

The Hill Difficulty

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 December 2008

Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0:00] Well, the last time we walked a while with Bunyan's pilgrim, Christian, he had met up with two characters called Formalist and Hypocrisy.

And you remember after meeting with them and finding that they had no heart for true religion, for religion of the heart, Christian has to walk aside by himself.

They don't share in his love for the things of God. And so Formalist and Hypocrisy and Christian are all making their way to the celestial city, but somewhat apart.

I beheld then that they all went on till they came to the foot of the hill difficulty, at the bottom of which was a spring. There were also in the same place two other ways besides that which came straight from the gate.

One turned to the left hand and the other to the right at the bottom of the hill. But the narrow way lay right up the hill. And the name of the going up the side of the hill is called difficulty.

[1:07] Christian now went to the spring and drank thereof to refresh himself and then began to go up the hill, saying, This hill, though high, I covet to ascend.

The difficulty will not me offend. For I perceive the way to life lies here. Come, pluck up, heart. Let's neither faint nor fear.

Better, though difficult, the right way to go. Then wrong, though easy, where the end is woe. So here's the geography.

There's a hill. And at the bottom of the hill are two roads. And they split off the narrow road. And they go one to the left and one to the right of this hill.

But the narrow road goes right up the hill. The hill is called difficulty. Now, these difficulties are not representative of the difficulties in life that are common to all, like sickness, car problems, accidents, economic hardships, layoffs, rebellious kids.

[2:22] These are difficulties, to be sure. But they're not the difficulties that Bunyan is speaking of here. These difficulties are those kind that come in the way of true religion.

Indeed, they come because of the narrow road of holiness. We see that because they can be avoided by just stepping off the narrow road.

These difficulties can be avoided. If you don't go up the narrow road, you miss some of these difficulties. Well, you don't miss sickness and layoffs because by stepping out of the narrow road, these things come to all men.

No, the difficulties that Bunyan speaks of here are those that come because of the narrow road you're traveling on. Because of the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ, who says, if anyone would be my disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

So it's the difficulties that come when we remain true to Christ and his word. It's the self-denying cross that you must carry if you follow Jesus.

[3:36] So what are some of these difficulties? What are some of the difficulties that are here represented? Give me some examples of difficulties that come to you, not just because you are man in a cursed world, but difficulties that come only to Christians because they are Christians, because they are walking the narrow way.

Some examples. There. Okay. Rejection, loneliness, misjudged, misunderstood. Jim? Persecution. Hatred. Hatred. Because of what we say and we're believing. Because of what we believe and stand for. Battling sin.

Battling sin. That's a difficulty only Christians know anything about. Okay. There's much self-denial involved in these things.

Renouncing worldliness. Walking against the stream or swimming against the stream. When everyone else is going this way, we're going this way.

[4:49] That's hard. That's hard to swim upstream. Death to self-interest in order to obey the commands of Christ. To seek first his kingdom and righteousness.

The world doesn't know anything of those difficulties. That come from denying ourselves to serve the interests of Christ's kingdom and righteousness. Maybe losing a job.

Losing a promotion because you won't lie for your boss. Many difficulties. These are the kind of difficulties that this hill represents. Cheevers comments, many a Christian is climbing the hill difficulty when you can't see his troubles.

Because some of the troubles and difficulties of the Christian life are inward struggles. The idea of mortifying sin.

We don't really understand what our brothers and sisters are perhaps struggling with as they're seeking to keep on the narrow road.

[5:52] It would be so much easier just to step out of it. No. They follow on and so the way goes right up the hill difficulty. It's the well-beaten path of the faithful in Hebrews 11.

You read of many of them there. Others were tortured and refused to be released. Jeers and flogging. Chained, put in prison. Stoned, sawn in two. Put to death by the sword.

They went about in sheepskins and goatskins. Destitute, persecuted, mistreated. Wandering in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

Hebrews 11, 35 through 38. And why? Simply because they're on the narrow road that leads to the celestial city.

And there are times on the narrow road where the road goes right up these difficulties. And they've refused to step off for the sake of their Lord Jesus.

[6:50] Now, you can't get around these difficulties then without stepping off the narrow road.

There are times and places in the Christian life when the option is either sin or suffer.

And that's when the way, the narrow way to heaven goes right up the hill difficulty. Your options are two. Suffer difficulty or sin.

And if you opt to sin, you will always find these optional routes peeling off right before the hill difficulty. They're always there. One to the left, one to the right.

To bypass the self-denial, the harshness and difficulty of the way of following Jesus and his word. There's always these optional roads. A little compromise here. A little conformity to the world there. And we miss the difficulty of the narrow way.

[7:57] So, these difficulties represent the cross that we must bear. And here this young Christian meets his.

Remember, the Lord Jesus had his hill difficulty to climb as well. It was called Mount Calvary.

Because it's really more a mountain than a hill, isn't it?

When we think of the difficulty that he faced. Because the Father's will went right up this hill.

This is the way. And if you're following it, Jesus Christ, you will endure this self-denial, this hardship, this difficulty. What did he do?

He didn't peel off some side detour. But as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Resolutely.

[8:57] Set his jaw. Set his face. And purposed to go to Jerusalem. To march right up the hill difficulty. To lay down his life for his people.

Isaiah 50 and verse 7. Because the sovereign Lord helps me. These are the words of our Savior.

Because the sovereign Lord helps me. I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint. And I know I will not be put to shame. Here's a man of all men. Men. Setting his jaw. And marching up the hill difficulty. So if you're going to follow him.

The message is clear. You must take up your cross. And follow him. Which means that there will be many a hill difficulty for you to take. Expect them.

Don't be surprised when the hill difficulty shows up on your landscape. You're following the one who climbed Mount Calvary. So it's the same world that put him to death on the top of his hill of difficulty.

[10:02] Expect the same treatment as one of his followers. And remember whenever you think that your hill is too difficult and too steep and too high.

That there was far more difficulty in his hill difficulty. Than in yours. And he sympathizes with you in yours.

That's the message. It was Jesus. The man. Jesus. Who carried that cross up his hill. So he's able to sympathize with you. As you carry it.

And remember he carries the heaviest end of your cross. So here's the hill difficulty. And the Lord of the way has placed a cool delicious spring at the bottom of the hill difficulty. What's this teaching us? That right at the foot of this hill. Is a cool refreshing stream. What's that say? Jason. Alright.

[11:03] Right? God meets us with his grace. When? In our need. In our time of need. We shouldn't always expect to have the water.

The refreshing spring show up. When we think we need it. But there at the base of our hill difficulty. God will supply this spring. To give us all that we need to climb this hill.

This is God's way with his people. Who have particular hardships to face in following Christ.

He gives them necessary preparations. To meet that trial. Paul. In Acts 23.11. A few weeks ago.

Or months ago. We were reading of Paul. And the opposition from the Jews that he met with. But there were greater. Greater persecutions to follow. He was. On the next day.

[12:04] Going to have. Here about 40. Zealous Jews. Taking an oath. Not to eat or drink. Until he was a dead man. He hasn't heard that yet. That's going to be a difficult hill.

For Paul to deal with. But the night before. The Lord Jesus appeared to him. And said to him. Take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem.

So you must also testify in Rome. There's the cool refreshing spring. Right before. The hill difficulty. And we've found the same. Haven't we? The Lord meets us with.

With refreshment. At the foot of our hills. How does it come? How does this refreshment. Come to you? How does it.

What's the way that the Lord brings about this. This strengthening. And preparing us for his ways. How does it work in your life? Okay.

[13:00] There are promises in the word. That come to mind. Either just by him bringing it to mind. That we've memorized. Or heard. Or maybe reading in our Bibles. How many of you found that.

In your own personal devotional life. You've been reading. Been refreshed. And later on. Maybe the very day. Or the end of the week. You look back. And you say. That was such a timely word for me. That was exactly what I needed. That didn't happen by chance. You say. I'm following McShane's Bible reading schedule. Well. Why were you at this passage.

On this date. And at this point in your life. Well. There's one. Called the Lord of the hill. Who's ordering all of this. And he is provided this spring.

At the foot of your hill. How else does it come? What are the means. That God brings. Refreshment. Ed. Gracious providences.

[13:56] Kind providences. Things that happen to us. And we taste the goodness of God. In that event. And we say. Oh Lord. Thank you for that. And we're carried.

On our way. Angie. Excellent. The ministry of the body to us. Someone coming alongside of us.

In so many different ways. And we come away refreshed. And we're ready to climb. And to go another day up this hill. Yes. You might have mentioned a couple weeks ago.

How strong is definitely encouraging. Singing to yourself. With hymns. And spiritual songs. And psalms.

A ministry of encouragement. Jim. Back that up pastor. I highly encourage your body. And memorize. Great as I think was. That song.

[14:52] I spoke with love. In my heart. In times of difficulty. Amen. Sung that song through tears myself brother. And found the same comfort. A faithful Lord.

And in song. We praise him. Anybody ever found the Lord's day. To be a refreshing spring. At the foot of some hill difficulty.

I trust that we're tasting. And seeing the Lord's goodness. And in our corporate worship. And many of these things that you've mentioned. Of the word of God coming to us. And preparing us for the difficulty.

Brother or sister in Christ. Coming alongside. And these things happen to us. As we sing the songs of Zion. It's the Lord. Providing the refreshing stream.

Or spring. Right at the base of the hill. He reveals more of himself to us. It's his kindness. Behind that kind act. Of our brother or sister.

[15:52] It was his kindness. In that providence. It's his word. In that promise. And tasting of him. We're encouraged. Well Christian takes a deep drink. From this spring.

That's good isn't it. We need to drink deeply. And he refreshes himself. And then he begins to go up the steep hill. Saying. The way to life.

Lies here. Say. Haven't we heard something like that. From this man before. When he first left home. And his neighbors were calling out. And his wife and children.

Come back. Remember what he did. He stuck his fingers in his ears. And he cried. Life. Life.

Eternal life. As he ran. And now. He meets up with difficulty. And what's he say.

The way to life. Lies here. And so he's not offended. He's not put off. If eternal life is at the end of this way.

[16 : 46] I will not be put off by a few difficulties along the way. And so he talks to himself. And follow his reasoning in what he says to himself.

He says. Better though difficult. The right way to go. Than wrong though easy. Where the end is woe. Better the hard right.

That leads to life. Than the easy wrong. That leads to death. So here he is. He's with a decision. Do I peel off. And compromise. And go back.

And not follow Jesus commands. So clearly. In order to take the easy wrong. No. It's the reminder. Where that easy wrong leads.

It leads to death. And so he's. Reminding himself of the end. At the end of this narrow road. That goes right uphill difficulty. The hard right. Leads to life.

[17 : 43] So he's not thinking of his immediate comfort. His immediate desire for ease. Does not control him. We all have that desire for ease. But it must not control us. He rather looks to the end.

It's the long view. That he takes. Where are these roads leading anyway? That's the important thing. Many people live for the weekend. Someone says. We live for the end.

Just the plain end. Where's this road going? And so talking to himself. He says. That's the end. I want life. Not death. So he takes the road. Right up the hill difficulty.

That was Asaph's view. As he was saved from. Envyng the wicked. When he considered. Their final destiny.

Then he no longer envied them. Psalm 73. 17. So he goes on. Up. The narrow road.

[18 : 43] The other two. Also came to the foot of the hill. This is formalist and hypocrisy. But when they saw that the hill was steep and high. And that there were two other ways to go. And supposing also that these two ways might meet again with that up which Christian went on the other side of the hill.

Therefore they were resolved to go in those ways. Now the way of the name of the one of those ways was danger. And the name of the other destruction. So the one took the way which is called danger.

Which led him into a great woods. And the other took directly up the way to destruction. Which led him into a wide field. Full of dark mountains. Where he stumbled and fell.

And rose no more. Shall they who wrong begin yet rightly end? Shall they at all have safety for their friend?

No, no. In headstrong manner they set out. And headlong will they fall at last. No doubt. Cheever says concerning formalist and hypocrisy.

[19 : 47] This is about as far as formalist and hypocrisy will ever go in religion. You will always find them stopping at the foot of hill difficulty.

Formalism and hypocrisy may always be a ridiculing and persecuting religion. But never a suffering one. The formalist, the hypocrite, will never suffer for the faith.

For the Lord Jesus Christ's sake. Suffering any inconvenience for the sake of their religion is unthinkable to them. The way is too steep they say.

The way is too high. It's too difficult. So they take what seem to be the easier route. Indeed these two roads peeling off at the foot of the hill were flat.

They didn't go up the hill difficulty. So these roads didn't have the difficulties that Christian experienced. Now it's not the first time we've seen formalist and hypocrisy doing this.

[20 : 52] Remember back when Christian first met them on the way. How did you get in here? Did you go through the gate? Oh no, that was too far. It's too hard.

The self-denial that's required at the conversion to turn my back on my sin and to follow Christ.

They never were truly converted. They just tumbled over the wall instead of going a long way to the gate.

And now that same lazy spirit is what causes them to peel off at the hill difficulty. Remember, they're all for comfortable religion. They had made an idol of their ease. But difficulties for the flesh only begin at the gate. The gate is narrow and they can't get through with all the baggage of pride and self-righteousness. And so self-denial meets them at the gate. But that's just the beginning of self-denial. Self-denial meets them every step of the way in this narrow road. And a self-denying narrow gate is followed by a self-denying narrow way.

[21 : 55] And sooner or later, that's what exposes the false professor. Those who are not starting right cannot end right. And so they chose the two ways around the hill difficulty.

Now, they didn't intend entirely to quit religion. They assumed that these two ways would meet up with the path Christian was on, on the other side of this hill. They thought these paths would join again. They only mean to conform to the world in certain points to avoid trouble, but then to remain on the way. And someone comments, There have always been those who think they can go to heaven without it costing them anything in the way of self-denial. I can have heaven in my sin, too. I can have heaven in my evil desires, too, and satisfy them. And they think that it works that way, rather than going up that hill difficulty and needing to mortify their sins and throw them off.

Jesus met these along his journey while he was on the earth. He talked about the rocky ground hearer. Who is he? He's the one who, when he hears the message, receives it immediately with joy.

[23 : 09] But when trouble or persecution comes, trouble or persecution, here's difficulty, when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

That's formalists and hypocrisy and a host of others. And as soon as following Jesus cost them something too much, they as quickly fall away as they quickly took up the path in the first place. And so these take what seem to be the easier route. What do the scriptures teach about the way that seems right to a man? Where does it lead? Destruction. Death. And that's the name of these two roads. Danger and destruction. And this is what happens to formalists and hypocrisy. And they're not found again by Christian on the narrow way to heaven. Destruction. Death. Now, we're called upon to declare the gospel in the midst of all these ways that seem right to a man. And we need to keep pointing them to God's word, the only way to life.

[24 : 24] And we need to beware of being led by our own feelings because the flesh will cringe before every hill difficulty. There's what God says you're supposed to do. You know it. It's clear. It's thus saith the Lord. And the only thing that stands between you and going up the hill is your flesh. And it cringes. It doesn't want to go. It drags its heels. It doesn't want to go. It doesn't want to go. Every time there's a difficulty to be confronted in the way, the narrow way, your flesh will cry, not there, John. There's got to be an easier way. And it will present to you easier ways. Expect it. Expect in any situation where following Jesus will cost you something to find other options available. So don't trust your own heart is the message of the Bible, Proverbs 28, 26. He who trusts in his own heart is a fool.

[25 : 18] Have a healthy distrust of yourself. Expect that yourself would come up with these other options that are less than faithfulness to Jesus and his word.

That's a lesson that comes to us at the foot of this hill difficulty. Well, Christian is going up and these other two have gone around. I look then after Christian. To see him go up the hill where I perceived he went from running to going and from going to clambering upon his hands and knees because of the steepness of the place. Now, about halfway to the top of the hill was a pleasant arbor made by the Lord of the hill for the refreshment of weary travelers. Thither, therefore, Christian got where also he sat down to rest him. Then he pulled out his roll from his bosom and read there into his comfort. He also now began afresh to take a review of the coat or the garment that was given him as he stood by the cross.

[26 : 24] Thus pleasing himself a while. He at last fell into a slumber and then into a fast sleep, which detained him in that place until it was almost night.

And in his sleep, his roll fell out of his hand. Now, as he was sleeping, there came one to him and awakened him saying, Go to the ant, thou sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise.

And with that, Christian suddenly started up and sped him on his way and went apace till he came to the top of the hill. Isn't this a true picture of the way we meet difficulties?

He starts with a gallop. He's running up the hill. And then he slows down to just going. Isn't that a telling comment?

He's still going, but he's not running. He's just going. And then he's clambering up the hill on his hands and knees.

[27 : 25] So the longer the difficulty, the harder it is to keep going. Someone comments on this, that there are periods in our journey when any progress at all is so slight.

And it's such a great expenditure of energy. Cheever says, we go like an invalid climbing the pyramids. You got the picture? You're an invalid that can't walk.

And yet he's climbing the pyramids. And even with all the assistance we can get, it's slow work. Is that not true of us and our experience?

The longer these trials drag on and the longer that the hill difficulty stretches in front of us, we easily get discouraged and slow up.

But with increasing difficulties, the Lord provides increasing refreshments not to faint. And so what do we find midway up the hill? A peaceful arbor. A place for pilgrims to come in the midst of their climbing and to be refreshed.

[28 : 42] Notice how Bunyan refers to God in this section. Now about halfway to the top of the hill was a pleasant arbor made by the Lord of the hill for the refreshment of weary travelers.

We're meant to take encouragement from the fact that he is called the Lord of the hill. He is Lord over my difficulties.

He is in control of everything about this hill. And he knows just how much I can take, 1 Corinthians 10, 13. And he knows exactly what encouragements and refreshments I need to make it up this hill. And so he provides this refreshment for Christian. And he sits down to rest. It's a break from the difficulties. And we even know, don't we, certain let-ups in the difficulties and these times of respite when we refresh ourselves.

And so the Christian brings himself delight in two ways. He finds delight in the roll and in the coat or the garment, both of which were given to him at the cross.

[30 : 00] Let's consider first the roll. The roll is not the Bible. Some of the paraphrases refer to it as if it's the book. But Bunyan makes a difference between the roll and the book.

Remember, the book is that which he has in his hand. The roll is that which he has hidden in his bosom. And later it will drop from his hand.

But the roll was given at the cross. Remember, he had the book before he got to the cross, before he got to the gate. That's what caused him to see and feel his burden. But the roll was given at the cross and was kept in his burden.

It's the evidence of salvation. It's the assurance of being accepted at the gate of heaven. It's the changed heart. It's the renewed desires. It's the marks of new life.

If you turn to the Lord Jesus, it's the beatitudes. The marks of those who are his citizens. They're poor in spirit. They mourn for sin. They're merciful.

[31 : 00] They hunger and thirst for righteousness. They're persecuted for righteousness' sake. They're peacemakers. They're pure in heart. Or if you go to 1 John, you find other marks and evidences of these people.

They confess their sins instead of concealing them. They love the brethren. They practice righteousness. They believe the truth of God.

And so these marks, these evidences of salvation are seen by Christian in his own life. And even in difficulty, the Christian grows in his assurance.

Because he finds that he's persevering in difficulty. Here I am. Wow, I'm halfway up this hill. This isn't me.

This is Christ in me. I know my weakness. I know this is not the way with me. To endure suffering for Jesus' sake and to keep going.

[32 : 06] What does James say? Blessed, happy is the man who perseveres under trial. Because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Romans 5, 2 to 5 as well talk about perseverance. Produces hope. Hope that will not be ashamed. Assurance. Wow.

God has done something to me. And so, halfway up the hill difficulty, he takes comfort from his role, from his assurance of salvation. But indeed, he's on the right road and God is in him.

And then he takes comfort from his coat, his garment. This is the righteousness of Christ imputed to his account. And it's wonderful in our difficult days, our bad days, to draw aside and to look again at that righteousness that is perfect in heaven.

And to know that it can't be improved upon. Jesus is my righteousness. And the Father looks on him and pardons me. He looks on his perfect Son and accepts me. And so the Christian in the midst of difficulty pauses and drinks deeply the comfort of the righteousness of Jesus put to his account.

[33:24] And these things thrilled Christian. But Bunyan shows us that our greatest dangers are not far from our greatest privileges. They often walk side by side.

Great privileges as he drinks in his assurance of salvation and the righteousness of Jesus. But these privileges are meant to refresh us for the journey, not to puff us up.

They're meant to strengthen us for greater diligence and watchfulness on the journey. But it's easy for a young Christian to take pride in his spiritual privileges, to take pride in his marks of grace.

Look, I am poor in spirit. Look, I am hungry and thirsting for righteousness. And to begin to become proud of it and actually to presume then and to no longer be alert, but to relax our carefulness.

That's a misuse of assurance. That's a misuse of the righteousness of Jesus. To say, oh, what a wonderful thing. My acceptance in heaven is perfect. It's Jesus. It's not the way I live.

[34:27] And to take such joy in that that we therefore quit watching and praying. That's an abuse of the righteousness, the imputed righteousness of Jesus. But it happens.

And that's what Bunyan's saying. Happens often. Happens often to young Christians. But not only young Christians. He's so satisfied with the righteousness of Christ. His robe and his acceptance with God and his evidences of salvation that he forgot that he must continue growing in grace. He must make every effort to be holy and press on to higher ground. And so this refreshment becomes a snare to the Christian. And he falls fast asleep.

And while he's sleeping, the role that he'd taken from his bosom and was enjoying falls from his hand. He lost his role. Night's drawing near. And he's still only halfway up the hill.

Better to travel in daylight than in dark, as he'll find out. Bunyan has a footnote. He that sleeps is a loser. He's going to lose. He's going to pay for this sleep.

[35:32] Because sleep represents spiritual sloth, laziness, drowsiness, not being alert and careful in the Christian life. And while in the midst of difficulties, we watch and we pray just to keep alive.

It's often in the time of ease that we get soft and we cease watching and praying. And so he falls into that same sloth that just earlier in the day he rebuked in those three that were sleeping close to the way.

Simple presumption and sloth, was it? Remember how he rebuked them for sleeping? They should wake up. Now he falls into that same trap as he's sleeping.

The arbor was never designed to sleep, only to rest in, not to fall off our careful watching. But again, his faithful Lord is watching over him and awakens him with a startling warning from Scripture.

Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise. And so he wakes and goes on, running as fast as he can to the top of the hill.

[36:44] But unbeknownst to him, he has lost his role. And when he comes up to the next trial, he will need that role. He will need his assurance of salvation to run right through two lions that are opposing him.

But he will find himself without it. And we'll have to leave him here at the top of hill difficulty for several months, at least a couple months now. And let's learn to expect difficulties in the way of holiness.

Let's remember who we're following. We're following the crucified Jesus who went up Mount Calvary. So don't let difficulties turn you aside from the narrow way. And then thank God for cool, refreshing streams, springs, pleasant arbors along the way.

The Lord's provided the Lord's Day, this day, as such a thing for us. Let's drink deeply of our Savior and the encouragements that are found in his word. Let's be aware that we're not the only ones going up a hill difficulty.

That we've got brothers and sisters here who find it far steeper than us. Let's draw near them. Let's put our arms around them. Let's encourage them. Let's walk together a while this Lord's Day.

[38 : 02] Let's sing the songs of Zion. Let's seek to encourage each other in the songs we sing. Let's feast on this word that comes to us from the Lord of the hill, the place to which we are going. And let's not give in to our love of ease. Let's seek in an easier way. Let's keep Bible arguments before our faces. Talk to ourselves and talk to one another. What's at the end of the easy wrong? What's at the end of the hard right? And so may we, at the end of this day, find refreshment and strength to go on up that hill. To the glory of our Savior who went it before us and who now walks there with us. Well, let's pray together. Thank you, Lord, that you know every one of our hearts and our difficulties. Indeed, you have designed them, tailor-made them for us, for our good, to send us to you so that Paul could actually delight in difficulties. Because he found that when he was in difficulties, feeling his weakness, it was then that the power of Christ rested upon him and he found renewed strength to go on.

[39 : 18] Strengthen each one who is struggling this day. Give us to drink deeply of our Savior. We ask in his name. Amen.