

LED OF GOD

"And He led them forth by the right way." Psalm 107:7.

It is said that history is constantly repeating herself; that the new is but a transcript of the old; that even new thoughts are nothing more than the resurrection and expansion of thoughts long since buried. Whether this be so or not, he who would understand the present, and who would plan well for the future, must ever be inquiring "of the days that are past." Inspired history especially is full of instruction, casting its radiance down upon our present life. How accurately the desert-march of Israel fits in with the contour of our lives! How true it is to our spiritual life, for after all that is the only true life! We begin to live when first we hide behind the blood of Christ.

This one hundred and seventh Psalm, which contains the history of the children of Israel in their passage through the wilderness into the land of Canaan, challenges us to meditate on God's providential dispensations for our own personal benefit. It ends with the remark: "Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the Lord."

There were at least two ways from Egypt to Palestine. One was the well-known caravan route leading through Gaza. The other was across rivers and seas and through the "great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents and scorpions," "a land of deserts and of pits, a land of drought and of the shadow of death, a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt." By the first of these ways the journey was about 180 miles, and could be made in about a week. The second way was a little less than 1,000 miles, and involved the lapse of months, if not of years.

When the myriads of the ransomed people had gathered from all parts of the Nile valley, Palestine was the watchword upon every tongue, and the land watered by the rains of heaven and flowing with milk and honey was the vision that flitted before every eye. When the signal was given they moved northward to Succoth, and thence on the day following to Etham, "on the edge of the wilderness," ready to set out by the near way on the well-beaten track which must have been familiar to many of them. All at once a countermarch was ordered and they had to go by the other route. Concerning the way which they traveled five things are noteworthy.

I. It Was A Divinely Appointed Way.

It was a strange sight when God's ransomed people set out for Canaan. Without drawing a sword or lifting a spear, they marched forth from the iron furnace of Egypt, the angel of the Covenant leading them up out of the dungeon and through "the iron gate" of imperial decrees into light and liberty. The way they took was no choice of theirs; it was divinely chosen, and they had nothing to do but to accept it. The cloud gave them the direction of the march, and timed their journeyings. Even the order of the march was included in the divine plan. Judah to the front; Reuben to the right; Ephraim to the left; and Dan to the rear, were commands which must not be disobeyed. It says, "He led them," and so now. It is the Lord who fixes for us the bounds of our habitation, who chooses our inheritance. In the material world we find that to everything there is affixed a purpose, to everything there is given an appointed path. To everything a purpose and a place is the unwritten law of the universe of God. And is human life alone left without rule, without a guide? This cannot be. The divine will can easily be made known to us. Paul speaks of life as a "course," marked out and marked off for us. Let us keep in the path of duty, and heaven's star will always shine over head.

II. It Was An Unknown Way.

They had "not passed this way heretofore." Every day new experiences met them, and new scenes opened up before them. Nay, sometimes the cloud led them forward in the dark (Numbers 9:21), with no beacons around them save the stars of a midnight wilderness. Fit emblem of our lives! Reason tells us tomorrow will be as today; hope makes the future bright with her gilding; but while we may hope everything, we may know nothing. Like Paul, we go forth "not knowing the things that shall befall" us; or, like Abraham, we leave the familiar landmarks behind and we know not the whither of our journey. "Get thee out ... into a land that I will show thee." Notice a change of tense in these verbs. The command is present, imperative; the promise is future; "I will show thee." But Abraham obeys. He wraps up his fears, where we may wrap up ours, in the "I will" of God. We are still stepping forth into new experiences. Each day has its peculiar shading, its peculiar discipline. We never repeat an experience. And this very uncertainty becomes one of the sweetest ingredients of our trust. How much brightness would be taken from our lives if faith and hope were to give place to glaring light! It is better to walk with veiled eyes. The sight of a future glory might dazzle and unfit us for a present duty; the sight of a coming sorrow would only becloud our hearts before the time. If he knoweth, why should we care to know.

III. It Was A Circuitous Way.

The cloud did not lead them by the nearest road. The path went winding in and out, now turning back completely upon itself, almost overlapping the same ground; and then it circled round and round as at Mount Seir. True, these windings of the journey were in part the result of their own unbelief and sin; but even if they had not sinned the path would most likely have been "round about." They frequently retraced their steps, wandered about and visited the same places over a period of forty years. God can accomplish His purpose without making haste.

Heaven's forces do not travel in straight lines. Study the structure of a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or a world, and we shall find that nature uses straight lines very sparingly, adopting instead the curve, the circle and the sphere. So is it in the higher plane of God's moral government. Ezekiel's vision represents Providence as a wheel; its cogs traveling out into the unseen; the direction of its motion ever changing, so that what seemed against, becomes for; and what seemed exactly wrong, turns round and becomes exactly right. It is by the zigzag path we conquer the Alps; and by the same path we scale the mount of God. It is now here, now there; but each new turn lifts us up into a more serene air, and opens a wider prospect at our feet.

IV. It Was The Way Of Discipline.

God led them forty years to prove them. He put difficulties in their way. Seas daunted them; thirst parched them; hunger pinched them; enemies opposed them. They were called upon to encounter great and serious conflicts. They had to content with numerous enemies. By these various ways God called into play and put to the test every power of their souls. Likewise, our spiritual conquests are born out of conflicts. We develop robust manhood, not amid the feasts and ways of the banqueting house, but out in the hot arena of patient and victorious struggle. The enemies of the Christian are the world, the flesh and Satan. The Israelites of old were perverse, disobedient and rebellious. It is doubtful if any less discipline and trials would have fitted them for entrance upon the land of their dreams. To this day some imagine that as soon as they become Christians that their trials are all over, and that henceforth they shall have nothing but peace and joy. The truth is that they will experience greater trials than they have ever known.

V. It Was The Right Way.

It was not a right way, one of ten, or of a hundred, but the right way. It was right because God chose it; it was right, for it was the way of the promise; it was right, for it brought them to the city of habitation. They doubted, feared and murmured. They called the way hot and rough, and long; but when they passed through the crystal gates of Jordan to the land of plenty and of promise, then they saw all, and understood all. And as they remembered "all the way" the Lord their God had led them, they changed their murmurs into a psalm.

This text reveals the goodness of God in everything. Sorrow comes, but, veiled in the sorrow, the blessed angel of comfort comes too. It grows very dark sometimes, but in the darkness the lamps of heavenly promise shine out. Losses are endured, but there is a divine secret which changes loss into gain. Disaster falls, but in the very heart of the disaster goodness is hidden. There are bitter cups, but in the bottom is always a blessing. Death comes to those we love, but Christian faith knows that it but leads out of shadows and sorrows into eternal realities and eternal joys.

So this truth interprets the past, and shows divine goodness in everything. Then it forecasts the future and shows that whatever may come will bring goodness. The path leads on from blessing to blessing, and up at last to the gate of pearl and the glory of heaven.