

The Way to the City

by H. A. Ironside

"The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city" (Ecclesiastes 10:15).

IN some respects the book of Ecclesiastes is the saddest in all the Bible. It gives the search of the natural man for the supreme good under the sun, leading at last only to bitter disappointment and the heart-broken cry:

"Vanity of vanities; all is vanity...all is vanity and vexation of spirit" (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14).

There is a city presented to the eye of faith in the blessed Bible for which every Christian heart yearns, a city toward which the saints of God in all ages have turned their eyes. We are told that Abraham, the father of the faithful, looked for that city "which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). So dear was it to him that he went forth not knowing whither he went, and turned his back on all worldly prospects, that he might be sure of a place in that city.

In the New Testament, our blessed Lord tells us: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you" (John 14:2), and then He adds, "I go to prepare a place for you." In that last wonderful book of the Bible, the book of the Revelation, the description of that city is beyond anything that these poor finite minds of ours can comprehend. It is a city with a street of gold, with foundations of precious stones, with gates of pearl, and walls of diamonds; for the jasper of the book of Revelation is clear as crystal, and not the opaque jasper that we know, but evidently the diamond in all its glory. In this way we are given to understand something of what God has provided for those who love Him. What a solemn thing to miss the way to that city! We dwell in this world for some fifty, sixty, seventy, or even eighty years, and if, after we have passed our little life here, we find ourselves going out into a dark eternity, what a tragedy life will really be!

In this book, Solomon uses a very striking figure. He imagines a countryman on his way to the city, desiring to go perhaps to the great capital of Palestine—Jerusalem, or to some other city upon which his heart is set. But that man starts out trying to find his way with neither

guide-post to direct him, nor authoritative information to tell him which route to take. He tries first one road and then another, only to be disappointed every time, until at last, utterly wearied, he throws himself down in despair as the shades of night are falling, and says, "It is no use, I cannot make it; I cannot find my way." "The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city."

If we think of that city as heaven, or as the glorious New Jerusalem, then indeed we may see how aptly Solomon's words apply to myriads of mankind about us. Speak to men about their hope of heaven and they will say uncertainly, "Oh, yes, I trust I shall enter heaven when earth's short day is over; I hope I shall find my way to the city of God; I hope that some day my feet will walk the gold-paved street of the New Jerusalem." If you ask them what assurance they have that they are really on the road that leads to heaven, you will find that they are all in confusion. Many of them will not even thank you for trying to give them authoritative information from the Word of God. Instead of "Thus saith the Lord," you will find them substituting, "I think." What a common thing it is to hear men say, "I think that everything will come out all right in the end; there are many different roads to eternity, many men of many minds, but we are all going to the same place at last; every road will eventually lead to heaven, we hope." But you know that this is not logical, it is not reasonable. It is a principle that does not work in this life, nor in this world, and what reason have we to believe that it will work when we come to another life, and another world?

The Wrong Train

I remember one day leaving Los Angeles by train to go to San Diego. Shortly after we passed Fullerton, my attention was directed to an altercation going on near me. I had observed a little old lady who got on at a station some miles back. My attention was drawn to her because of the great number of bundles she carried. In one hand she had a cage, evidently containing a parrot, some kind of a package held by one finger, a grip, and a bag; but she got in and put them all down about her, and filled the entire space where she sat. She was nicely settled when the conductor came around, and said, "Tickets, please." She handed him her ticket, and he said, "Madam, this is not your train. Your ticket calls for San Bernardino, and you are on the train that goes to San Diego."

"You needn't tell me that," she replied; "I asked a man before I got on, and he told me that this train was going to San Bernardino."

"Well," he said, "I am sorry, but you have been the victim of some wrong information, for this train is going to San Diego."

"I don't believe it," she said; "I bought this ticket in good faith, and have taken the train they told me to take."

"Pardon me," he replied, "but I am the conductor on this train, and it is going to San Diego. If you want to go to San Bernardino, you will have to get off and take a train back."

Finally as the train drew near to the next stop, she gathered up her parrot and her packages and bags, declaring that this was an outrage, and that she would report it to the company and have the conductor discharged for putting her off the train. She left, while the rest of the passengers smiled even though they felt sorry for her.

It is not true that if you take a train going north, you will land somewhere in the south. It is not true that if you are on the road leading to everlasting judgment, you will reach heaven. "The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city."

Well Marked Roads

How grateful are those who have done much motoring for the wonderful way in which the various automobile associations, and also the state and federal governments, have marked the roads all over this great country. We start off in our cars, and every little while we see the signs directing us. When we come to a fork in the road, we are careful to take the correct one. But sometimes you get into a region where the roads have not been marked, and how perplexing it often is.

I remember of the time we were going from Elizabeth, New Jersey, to California. We were away out in Arizona, and came to a fork in the road. There had been a sign there, but some young vandals had evidently used it as a mark for shooting, and had shot it up so completely that we could not make anything out of it. My secretary, the young man who was driving, said, "I think this is the right road," but I said, "No, I think this is the one." Our thoughts did not amount to anything. We went wrong and got far out of our route, and had to retrace our way many long miles. The labor of the foolish wearied us. Why? Because we did not know the way to the city, we had no authoritative information. How many eternity-bound men and women are content to go on just like that! What egregious folly when God's Word has so plainly marked out the only right way!

Several Wrong Roads

May I indicate some of the roads which men and women take, and which they think will lead them to heaven?

First, there is Legality Lane. Do you know that lane? It is a hard, stone road, and many imagine that it will get them through to heaven. As you pass along you see the frowning cliffs of Mt. Sinai, you hear the heavy thunderings and see the lightning flashing, and you can almost hear the words: "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."

But you say, "I will do my best; I will try to keep God's holy commands; I will surely get to heaven at last." Beware, for *Legality Lane* will bring you eventually to the place of the curse, for God's Word declares that if a man shall "keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). Again we read, "Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Galatians 3:10). No man was ever justified by the works of the law, and no man ever will be. It is utterly impossible that man should wash out the stains of sin by obedience to that holy law. The law tells you how to behave, but it does not tell you what to do if you have already failed and become guilty before God. *Legality Lane* will never lead you to the New Jerusalem.

Then says some one, "I will try *Reformation Alley*. It is true I have failed, I have been guilty of many gross violations of God's law; I have sinned, but I will turn over a new leaf, begin henceforth to please God, put away my bad habits, cultivate good ones, and surely all this will bring me at length to heaven." But my friend, this road will lead you eventually to eternal disappointment too, for there is a solemn word found in this same Book that reads like this, "God requireth that which is past" (Ecclesiastes 3:15). Even though you were to reform today, even though you were to turn over a new leaf and never have another black mark upon the books, the old leaves with all their sinful record are still there, and you will have to face them in the day of judgment, unless some means shall be found whereby those marks can be blotted out.

"God requireth that which is past." Your grocer does that, you know, and it is perfectly right that he should. You run up a bill for a month or two, and then say, "Dear me, this will never do; this buying on credit is too easy a way to get head over heels in debt. I am going to begin to pay cash for everything I buy." And so you go down to the grocer with

your market basket, and say, "I am determined to turn over a new leaf."

"In what regard?" the grocer asks:

"I have concluded that this buying on credit is all a mistake, and henceforth I am going to pay cash."

"I am delighted to hear that," he replies, "and when will you be able to settle your old bill?"

"Oh," you say, "you don't understand. I am going to pay cash from now on. Surely you won't hold the old account against me."

"I cannot afford to do business that way," he replies; "you received the groceries from me, and I will expect you to pay for them."

"But if I tell you that I am sorry, and pay you as I buy in the future, surely that ought to satisfy you." But he answers, "I will be delighted to have you as a cash customer, but business makes it necessary that I should require that which is past."

My friend, you may reform, you may turn over a new leaf, but when you get to the end of *Reformation Alley*, you will find that you have landed in a district called Eternal Disappointment, where you hear the sad voice of the Son of God saying: "Depart from me, I never knew you."

There is another highway that runs very close along side this one, it is called *Morality Road*. Many excellent people travel along this way. People whom you would be glad to have in your home, travel this road. You would find pleasure in their society. They are people who eschew all kinds of evil behavior, and pride themselves upon their morals and their ethics. They are what the world calls "good people," but they have no place in their thinking for the Lord Jesus Christ; and yet the Word of God declares: "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved," but the name of Jesus. My friend, if morals could have saved, if ethics could have fitted you for heaven, Jesus Christ would never have died on Calvary's cross. Down in Gethsemane's garden He cried in the agony of His soul, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,". and if there had been any other way of saving sinners than through His sacrificial death, it would then have been made known.

Right by the side of Morality Road runs *Self-righteousness Boulevard*. It is a magnificent boulevard indeed, and here the scribes and

Pharisees and many church dignitaries walk. Listen to one of them crooning his own perfections, as he cries, "I thank God I am not as other men. I am not a drunkard, I am not a blasphemer, I am not an adulterer; I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. Surely if anyone gets to heaven I will." But hear the solemn declaration of the Word of God, "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." And that expression, *filthy rags*, does not mean shreds of clothing that have been contaminated by the dirt of the streets, but it refers to robes tainted and made unclean through the inward corruption that has exuded from the sores of lepers. Naaman, the leper, wearing his magnificent robes might throw off one of these garments, and say, "Look, I want to make you a gift, take this." Would you thank him for the gift? No, you would say, "Keep it away from me, it is contaminated by the leprosy from within." That is what our own righteousnesses are like. They all come from a corrupt, evil heart, and therefore, they can never justify a guilty sinner before God. The end of *Self-righteousness Boulevard* is the lake of fire.

And then akin to this is another road that we will call *Ritualistic Avenue*. Did you ever meet anyone on that road? I said to a young lady one day, "I am glad to see you in the meeting; are you a Christian?"

"Yes," she said, "I have been a member of such and such a church ever since I was a child." "Pardon me," I said, "but you did not understand my question, Have you ever been born again?" "I was baptized when I was only eight days old," she replied.

"You don't understand me yet," I said, "were you ever converted?"

"Oh yes," she said, "I was confirmed when I was twelve years of age, and took the sacrament for the first time, and I have been very careful to attend services and take the sacrament ever since. You can be sure I am all right."

She was flitting down *Ritualistic Avenue* imagining it was the road to heaven when it was really leading her as fast as time could carry her to the pit of the abyss, and if not saved, she would plunge over the cliff of time into the darkness of eternity only to find out that baptism cannot save, sacraments cannot save, church-joining cannot save. It is Jesus only that washes away sin and fits us for glory.

Then there is another popular road that many take today. It is called *Delusion Road*. The people on this road are those who will not have the simple gospel of this Book, they will not take the plain statements of the Bible as to the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, as to His

sacrificial atoning death on the cross, but are ready to listen to every kind of folly. As they go down that road you hear them muttering to themselves, "God is all and all is God." "God is good and good is God." "There is no such thing as evil and sin and death." "Every day, in every way, I am growing better and better."

Men are deluding themselves, shutting their eyes to the realities of life. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, was wiser than they, for he said, "If any man rejects the testimony of the five senses, there is nothing else on which to build." What can you do for a man who is suffering from the twinges of rheumatism, but who looks at you, and says, "There is no such thing as pain, no such thing as suffering." Or, a man who can be a victim of all kinds of sinful habits, and yet looks you in the eye, and says, "There is no such thing as sin." Or, a man who can stand by the body of a dead loved one, and say, "There is no such thing as death"?

Scripture affirms, "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter" (Isaiah 5:20). *Delusion Road* will end at last in an eternal hell, and men will wake up too late to find out that sin is a reality, that death is a reality, that heaven is a reality and they have missed it, that hell is a reality and it is to be their place of abode forever. What a fearful thing it is to turn from God and trust in fables, to turn away from the sign-post that God has given to point the way to the city of God and take the opposite direction, hoping to reach heaven at last. "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:23).

The Modernism Way

Another road is called *Modern Thought Highway*. Many of the intelligentsia tread that path. It is dotted with universities and schools of higher education, and we find people peddling books up and down this highway, for the folk on this road are the learned of this world. They are too proud to accept, "Thus saith the Lord," but bow down before science, before modern thought, before philosophy, and all the different delusions that are turning men away from God. Let me read you the testimony of a man who admits that he is treading this road. It is written by Professor Melinowski:

"Personally, I am an agnostic. That is, I am not able to deny the existence of God: nor would I be inclined to do so, still less to maintain that such a belief is not necessary. I also fervently hope that there is a survival after death, and I deeply desire to obtain some

certainty on this matter. But with all that, I am unable to accept any positive religion—Christian or otherwise. I cannot positively believe in Providence in any sense of the word, and I have no conviction of personal immortality."

In other words, this man says, "I should like to go to the city of God, if there be such a city. I should like to spend my eternity there. But I cannot trust the Guide Book, I cannot believe the sign-post, I cannot put my confidence in One who says He came from there and went back, and is Himself the Way there." Yet this man is a great deal more modest than many who tread this road. He goes on to say:

"Thus, as you see, I profoundly differ from the confident rationalist or disbeliever of the past generation or two. We all know the story of La Place and the discussion which he had with Napoleon the First about his system of Celestial Mechanics. The Emperor asked him: 'What place have you given to God in your system?' 'Sire,' was the answer, 'this is an hypothesis of which I have never felt the need.' It is the proud answer of a confident atheist, but it does not ring true to the humble agnostic."

Men today will tell you frankly, "I never felt the need of God; I do not need Him now, and I do not feel there will be a need for Him in eternity." But Melinowski continues:

"On the contrary, I should say that God is a reality and not a hypothesis, and a reality of which I am in the greatest need, though this need I cannot satisfy or fulfill. The typical rationalist says: 'I don't know, and I don't care.' The tragic agnostic would rejoin: 'I cannot know, but I feel a deep and passionate need of faith, of evidence, and of revelation.' Personally, to me, and to those many who are like me, nothing really matters except the answer to the burning questions: 'Am I going to live, or shall I vanish like a bubble? What is the aim, and the sense, and the issue of all this strife and suffering?' The doubt of these two questions lives in us, and affect all our thoughts and feelings. Modern agnosticism is a tragic and shattering frame of mind. To dismiss agnosticism as an easy and shallow escape from the moral obligations and discipline of religion—this is an unworthy and superficial way of dealing with it. Is science responsible for my agnosticism and for that of others who think like me? I believe it is, and therefore I do not love science, though I have to remain its loyal servant. Is there any hope of bridging this deepest gulf between tragic agnosticism and belief? I do not know. Is there any remedy? I cannot answer this either."

The blessed, holy Word of God answers every one of these questions, but the modern mind turns away from it all, and says, "No, I would rather go on questioning, go on in uncertainty, than to face the problem

of Jesus Christ."

But Jesus Christ is not a problem, He is the *solution* to every problem for life, for death, and for eternity. Listen to the poor woman at the well. Wonderingly she gazes at the Jewish stranger who seems so ready to deal graciously with the Samaritan, and she says, "I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things." Oh, the questions that were welling up in that woman's heart—"If I could only see Him maybe He would answer all my questions, maybe He would solve all my problems," and quietly, earnestly, kindly, Jesus looks upon her, and says, "I that speak unto thee am he." She took one long look into those fathomless eyes of His, and in a moment every question was answered, and back to the city she ran, and said to the men, "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" Yes, He is the answer to every problem.

You remember it is written in Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." All these different pathways which have been indicated are the ways that seem right to man, but end in outer darkness. When Thomas asked the question, "Lord...how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

Do you want to know the way to the city? Jesus is the Way. Do you want to know the truth in regard to the great problems of time and eternity? Jesus is the Truth. Do you want to know where life is found, so that you may be a new creature? Jesus is the Life. And, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shalt not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). My friend, surely you want to find the way to the City. When at last you lie down and say good-bye to your friends and loved ones, surely you want to be able to say, as one dear saint of God did, "Earth is receding and heaven is opening." If you do, you need Christ, for He alone is the Way to the city of God, and He says, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). Are you saying, "I should like to find the way, I should like to know Christ, but how may I make His acquaintance?"

"If I ask Him to receive me,
Will He say me nay?
Not 'till earth and not 'till heaven,
Pass away."

If you will come as a sinner, confessing your guilt, forsaking every other refuge, and put your trust in Him alone, He will save you according to His Word, and you shall know Him as the only Way that leads to

"Jerusalem, the golden.
With milk and honey blest."

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