

# Making Safe Passage to the Celestial City

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"The Celestial City" from Pilgrim's Progress*

## Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone. Let the heavenly food of the scripture we are about to hear nourish us today in the ways of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen

## Scripture: Revelation 7:13-17 (NRSV)

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship him day and night within his temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.  
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;  
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

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

## SERMON – Making Safe Passage to the Celestial City

Last week, our fearless pilgrims, Christian and Hopeful, ascended the **Delectable Mountains**.

They continued from there and along the way had spirited and soul-searching debates with **Ignorance** and **Atheist**. They also had a harrowing encounter with **Flatterer**, who still found a way to sidetrack them and get them entangled in a net, despite the shepherds warning. When all seemed lost, a Shining One appeared, tore the net, and freed the pilgrims.

"Follow me and I will set you along the Holy Way once again. And don't forget to read the directions the shepherds gave you."

Onward they moved—making it through the **Valley of the Shadow of Death**.

Without the perspective glass, Christian and Hopeful could see the pearls and precious stones of the **Celestial City** with the naked eye.

Christian and Hopeful finally arrived at a river that encircled the Celestial City. There was no bridge that crossed over the river. And the river was deep and the waters dark. Two Shining Ones appeared and announced,

"You must go wade through the waters of the **River of Death** or you cannot come to the gate."

Christian looked all around hoping for some alternative way to avoid the river.

"Is the water all the same depth?" The Shining Ones said,

"No—all we can say is that you will find it deeper or shallower as you trust in the King of this city."



"Thus they got over."

Christian and Hopeful resigned themselves to the face of the water. Upon entering the River of Death Christian immediately began to sink and he cried out to his good friend Hopeful,

"I'm sinking! The billows are going over my head!"

"Be courageous my brother," said Hopeful, "I feel the bottom and it is firm!"

Horror began to flood Christian's soul.

"Hopeful, the sorrows of death have encompassed me! I shall not see the land that flows with milk and honey!"

A darkness fell upon Christian so that he lost his senses. He could neither remember nor name the sweet refreshments he experienced along his pilgrimage. Terror overtook him—he knew he would drown in the River of Death, failing to reach his destination. But Hopeful struggled by Christian's side to keep his head above the waters.

At times, it appeared Christian would sink down for good, but after a short time he would rise to the surface again. Christian seemed half-dead, yet Hopeful comforted his companion,

"Brother, I see the gate! People are standing at the river banks, ready to greet us!"

"They are waiting for you Hopeful, not for me."

"Be courageous Christian! Jesus Christ makes you whole!"

With one squinted eye, Christian could vaguely see what looked like multitudes. And he heard them cheering and beckoning. He may have even heard his name mentioned. Then these promises poured from Christian's mouth,

*"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they will not overflow you."*

And then in that moment, the Enemy seemed still as a stone. For the first time, Christian's toe rested upon firm footing. And from there the rest of the river became shallow and the two could cross over.

Two Shining Ones led them towards the gate—holding the pilgrim's arms. Though they were ascending a mighty hill, they climbed with agility and speed.

They gave further guidance to the pilgrims,

"You are now going to the **paradise of God**—and there you will see the **Tree of Life**, and you will eat of its never fading fruits. When you arrive to the gates, you will be given white robes, and every day you will walk and talk with the king. There you will see things differently than when you were in the lower regions of the earth. The old things—sorrow, sickness, affliction, and death—they have passed away. You will see the Holy One, and you will look upon your Redeemer in the face. You will see your friends and loved ones. You will be joyfully welcomed by them."

As Christian and Hopeful neared the gates—the trumpets blasted with 10,000 welcomes echoing. Bells were ringing. Joyful and melodious noises filled the air.

"Enter into the joy of your Lord."

The city shined like a sun. Reverent voices worshipped,

"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!"

Our pilgrims' earthly journey was done. Their heavenly journey was about to begin. And then, my dear listener, I awoke from my dream.

*Pay attention to my stories and my traveling tale.  
Open the curtains, look within the veil.  
Turn up my metaphors, and do not fail.  
If you seek them, such things you will find  
as will be helpful to an honest mind.  
Throw away the impurities, preserve the gold of this lore.  
Eat your fill of the apple—throw none away but the core.  
Taste God's delicious food  
and see that indeed the Lord is good. Amen.*

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