

OUR GUARDING GOD

"For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the Lord will go before You; and the God of Israel will be your rearward." Isaiah 52:12.

How do you regard human life? Perhaps the three most frequent descriptions of life are a battle, a voyage, and a march.

Many have spoken of life as a battle. William James said, "For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight.

Many have spoken of life as a voyage, like the passing of a ship across seas which today may be as smooth as glass, and tomorrow tossed with a hurricane — on and on, till the harbor lights appear on the other side and the desired haven is won.

But the picture which doubtless has the widest appeal is that of life as a march. We talk about "the milestones of the years." We put an ear to the ground and we hear the tramp, tramp, tramp of the hosts of humanity. We turn the pages of history and we see the cavalcade of the sons of men. Life is a march. Many of the greatest spirits who have ever lived have taught us to regard life as a march. John Bunyan, for one, gives us his immortal pictures of the road beaten bare by the passing of pilgrim feet. One of the great hymns expresses it like this:

"Through the night of doubt and sorrow
Onward goes the pilgrim band,
Singing songs of expectation,
Marching to the promised land."

That is the history of the sons of men. That is a description of each of our lives today — with the milestones hurrying by.

How to deal with your past and how to deal with your future are matters that should concern every one of you. In all probability, you are much less sure how to do either than was the average person a generation or so ago. As a matter of fact, most people today are not sure of many things. Many, who read the periodicals and listen to the news media, find it hard to believe firmly in the things that are good. They do not see anything but misery ahead. It is the prevalence of this mood that caused Reinhold Niebuhr to declare: "We are a generation that must have the spiritual resources to deal with the problem of frustration."

Niebuhr was right. And I am convinced that these required "spiritual resources" are to be found where the prophets found them in the dark days of Israel's history, where the apostles found them in the difficult days of the first century, and where the martyrs found them in the days when the price of faith came high. Those resources are not in ourselves; they are in God. We are but the channels through which they will pour if only we will confess our emptiness and impotence and begin to believe the mighty promises of God.

Here is one of these glorious promises which we need to believe: "For the Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rearward." Moffatt translates it: "The Eternal goes in front of you, and your rear-guard is Israel's God." What a life! With God in front and God behind, the guarded one continues to march.

I. The Confidence Which Our Guarding God Inspires.

Try to place yourself where the exiled people of Jerusalem and Judah were at the time to which Isaiah refers. The captivity in Babylon was ended. By the edict of Cyrus the people were free to return to their beloved Zion and to their native

Judah, and that with the good will of Cyrus and under his protection. But Isaiah saw that many of the timid souls were hesitant about striking out boldly to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it. People are such curious creatures of habit that they prefer to go on doing an inferior thing that is easy in place of doing a noble thing that is difficult or costly. The prophet knew this. He foresaw that others would think that they should return to Jerusalem, but that they would remain in the worldly, easy-going life of Babylon. To one and all he cried: "Depart ye, depart ye," for the time has come to march! Turn your pilgrim feet back to Jerusalem. And remember, as you march, "the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear-guard."

Let me bring this truth to you who have heard the call of Christ to follow Him! You, who have left your Babylon of spiritual death and paralyzing habit and indulgent worldliness, who have allowed the Holy Spirit to pull you up sharply and powerfully out of a mediocre discipleship into something utterly surrendered and creatively vital, have a word here which you sorely need. It is that your soul's march will never be a lonely adventure, because it is an adventure with God. If every human comrade should be cut off, you still would not be a forsaken soul, because God will still be with you.

And see what God does! "Your rear-guard" is Israel's God." That means He puts Himself between you and your past. And then this: "The Eternal goes in front of you." He puts Himself between you and your future.

It is when a man is haunted by his past and is hopeless about his future that the present "gets" him. He begins to feel as Nathaniel Hawthorne did when, under the terrific strain of the Civil War, he declared: "The present, the immediate and the actual have proved too potent for me."

John B. Gough, the famous temperance lecturer, came to a similar state of mind, albeit by an entirely different road. At the age of twenty-five Gough was a drunkard. During seven evil years he had saturated himself with alcohol. Thin and nervous and ragged and lonely, he sat by himself at a bare table in a cheerless room in Massachusetts. Yet in some respects he was not alone. As F. W. Boreham put it, the Giant Yesterday was there, bringing up a hundred ghastly ghosts from the experiences that had debauched his body and all but doomed his soul. Giant Yesterday was pitiless. He went so far as to suggest that there are some things in the past which even God cannot alter.

"Wounds of the soul, though healed, will ache
The reddening scars remain
And make confession;
Lost innocence returns no more;
We are not what we were
Before transgression!"

And Giant Tomorrow was there, too, in that bleak room. With a devilish grin, and a smirk of skepticism, he pointed out that good resolutions have a way of going by the boards and religious feelings so easily fade out. He assured the dismal drunkard that if the first temptation did not throw him, the second or the third would surely bring him low.

There, with Giant Yesterday on one side and Giant Tomorrow on the other, John B. Gough tottered perilously on the precipice of despair. But he did not tumble. For there, working through memory, the Spirit of God wrought the miracle of the new birth. Gough's mother had died in poverty and blindness, but she had bequeathed to her son a heritage of priceless value — some memorized passages of scripture and the benediction of a sweet and godly Christian life.

Let the forlorn son, sitting there in that wretched room, tell the story himself:

"All at once it seemed as if the very light she left as she passed had spanned the dark chasm of those seven dreadful years, struck the heart, and opened it. The passages of Scripture that she had taught me, and that had been buried in my memory, came to me as if they were being whispered in my ear by the loving lips of my mother herself. 'He is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by him.' It is the very thing I need! I want to be saved --- I cannot save myself --- He is able to save to the uttermost! Then He is the Saviour for me!"

As a result of that glorious verse John G. Gough took Christ as his Saviour, and trusting his guarding God he walked out into new life. After forty-four years of victory over Giant Yesterday and Giant Tomorrow in the record books of God, and after the same number of years of witnessing for Christ and helping broken human beings to find Christ were stretching back of him like a path of sunlight across a silvery sea, Gough was delivering an address in Philadelphia, when suddenly his voice wavered, his body fell heavily to the floor, and his spirit soared up to God.

Make no mistake about it, God speaks to us through lives like that. It is His way of saying precisely what He said through Isaiah: "The Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rear-guard." God is behind you, writing His large forgiveness over your yesterdays, defending you against the accusations of Satan, and God is in front of you, luring you on to life's highest and best, allaying your fears, challenging your obedience and summoning your faith. What a confidence is yours! Look to the rear: there is God! Look around: there is God! Look ahead: there is God! You are surrounded, garrisoned and guarded by Him, and for marching purposes you cannot ask for more.

II. The Condition Which Our Guarding God Imposes.

Consider these demanding words in the verse which precedes our text: "Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord."

Originally those words applied to the Jews who left Babylon and went back to Jerusalem. If God were going to be their guide and guardian, it was necessary for them to make a clean break with Babylon. They were required to journey with clean hands and clean hearts, as they carried the "vessels" of the Lord. The demand was for separation and purity.

Fellow Christian, let this truth be plowed deeply into your soul: if you would have God as your protector, He must have all of you as His property. The condition of blessing, fellowship and usefulness is a separated walk and a dedicated life. Be a clean Christian and God will go before you, and He will be behind you. What more could you or I ask, than for God to go before to guide us and to go behind to guard us.?

III. The Calmness Which Our Guarding God Imparts.

When we trust our guarding God, He imparts a wonderful calmness to us. As the prophet said: "For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight." Moffatt translates it: "Nor need you hurry forth, flying like fugitives." It is a picture of poise and a sense of power. It is the opposite of frenzy and panic. It is the steady, unaffrighted march of the pilgrim band, swinging along to the cadence of a great confidence. God is back of them defending them from the rear-guard action of their foes. God is ahead of them, leading them on to the journey's triumphant end. Why, then, should they not tramp with a purpose that is calm and strong? How greatly you and I need this tranquility of spirit that springs from the confidence that God forever watches over and cares for His own!

The Lord is our vanguard. Hasn't that been your experience on the road? Can't you look back and see place after place which God had prepared for you? Has He

not always gone with you? Think of the surprises that His grace has so often brought to you? Turn from the joys you have had, and think of the sorrows. Think of the frustrations, the griefs, the disappointments, and the pathos of shattered dreams; and see if you cannot say that even in those experiences grace was present, even there God was leading you on, with a definite plan for your life.

There is an historic incident from the story of Oliver Cromwell and John Hampden, those two stalwart makers of England. It was in the days when they were still almost unknown. So utterly weary and impatient had they grown of the way in which king and court and government were ruining the nation and bringing it down to decadence and disaster that they decided there was only one course left for them to take, and that was to leave the country and never set foot in it again. Memories of the Mayflower's intrepid adventure kept urging them, and their thoughts turned longingly to the new colony beyond the seas where the winds of freedom blew and life was clean. One day news came to them that a ship lying in the Thames River was shortly to leave and cross the Atlantic Ocean. Quietly and unobtrusively Cromwell and Hampden took their places on board. Everything was in readiness for the long voyage; the two men had shaken from their feet the dust of the land whose downfall they lamented, when, at the last moment, messengers dashed up with orders from the king that on no account were they to be allowed to sail. Frustrated and angry at their fate, Cromwell and Hampden came ashore: it was the ruin of their hope. But it was that ruin that gave Cromwell to England, and shaped the subsequent course of history. Had not God, even in the wreck of the plans of the men, been going in front?

As to the future, there is one thing that I know, namely, that God will be out there in front. Is not that enough? It is for me. Whatever else is hidden, it is gloriously certain that God will go before His own. But glorious as that is, that does not finish Isaiah's picture of the march. Is it not a glorious picture — God coming in to hold the rear and to fight the rearguard action?

Do you see the parable for us? "The God of Israel will be your rearguard." For, if the Christian life is an onward march, it is also a rearguard action. Old forsaken things, whose bondage we thought was broken, come hurrying after. They come so near sometimes that you can feel their hot, foul breath upon you — insinuating habits, stubborn temptations, and strong, masterful sins.

Can't you see Christ, with the sword of His Spirit, holding the rear of our march, barring the way of our hereditary foes, delivering us from the menace of their onset, defending us from the even worse disaster of desertion? Where would any of us have been today if Christ had not been our rearguard?

When you think of the onward march of humanity today, and when you think of your own soul's march from the past into the future, remember that there is not only God out in front leading the way, but He is also the rearguard barring the way against the pursuing foes.

Take heart through Christ. The past is God's, and the future is God's; and the power of the love of Christ to hold your spirit strong and steady is really far greater, if you would but believe it, than the power of outward circumstances to violate your peace. Therefore, Christian pilgrim, march with the serenity of Christ possessing you. As you go past the milestones of the years, keep on marching until the long road lead to sunset and evening star and journey's end, and you cross over the river and enter the city of God.