

# Climbing the Hill of Difficulty

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

O God, by your Spirit tell us what we need to hear,  
show us what we ought to do,  
and empower us to do it,  
through Christ Jesus  
our crucified, risen, and reigning Lord.  
Amen.

## Introduction: *Christian climbs the Hill of Difficulty*

Last week we saw how Christian was finally able to get the heavy burden off his shoulders at the cross beside the **Holy Way**. His burden rolled down the mountain, then rested in the empty tomb, never to be seen again.

But Christian's pilgrimage is far from over—in many ways it's just beginning. Not far past the cross, he found three men sleeping along the road, with their ankles chained together—their names were **Sloth**, **Simple**, and **Presumption**. Christian hoped to awaken them from their slumber, loose their chains, and have them join him on his journey to the **Celestial City**, but they would have none of it and kept sleeping.

As Christian continued on the **Holy Way**, he encountered two new travelers—**Formality** and **Hypocrisy** who were from the **land of Vainglory**. They came a different way—finding a shortcut by scaling over a wall, rather than entering through the **Wicket Gate**, as Christian was instructed.

**Formality** and **Hypocrisy** poked fun at Christian for sticking to the travel directions given to him by **Evangelist**.

So Christian walked a little ahead of them, reading from his book as he walked to refresh his spirit and help overcome the disappointments of his day. Well, it wasn't long before the three came upon the **Hill of Difficulty**—and it was long and steep. The **Holy Way** went straight up the hill. However, two roads diverged around either side of the **Hill of Difficulty**—one named **Danger** and the other **Destruction**.

Both **Formality** and **Hypocrisy** thought these two ways that bypassed the **Hill of Difficulty** would get them to the back end of the hill merging again with the **Holy Way**. So they took the easier route—**Formality** choosing **Danger** and **Hypocrisy** **Destruction**. Neither was seen again.

Christian chose the **Holy Way**. He first drank from the fresh spring at the foot of the **Hill of Difficulty**, and then began sprinting straight up the hill.

As he made his ascent he began singing:

*I must climb to the mountaintop  
Never mind if the path is steep,  
For I know that through strife lies the way of life,  
And the wayfarer must not weep.  
So courage my heart, don't faint, don't fear.  
Though the rough rock makes the way slow,  
The easy track only leads me back,  
Up and on is the way I must go!*

But soon Christian's progress began to slow down. His pace went from a run to a walk to a crawl upon his hands and knees for the way became very steep.

When Christian was about halfway up the **Hill of Difficulty**, he saw a pleasant shady place. As he rested, he gazed upon his nice new clothes the **Shining Ones** gave him. As he drifted off to sleep, the **Scroll** he was given fell out of his hand.

Sometime later, a voice awoke Christian. He arose with a jolt and continued on his way. Soon two men came darting at Christian going the wrong direction. "Turn back! Turn back! There are lions up ahead!" yelled **Mistrust**. "The further we go, the more dangerous it is," explained **Fearful**. "We made it up the **Hill of Difficulty**—but the journey got even more treacherous, so we turned around and are going back home."

"You make me afraid, but I would rather face the dangers ahead than the dangers back in my city—I will certainly perish there. I must press onward. To go back is nothing but death, to go forward I fear death, but I know life everlasting is beyond it."

**Fearful** and **Mistrust** just shook their heads and then ran down the hill.

To find comfort, Christian reached for his **Scroll** in his pocket—but there was nothing in his empty pockets. Panic came over him and Christian became distressed. Then he remembered resting half-way of the **Hill of Difficulty** and that he must have lost his **Scroll** there.

Without delay, he began searching and praying as he backtracked—sighing and weeping. How could I sleep in the midst of difficulty and in the daytime? I've had to walk this **Hill of Difficulty** three times now, instead of once, like Israel wandering in the wilderness. Finally arriving at the same shady space, Christian sat down and wept, but when he looked up, his eyes fell upon the **Scroll**. Hope returned to Christian.

With his **Scroll** safely tucked away in his pocket, strength and even joy helped him climb the rest of the hill, even as he nervously looked all around for the beasts of prey.

*Let's hear now from...*

### **Scripture: Romans 5:1-5 (NRSV)**

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

### **SERMON – Climbing the Hill of Difficulty**

2020 has felt like one long obstacle course—hasn't it? Reading about Christian's adventures and challenges in the *Pilgrim's Progress* reminds me of how the spiritual journey is often like an obstacle course too. Challenge after challenge has come our way. The good news is that **HOPE** is going to help us make it through our difficulties. We're going to do this—with God's help.

Enjoy this excerpt from "*American Ninja*" where HOPE does not disappoint us...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sgi0ljvXxpk>

By the grace of God, we're justified by faith—meaning that in Christ our relationship with God is no longer strained or estranged. Before we were enemies, now we're God's friends. The relationship between Creator and creature and creature and creature has been repaired, restored, and reconciled in Christ Jesus. God did for us what we could never do ourselves. God has now empowered us to carry out his intentions for us. Because we are justified, we have peace with God THROUGH our Lord Jesus Christ.

And life doesn't have to be calm or tranquil to experience the peace of God. Peace is for times of conflict and upheaval. The peace of God is independent of our circumstances. It's sturdy—in fact wear and tear makes hope stronger rather than weaker. I don't know about you, but this gives me great hope.

Hope is based upon a higher plane than our circumstances. Hope is grounded not in the weather system of our society or individual lives. Our hope is grounded in God who is eternal and unchanging. It's built on nothing less than the solid rock of Christ. We can trust and believe in the midst of trials and tribulations. With hope, we can be merry even when there is no merriment.

This is the beauty of faith, hope, and love at work in us:

- Our obstacles become stepping-stones.
- Demolition becomes construction.
- Obstruction becomes an intersection.
- Darkness becomes light.
- Defense becomes offense.
- Crucifixion becomes resurrection.

In God we trust, not our situations.

And there are times of doubt for the Christian, even when we're trying so hard to trust. With hope we may doubt, but it's in God we doubt. Yet we doggedly believe that hardship is infused with meaning. It's in the crucible that we encounter the cross of Christ. It's in the crucible we encounter the risen Christ. Crucifixion and resurrection are both found in the crucible. That is our hope.

As Karl Barth says,

*"This is not an achievement of our spirit, but the action of the Holy Spirit... given to us."*

It's THROUGH Christ all this is possible.

Our Christian pilgrimage isn't so much about self-help as GOD-help. God gives us divine help to tackle and overcome our challenges. God gives us divine help to see our hardships differently. Hope helps us stand the test and remain standing. Why? Because Christ's actual presence and influence is at work in you and me, as we speak. Trust. Believe.

Christ gives us the gumption and the guts to face our obstacles head on rather than fleeing from them—or ignoring them. The key is Christ—he opens up the door to God's presence that was previously locked. Christ ushers us into the court of the King. And when we come before the throne, we experience not judgment or criticism, but grace. Kindness. Open arms.

This grace in which we stand and live equips and empowers us for all that life and death throws at us. Grace frees us to be very honest about our situation. We don't have to be in denial or super-spiritual and pretend a situation isn't challenging or painful. But we also have hope that something redemptive is going on in the midst of our very real struggles and difficulties.

Our difficulties aren't meaningless or purposeless. Our difficulties refine us—burning away the impurities, making us like sterling silver. When we find ourselves in the pressure cooker—a growth is taking place. It isn't mere subtraction. Purification, not subtraction is going on. In fact, there's not subtraction but a progression going on. A pilgrim's progression. A pilgrim's purification.

We can have the audacity to exult in our hardships and rejoice in our problems, because we know that it's about God—not us. Our victory is assured, even when it looks like we're down for the count. We have good hope for the future—nothing less than sharing in God's glory. We are entirely in God's hands. The eyes of faith can look through affliction and look through suffering and find their meaning in Christ who defeated death.

Through God, hardship develops in us patient endurance. We draw from God's unlimited strength, rather than our limited resources. The ever-flowing fountain of the Spirit dwells in us, the church collectively, and in each Christian individually. The Spirit is God's pledge to us that he will see us through to glory.

Through God, patient endurance produces a tried and true character. We're tested and we pass the test. Through God, this tried and true character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us. One translation puts it this way, "Such hope is no fantasy."

Sigmund Freud wrote that human hope is merely wish fulfillment, mere fantasy. Freud wrote that we just imagine things to be true because we greatly wish for them. We want them to happen so bad that we believe they are real. Paul begs to differ with Freud. Faith helps us to see the reality behind our troubles—that Christ has overcome them. Two people can be facing the same situation. One can be driven to despair. The other can be inspired to hope.

Hope challenges us to greatness in the face of adversity. Hope refuses to cave in, give up, peter out, or get down. One person put it this way: *"I don't like crises, but I like the opportunities they supply."* Hope sees the opportunity in the crisis. Because of God's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we have a humble confidence, a joyful assurance that not only will we persevere, but we will enjoy God's glory in due time.

We know deep down in our heart of hearts, that God loves us through thick and thin, no matter what comes our way. God uses and redeems our challenges to make us more tested, trusting, mature, resilient, and faithful. The Spirit makes us anti-fragile and unshaken by our circumstances. Unshaken, we can shake things off of us.

Let it roll off your back, straight into God's loving hands.

Amen.

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