's people draw out from the shore into that world of mystery beyond this life, is it any wonder that, at times, like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, they are at a loss as to what is happening? If one has confidence in the Master, however, all things will be different. He has sailed over that mysterious ocean. And, while no ship that has once left the shores of time ever returns, the believer is safe in the Master's hands. No shipwrecks are reported when He is in charge and the passengers may confidently say: "All is well".

5. *The Ocean.* Someone who has never sailed over the ocean may think it must be very uninteresting. It is not so. There is a marvellous variety with a sameness, which is characteristic of God's works. The vastness of the waste of waters, with the multitude of creatures which live there, brings before one's mind the greatness of the Creator, who has measured the waters of the seas in the hollow of His hand and sends food "in time convenient" to these creatures. Yet, as one of the Puritans put it, there was a time when He who created these mighty oceans and the flowing rivers had to say, "I thirst", and no water was given Him to drink.

6. *The prospects on the other side.* When one sets out across the ocean he has generally the prospect of meeting many friends who will give him a very hearty welcome. It may be a brother or a sister, and in such a case how

affectionate the greetings are – they have parted for a time and are now meeting again. But how infinitely more wonderful is the meeting when the Lord's people reach the other side of life's mysterious ocean! What a Friend is waiting! How beautiful is the home He has prepared for them – that death-free, sorrowless, sinless, tearless city where the peace of God for ever reigns! With what amazement will some of them open their eyes to behold the glory of their Saviour and hear for the first time the heavenly music, the song which in its volume is like the sound of many waters. But how unspeakably solemn is it for those who shall reach that shore friendless, homeless and hopeless. Thousands are sailing out on the great ocean of time with no friend to meet them and no home to receive them. And they have no hope that in eternity it will ever be otherwise.

7. *Safe arrival in port.* When one has crossed the ocean for the first time, it is with pleasurable feelings that land is sighted. The high sense of expectancy and the delight in feeling the solid ground beneath one's feet, together with the captivating sense of newness in all one sees around, produce feelings that are not easily described. So will it be with the Lord's people. All the storms that swept over life's troubled seas are at an end and they have reached the haven they desired to see.

Then are they glad, because at rest and quiet now they be:
 So to the haven He them brings which they desired to see.
 O that men to the Lord would give praise for His goodness then,
 And for His works of wonder done unto the sons of men.

Metrical Psalm 107:30-31

Missionary to India

8. Finding True Comfort

Alexander Duff reached Calcutta from Scotland in 1830. He established a school, so that young Indians would come in contact with the Bible. The last two months we have looked at some conversions which took place under Duff's influence.

Duff was afraid that too much was being made of these conversions. Yet he was truly thankful. "We cannot over-estimate", he wrote, "the worth of one never-dying soul". And he added: If one of them is "found cleaving to the Saviour steadfastly and immovably, we cannot rejoice too much or give too much glory to God". But when he considered how many millions of Indians were still heathens, he was afraid that their joy over these few converts might become "vain boastfulness". He was longing for the time when the whole earth would be filled with God's glory.

But Duff also had work to do among his fellow Scots. The minister of St Andrew's Church – built for Presbyterian worship in Calcutta – was James Bryce. In late 1831 Bryce decided to return to Britain with his wife, who was ill. He wrote to Duff asking him to take his place in St Andrew's and conduct the services for a year, while he was away. Duff wrote back to point out how much he already had to do and how tired this made him. He was willing to consider the matter, nothing more. But the next Duff heard was that Bryce was already on a ship sailing away from Calcutta. In spite of his heavy workload, Duff had no alternative but to begin regular Sabbath services in the Scots' church. He knew that, if St Andrew's closed down, the government might not readily allow it to open again.

It does not seem that Bryce's heart was in his work; one service on Sabbath was quite enough for him. He was much happier editing the *John Bull*, a newspaper or magazine, than doing work which was more suitable for a minister. On his first Sabbath in the St Andrew's pulpit, Duff found only about 20 people sitting in front of him, in a huge church which could seat 800. But soon many more were listening to his preaching.

One day a well-off merchant came to see Duff. He wanted to have his child baptized. The minister told him that he should be attending church and keeping family worship; this would at least show some honest regard for true religion. The merchant was not pleased at first but, as the conversation went on, Duff's kindness won him round. He confessed he was the junior partner in a firm which employed 500 Indians; the senior partner was away in England and he had to supervise the men on Sabbaths, just like on other days. And so, he said, he could not possibly come to church. Such Sabbath-breaking was perfectly common in Calcutta at the time and, sadly, most of the Scots and English made the Lord's Day a time of worldly pleasure if they were not working.

One Saturday the merchant gathered together all the men who were working for him. He told them that for the next month he would not ask them to come to work on Sabbaths, yet he would pay them the same wages as before. If this change made them work more diligently, he would make the new arrangement permanent. At first the workers could not believe what they were hearing, but soon everybody in the villages where they lived was talking about it.

In fact, the change was successful; the work done that month was greater than ever before. So the change did become permanent. It was the beginning of a trend towards Sabbath observance in Calcutta, and eventually the government made the Sabbath a day of rest everywhere. And the merchant's child was baptized in due course.

Six months passed after Duff's first service in St Andrew's Church before he announced that the Lord's Supper would be observed. The next day a young American, from Boston, came to see him. He told the minister that he had been brought up as a Unitarian – someone who does not believe in the Trinity. He had been taught to deny the teaching of the Bible that “there are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory” (*Shorter Catechism*, answer 5).

He told Duff that he was not finding any real comfort in his religion. He thought that if he were to join some of his friends, who were already members of St Andrew's, at the Lord's Table, it would bring him true comfort. Duff explained to him the scriptural teaching that Jesus Christ *is* God, and he did so in very much the same way as he had taught these truths to the Indians. Duff had many other conversations with the American, who began gradually to absorb the true doctrine about the Son of God, who became man and was wounded for the transgressions of sinners.

But the young man became ill and his doctor sent him on a sea journey in the hope that it would help him get better. In fact, he had not sailed far from Calcutta when he passed into eternity. But before he died, he told the captain of the ship to tell Duff that he had found Jesus Christ to be his all-sufficient Saviour – because He is God. He had given up his false beliefs about Jesus and had trusted in Him. He had found true comfort. Duff again had reason to rejoice and to give glory to God because another sinner had been rescued from a lost eternity.

For Junior Readers – Lessons from the Life of John G Paton

Teaching in Glasgow

After losing his post at the Ordnance Survey offices, John G Paton found work on a farm during the harvest season. Once that had finished, he started work as a missionary worker in the city of Glasgow, visiting people and giving out tracts. He got a small salary for this work and he was also given the opportunity of studying at a Free Church college to qualify as a teacher. This would bring him closer towards his goal of becoming a minister.

He was working long hours at his job. He was also trying to keep up with his studies at the College. But he was short of money and that made matters very difficult. He had not wasted the little money he earned, but he had lent some money to another poor student who had not paid him back.

John was now so poor that he could not pay the rent for his lodgings so

he decided to try to sell some of his books. He took some of them and went walking through the streets of Glasgow, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly a notice in a window caught his eye: "Teacher wanted, Maryhill Free Church School; apply at the Manse". He jumped on a bus and a short while later he was the newly-appointed teacher at the Maryhill school. He now had some money to pay his rent because he was paid in advance for this job.

The next morning he arrived at the school to start his new work. The minister had warned John that it was a rough school and gave him a thick cane, saying, "Use that freely, or you will never keep order here". John put the stick away in a drawer; he did not like the idea of using it.

It wasn't until a week later that John had to use the cane. There were evening classes for young adults who were working during the day. One evening a young man and woman came to his class. They made it very obvious by their loud jokes during the lessons that they were only there to have some fun. When John asked them to be quiet, they just got louder and cheekier, making the other students laugh. Finally John told the young man that he had to be quiet or leave. When the young man heard this he stood and put his fists up, as if he was going to start fighting John. John quietly locked the door, put the key in his pocket, went to his drawer and took out the cane he had hoped he would never have to use. He went on to beat the young man, who tried to punch John. Finally the young man was beaten, and in a bad mood he went to his desk, sat down and did his work. The rest of the class were very quiet for the rest of the evening.

Before all the students left that evening, John spoke to them. He said that he would much rather have order and calm in his class by being kind and patient than have to use the cane. None of these young adults gave him any trouble after that.

But the next day, in the day school with the younger children, two boys decided to play a prank. Instead of going to their seats, they went under the floor, where the coals were kept. They made a terrific noise as if a cat and a dog were fighting. The other pupils found this very funny and John found it difficult to control the class. When he asked the two boys to stop and come out, they got even noisier. When it was lunchtime, John got the class to march round singing. The two boys thought the class were leaving, so they came out of their hiding place, only to be seized by their teacher.

John ordered everyone back to their seats and the class acted as a court to decide on a punishment for the two naughty boys. The boys were found guilty and were to be given a severe beating with the cane. But John made another suggestion. His idea was that, since this was the first bad thing the

boys had done, he would not beat them. Instead he would forgive them if they said sorry and promised to work hard and be obedient. The two boys quickly agreed to this and they soon became two of John's favourite pupils.

John had to do something difficult to establish order and authority. He had to use a cane to show the pupils that they must obey him. But he did not abuse the cane, or use it when he did not need to. As soon as he had order and could keep it using other methods, the cane was put away. Punishing children is not easy. You might think that your parents or teachers find it easy, and enjoy giving out punishments; whether it is being sent to your room, having to write out lines or being given a smack. But I can tell you they do not.

The well-known words, "Spare the rod and spoil the child", are based on Proverbs 13:24. Because we are all sinners, we do many things that are bad for ourselves and bad to other people. God's Word teaches that there must be discipline to stop people from becoming worse and worse.

But the most important thing is that God would give us a new heart, so that we would not want to do bad things. You can ask God to give you this new heart, and to forgive all the wrong things you have done. Read Psalm 51:9-10 to see how David prayed for these blessings. *S M Campbell*

The Book of Ruth

95. The Wonder of It All

Rev Keith M Watkins

Ruth 4:18-22. "Now these are the generations of Pharez: Pharez begat Hezron, and Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab, and Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon, and Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David."

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable” (2 Timothy 3:16). That includes the long lists of names (called *genealogies*) which often appear in the Old Testament, and twice in the New Testament. Perhaps a genealogy seems a strange way to end the Book of Ruth, but this family tree from Pharez to David is here for a purpose.

The holy man of God who wrote Ruth seems to have given us just a list of names. But he was as surely moved by the Holy Spirit when he wrote these last words as when he wrote all the earlier ones. They are as much the Word of God as every other word in the Book. The record of Ruth saying, "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God", is no more inspired than this record of names. So this genealogy must be useful for our souls.

The events of the Book of Ruth took place "in the days when the judges

ruled”, as its first verse told us. Now the last verse points us forward to David, who became king of Israel. The contrast between these two periods could not be greater. In the former, every man did what was right in his own eyes. In the latter, the godly king encouraged every man to do what was right in God’s eyes. God’s great purpose was to bring in those better days. By including Boaz and Obed in the genealogy, we are shown that the events recorded in the Book of Ruth were essential links in the wonderful chain of Divine providence which accomplished God’s plan.

It is wonderful how the Lord uses *all* things to achieve His purposes. He “worketh all things after the counsel of His own will” (Ephesians 1:11). The Shorter Catechism explains: “God’s works of providence are His most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions” (answer 11). Everything that happened in the lives of the people in this Book achieved God’s purposes. It is so in the lives of all God’s people. Everything that happens to them is part of His great plan to bring them to glory. It is also so in the lives of those who never become God’s people, which should make every unbeliever tremble. Everything that happens to them is part of the great plan to make them vessels of wrath, to declare God’s justice in the eternal punishment of sin.

Providence is wonderful because God can achieve His great purposes by using the *smallest* of events. A poor widow like Ruth going out to glean was a small thing. But she happened “to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz” (2:3). There she met Boaz, which led to their marriage and the birth of Obed, who in turn became grandfather to the great king David.

The Book of Ruth has focussed on one family’s circumstances, with significance at most for the small town of Bethlehem, which was “little among the thousands of Judah” (Micah 5:2). These last verses take us to a wider view, to show that these little details of daily life had an overall purpose which affected the whole land. In the Book of Esther, the deliverance of all the Jews turned on one man not being able to sleep one night.

Even the smallest cog in a vast machine is vital if it is to operate. It cannot work without it. If one small link is missing from a chain, the chain is useless. In God’s plan, everyone has their place. If you are a child of God, you may feel very small, and you may think that your contribution to His cause is not important. But even a cup of cold water has its place in God’s great plan and will never be forgotten.

God’s providence is wonderful because it uses the most *ordinary* things. A man and woman met, married and had a son. This has been repeated times without number throughout the history of the world. But God was using this ordinary event for the extraordinary purpose of raising up David to sit on the

throne of Israel. If you feel that your life has nothing out of the ordinary in it, do not think that God has no purpose for you. He can use very ordinary lives to achieve His most extraordinary purposes.

God uses things which seem to us so *disorderly* and chaotic. Elimelech did not know exactly what he would do in Moab when he fled from the famine in Judah. Naomi in particular was perplexed at times. Ruth had no plan apart from getting food when she went out to glean. The different fields must have looked confusing to her. But the Lord had a great plan through it all, which was being steadily unfolded. The days of the judges were days of confusion to many in Israel, but "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Corinthians 14:33). To Him, what happens is always "ordered in all things, and sure" (2 Samuel 23:5). When we are not sure of the way forward, the Lord knows.

To achieve His plans, God wonderfully uses things that seem to be *contrary*. A family leaving Bethlehem when there is a famine and going to another country is not the way we would plan to produce a king from that town and family. Then the deaths of Naomi's husband and sons seemed to devastate her family, but were actually used by God to bring Boaz and Ruth together; His purpose was to bring David from Naomi's family so that he would rule over Israel in righteousness. When Boaz went to Ruth's nearer kinsman, their marriage looked in doubt. But God's purpose pressed forward. No obstacle could prevent it happening.

Where a stream comes down the hillside, the rocks seem to prevent the water's downward course. But the water finds its way around every obstacle, driven by the irresistible force of gravity. God's plan is like that. Nothing can stop it. Our frustrations and disappointments do not get in its way. Naomi's bitter experiences in Moab did not prevent the coming of David; they actually brought it about.

Divine providence is wonderful because God uses even *sinful* things to achieve His holy purposes, such as the departure of Elimelech from Israel, his sons marrying heathen wives, and the nearer kinsman refusing to do his duty of marrying Ruth. God brings good out of evil. That is what Joseph told his brothers about their sin of selling him into Egypt: "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20). Even the sin of crucifying Christ was God's plan: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). Even sin cannot stop God's holy plan.

O the wonder of it all! Trust in the God of providence. "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass" (Psalm 37:5).

Running the Race

5. Continuing to the Finish

Rev Neil M Ross

This is the final section of a talk given at the 2006 Youth Conference of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. It was sub-titled, "Some Bible Teaching About the Christian Life", and is now edited and slightly enlarged. Last month we finished the longest section, "Continuing in the Christian Race", and focused especially on the duty to "lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us".

An important rule for continuing in the Christian race is always to follow the prescribed path. The physical runner must keep to the track made for the race. He is not counted as a competitor if he strikes out on a course of his own. So we are to follow the route mapped out for us by the Word of God – a route referred to as "the good way" (Jeremiah 6:16), the "way of holiness" (Isaiah 35:8), the "path of righteousness" (Psalm 23:3), and so on. Sad indeed was the case of a young person whom I heard say long ago, when directed to the Bible as the guide for what is right and wrong, "I have my own moral code!" If we decide to follow a secular moral code devised by ourselves or by others, our destination will be destruction.

Satan sometimes succeeds in diverting the young professing Christian from the Bible, and thus from the right way. When the Christian backslides openly, he brings shame upon himself, disgrace on the cause of Christ, and discouragement to others who are running the race. Take, for example, the cases of Christian and Hopeful in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and who were presented to us in the article, "Out of the Right Way", in the April 2006 issue of *The Young People's Magazine*. How great were their troubles when they turned aside into By-path Meadow and were imprisoned in Doubting Castle. If you turn to *The Pilgrim's Progress* itself you will see that, after their bitter experience, they acknowledged, "Out of the way we went, and then we found / What it was to tread upon forbidden ground". The lesson is plain: "Watch and pray!" This race must be run, as it were, on one's knees, praying as David did: "Hold up my goings, Lord, me guide in those Thy paths divine, / So that my footsteps may not slide out of those ways of Thine" (Psalm 17:5).

As the Christian presses heavenwards, he must not only have the glory of God as his objective but also the good of others – especially his fellow believers. Each of the runners in a team should have each other's welfare at heart. So Christians are to encourage each another in the race, and show their unity to a watching world. As someone has said, "The believer is the world's Bible." Tertullian, who lived towards the end of the second century, said that

the heathen commented about believers: "See how these Christians love one another!" We should so run as not to repel others but rather draw them. The Biblical rule is, "Increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men" (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

Another important instruction for continuing to run the race is this: "Run with patience". In other words, the Christian is to keep going on in spite of the obstacles. These obstacles are sometimes his own discouraging failures, or the scoffing and rejection of friends when he refuses to join them in questionable activities, or the hostility of his fellow students or his teachers as he sticks to his Christian beliefs, or opposition at home when he is trying to follow Jesus in the way, or persecution at work when he insists on keeping to Christian principles.

Sometimes, when severely pressed, the Christian wonders, "How can I keep going?" The answer is this other instruction: "looking unto Jesus". To be looking unto Jesus is not only to behold Him in faith as the Lamb of God to save us from our sins, but also to be at all times trusting in Him and drawing out of the fullness that is in Him. Christ assures those who look to Him, as they run the race, that His grace is sufficient for them and that His strength is made perfect in their weakness.

Keeping on in the race means also *making progress* towards the finish. Sanctification is a progressive work. As our Confession of Faith says, "The saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Paul said, "I press toward the mark for the prize". The runner in a physical race, in pressing on toward the finish, knows it would be stupid to stop on the course and do some running on the spot. Energetic as that might be, it is not moving forward. So the Christian strives to advance in holiness. He often examines himself to see if he hates sin more and more and is forsaking it; and if he is growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. And so the Christian will continue to the end and obtain the prize. Let us now look at the last point:

The *finish* of the Christian race. The true Christian will indeed finish the race. God's work of grace in his heart and life will surely be completed; His people will not only be given grace but also glory (Psalm 84:11). The bud of grace will surely blossom into the full bloom of glory.

The finish of the Christian course is indeed glorious – so glorious that the greatest honours heaped on certain people for their achievements in this world are trivial in comparison. Those who run the Christian race will at last arrive in the place of which Samuel Rutherford said, "Glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel's Land." Paul had this glorious finish in view when he said, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ

Jesus". That prize is described in the Bible as a crown – “a crown of glory that fadeth not away” (1 Peter 5:4); “a crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:8); “a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

No doubt this figure of a crown alludes to the ancient custom of the successful runner being crowned with a garland of evergreen laurel leaves, but even that laurel crown faded away eventually. It is impossible for this to happen to the glorious, unfading crown of life. It is the crown of life because everlasting life is the essence of it. One Bible commentator says, “It is a crown that is constituted of life – literally, ‘the life’ – the only true life, the highest life, eternal life”. When the glorious crown of life is set before us in the Bible, it says to us, as it were, “Run the race. Flee from the wrath to come. Lay hold on eternal life.”

Let us remember, however, no one can obtain the crown without taking up the cross. Deny yourself, “take up the cross,” said Christ, “and follow Me.” As Christ was glorified after His suffering, so the crown of glory will be given only to those who have taken up the cross and suffered as Christians. All Christ’s followers do suffer persecution more or less, as Scripture says, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”. If we decline to face the opposition involved in running the race, we cannot hope to receive the prize.

On the other hand, suppose we had to suffer even martyrdom for following Christ, we would not be defeated, but rather victorious. It is recorded of Polycarp of the early Church that, when he was brought to trial for being a Christian, he was ordered by the judge to blaspheme Christ. He firmly answered, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?” He was then put to death in the flames. He died willingly for his Lord, and thus was ushered into His presence to be crowned with glory.

The Christian is motivated and encouraged to run the race by the bright prospect of obtaining the crown. Turn a deaf ear to the suggestion of Satan that there are brighter prospects if you go with the majority, massed together in their millions, as they run their marathon along the broad way. Turn your back on godless acquaintances who try to divert you from being serious about your soul, and who pressurise you to join them in sin.

In *The Pilgrim’s Progress* we read that Christian, as he struggled to set out on his way to heaven, had tremendous pressure put on him by his dear wife and children. They pleaded with him to come back to the City of Destruction. What was his response? Bunyan tells us: “But the man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on, crying, ‘Life! Life! Eternal life!’ So he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the plain.”

So, finally, the crucial question for everyone of us is: Will we live for the fading rewards of this world and lose our souls, or will we run the Christian race and obtain the everlasting crown of glory? I leave the question with you, and also these Scripture commands: "Let us run the race that is set before us," and, "So run, that ye may obtain" (1 Corinthians 9:24).

For Younger Readers

Do Zebras Fight?

Have you noticed the lovely zebra on the front cover? With its black-and-white striped coat, it is a beautiful animal. Though all zebras look the same, the stripes on the different animals are never the same. That is the way God made them, and all that He does is wonderful.

The zebra stands there so quietly, you would think it would never get angry. You would think it would never fight. But you would be wrong.

Yes, zebras do fight. And so do children.

We might look at you or someone else, and say, "What a nice boy!" or, "What a nice girl!" And then we might think, "That boy or girl would never fight".

But how wrong we can be! Nice boys and nice girls are not always nice. Is that not so?

What about you? Do you fight? Do you fight with your brother, or with your sister, or with other children in school?

I expect you do. Why do I think so? Because you are a sinner. The Bible tells us that "all have sinned". That is true of you and of all the children you know.

You have done what God wants you not to do. That is what sin means: to do what is wrong, though God tells you to do what is right. And, every time you fight, you are doing what is wrong; you are doing what God tells you not to do.

That was not how God made Adam at first, in the Garden of Eden. But Adam sinned; he ate the fruit which God told him not to eat. That is why we too are sinners; that is why children fight. And it is because sin came into the world that even zebras fight.

Scripture and Catechism Exercises 2006-07

Names for Exercise 1

Senior Section: *Bonar Bridge:* Sandy Campbell. *Dingwall:* Beverly and Kathryn Mackenzie. *Dunoon:* Esther Maley. *Glasgow:* Kenneth C Gillies, Donald MacLeod. *Inverness:* Mark Campbell, James Fraser, Jonathan Schouten. *King's Lynn:* Timothy Wiltshire. *London:* Elizabeth Munns, David Rowland, Jeremy and Justin van Kralingen. *Scaynes Hill:* Abigail and Martha Main. *Sidcup:* Alexander Turnbull. *Swavesey:* Rebecca Parish. *Stornoway:* Anne R Dickie.

Intermediate Section: *Barnoldswick:* Philip J Martin. *Bonar Bridge:* Elizabeth Campbell. *Crowborough:* Heidi Woodhams. *Dingwall:* Alistair Mackenzie. *Dunoon:* Rachel Maley. *Edinburgh:* Eilidh Logan, Jonathan MacDonald. *Farr:* Alasdair MacQueen. *Glasgow:* Laura Chisholm, Catherine Freeke, Neil Gillies. *Inverness:* Andrew Campbell, Natalie Macaskill, Catherine Schouten. *King's Lynn:* Joanna Wiltshire. *Kyle:* Daniel Whear. *London:* William Munns. *Longcot:* Lucy Cooper. *North Tolsta:* Mark Mackenzie. *North Uist:* John Cameron, Christina Macdonald, Laura Macinnes. *Portree:* Rachel M Mackinnon. *Scaynes Hill:* Philip Main. *Sidcup:* Constance and Rupert J Turnbull. *Stornoway:* Alasdair Gillies. *Stratherrick:* John Fraser. *Swavesey:* Helen Parish. *Vatten:* Rebecca Fleming.

Junior Section: *Barnoldswick:* Robert Ross. *Crowborough:* Kevin Woodhams. *Dingwall:* Andrew MacLeod, Ruth M Macleod. *Edinburgh:* Catriona Logan, Isla Macdonald. *Gairloch:* Rachel Mackenzie, Mairi Wyatt. *Glasgow:* Donna Chisholm, Kate Gillies, Rachel and Ruairidh Macleod, Peter Macpherson. *Haywards Heath:* Hannah Woodhams. *Inverness:* Anna Fraser, Thomas Maton, Peter Schouten. *King's Lynn:* Matthew Wiltshire. *London:* Edward Munns, Amy van Kralingen. *Longcot:* Ruth Cooper. *Luton:* Stephen Kingham. *North Harris:* Tormod Mackinnon. *North Tolsta:* Shona Harrison, Sheena Mackenzie, Lucy A MacLeod, Sean Macleod. *North Uist:* Margaret Cameron, Fraser MacDonald, John A Macdonald. *Peasmarsch:* Alasdair Bailey. *Sidcup:* Lucy Turnbull. *Stornoway:* Sarah Gillies, Lauren Macdonald. *Stratherrick:* Ewen Fraser. *Swavesey:* Sarah Parish. *Swindon:* Alison Tugwell. *Trowbridge:* Joanna Broome. *Uig:* Murdo G Mackay. *Vatten:* Sabrina Annand.

Upper Primary Section: *Barnoldswick:* David Martin, Rebecca Ross. *Croydon:* Andrew Hickman. *Dingwall:* Graham MacLeod. *Dunoon:* Elspeth Maley. *Edinburgh:* Daniel Macdonald. *Fortrose:* Katie Macleod. *Gairloch:* Donald Mackenzie, Catherine Wyatt. *Glasgow:* Callum Macpherson. *Haywards Heath:* Edwin and Kate Woodhams. *Inverness:* John Maton. *Kyle:* Nathan Whear. *London:* Edward Martin, Andrew Munns, Ben and David Strata. *North Tolsta:* Murrin Harrison, Innes Mackenzie. *North Uist:* Iain Boyd, Angus Macinnes. *Oxon:* Samuel Cooper, Philippa Sayers. *Scaynes Hill:* Deborah Main. *Sidcup:* Jemima and Jeremy Turnbull. *Staffin:* Neil Matheson, Carey Ross. *Stornoway:* Leah Beaton, Cirsty Gillies. *Swavesey:* Robert Parish. *Trowbridge:* Nathan Broome. *Ullapool:* Lewis Mackenzie. *Vatten:* Jayne-Anne Fleming.

Lower Primary Section: *Aberdeen:* Rachel and Sarah Somerset. *Barnoldswick:* James Ross. *Croydon:* Marcus and Susanna Hickman. *Dingwall:* Jane Mackenzie, Matthew Ross. *Edinburgh:* Annabelle Macdonald, Emma, Jessica and Jonathan Norris. *Gairloch:* Andrew Mackenzie, Roderick Wyatt. *Garrabost:* Isla Macdonald. *Glasgow:* Katie and Kenneth Macpherson. *Haywards Heath:* Joseph Woodhams. *Inverness:* Jonathan Fiddes, Jonathan Janczak, Rebekah Maton. *King's Lynn:* Susie Wiltshire. *Kyle:* Sarah Whear. *London:* Claudia, Miles and Oliver Martin, Henry and Samuel Munns, Angus and William Pontin, Elizabeth Strata. *Ness:* Kathryn Ferguson, Johan MacInnes. *North Tolsta:* Mairi Campbell, Scott Macleod. *North Uist:* Eilidh Cameron. *Sidcup:* Annabelle, Henry, Joseph and Sebastian Turnbull. *Stornoway:* Aimee and Cara Macleod, Eilidh and Kirsten Macleod, Ryan MacSween, Alasdair, Donald and Uilliam Murray. *Swavesey:* Priscilla Parish.

2007 Youth Conference

This year's conference will be held, God willing, in Edinburgh from Tuesday, April 3, to Thursday, April 5. Further details are to appear in next month's magazine.

Looking Around Us

The Danger of Idolatry

Archaeologists digging under a Roman Catholic cathedral in Rome have unearthed a stone coffin. This is no ordinary coffin; the archaeologists claim that the remains inside it are those of the Apostle Paul. The words, "Paul Apostle Martyr" are carved on the coffin, which lies in a tomb dating back to at least AD 390.

But that is more than 300 years after Paul's death; no one will ever be able to know whose skeleton is actually in the coffin. Indeed it is likely that God in His providence has hidden the graves of the Apostles, and other men and women mentioned in the Bible, to prevent idolatry.

Paul's soul is in heaven; his body was probably laid in a grave very soon after his death by some of his Christian friends. This coffin, no matter whose body lies inside, should be left where it is and covered over again. The important point is that God knows where Paul's body lies. And when Christ will come the second time, on the resurrection day, He will call that body – along with those of all the other saints – out of its resting place. Till then it should not be disturbed.

There are as yet, it seems, no plans to open the coffin. But if the coffin is ever opened, the body will certainly attract idolatrous worship. Holes can clearly be seen in the coffin through which idolaters of some earlier generation would have pushed pieces of cloth to touch the relic. But touching Paul's bones could do no one any good. It was from heaven that Paul got every spiritual blessing he ever received, and it was in God's kindness that he received healing for his body and the supply of every other need – not by touching the body of some saint with a cloth, or by becoming involved in any other superstitious practice.

Indeed it was Paul who told the Corinthians: "Flee from idolatry". How disturbed he would have been to think that anyone would treat his body as a relic to be worshipped!