

ESCAPE FROM CHRISTENDOM

by Robert Burnell

{Originally Published by Bethany House Publishers in 1980}.

The Journey

In my dream I see the lone figure of a man following a road. As the sun sets beneath the hills, a city comes into view. Nearing it, the traveler sees what appears to be a large group of churches. Spires and crosses pierce the skyline. His pace quickens. Is this his destination? He passes an imposing structure, a neon sign flashing "Cathedral of the Future." Farther on a floodlit stadium supports a billboard boasting that fifty thousand people crowd into evangelistic meetings there three nights a week. Beyond this, modest "New Testament" chapels and Hebrew Christian synagogues cluster together on the street front.

"Is this the City of God?" I heard the traveler ask a woman at the information booth in the central square.

"No this is Christian City, "she replies.

"But I thought this road led to the City of God!" He exclaims with great disappointment.

"That's what we all thought when we arrived," she answers, her tone sympathetic.

"This road continues up the mountain, doesn't it?" He asks.

"I wouldn't know, really," she answers blankly.

I watch the man turn away from her and trudge on up the mountain in the gathering darkness. Reaching the top, he starts out into the blackness; it looks as though there is nothing, absolutely nothing, beyond. With a shudder he retraces his steps into Christian City and takes a room at a hotel.

Strangely unrefreshed, at dawn he arises and follows the road up the mountain again; in the brightening light of the sun he discovers that what seemed like a void the night before is actually a desert--dry, hot, rolling sand as far as the eye can see. The road narrows to a path which rises over a dune and disappears. "Can this trail lead to the City of God?" He wonders aloud. It appears to be quite deserted and rarely traveled.

Indecision slowing his steps, he again returns to Christian City and has lunch in a Christian restaurant. Over the music of a gospel record, I hear him ask a man at the next table, "That path up the mountain, where the desert begins, does it lead to the City of God?"

"Don't be a fool!" his neighbor replies quickly. "Everyone who has ever taken that path has been lost... swallowed up by the desert! If you want God, there are plenty of good churches in this town. You should pick one and settle down."

After leaving the restaurant, looking weary and confused, the traveler finds a spot under a tree and sits down. An ancient man approaches and begins pleading with him in urgent tones, "If you stay here in

Christian City, you'll wither away. You must take the path. I belong to the desert you saw earlier. I was sent here to encourage you to press on. You'll travel many miles. You'll be hot and thirsty; but angels will walk with you, and there will be springs of water along the way. And at your journeys end you will reach the City of God! you have never seen such beauty! And when you arrive the gates will open for you, for you are expected."

"What you say sounds wonderful," the traveler replies. "But I'm afraid I'd never survive that desert. I'm probably better off here in Christian City."

The ancient one smiles. "Christian City is the place for those who want religion but don't want to lose their lives. The desert is the territory of those whose hearts are so thirsty for God that they are willing to be lost in Him. My friend, when Peter brought his boat to land, forsook all and followed Jesus, he was being swallowed by the desert. When Matthew left his tax collecting and Paul his Pharisaism, they too were leaving a city much like this to pursue Jesus out over the dunes and be lost in God. So don't be afraid. Many have gone before you."

Then I see the traveler look away from the old man's burning eye to the bustle of Christian City. He sees busy people hurrying hither and yon with their Bibles and shiny attache cases, looking like men and women who know their destiny. But it is clear they lack something which the old man with eyes like a prophet possesses.

In my dream I imagine the traveler turning things over in his mind. "If I do go out there, how can I be sure that I will really be lost in God? In the Middle Ages Christians tried to lose themselves in God by putting the world behind them and entering a monastery. And how disappointed many of them were to find that the world was still there! And the people here in Christian City who are preparing to go to some jungle or a neglected slum, maybe they're coming closer to what it means to be lost in God. But then, a person can travel to the ends of the earth and not lose himself."

The traveler turns again to see the old person starting up the road for the narrow path down to the deserts edge. Suddenly, his decision mobilizes him and leaps to his feet, chasing after him. When he catches up, they exchange no words. The ancient man makes an abrupt turn to the right and guides him up still another slope which steepens as it rises toward a peak shrouded in a luminous cloud. The climb upward is very difficult. The traveler appears dizzy and begins to stagger. His guide pauses and offers him a drink from a flask hanging over his shoulder. Panting, he drinks it in great gulps. "No water ever tasted sweeter than this," he says with great feeling.

"Thank you."

Now look there." The old man points beyond them to a vista not nearly as monotonous and desolate as it had seemed earlier. The desert below has taken on many colors and gradation. In the far distance blazing light is throbbing and moving on the surface of the horizon like a living thing. "There is the City of God! But before you reach it, you will have to pass through those four wildernesses you see. Directly below us is the Wilderness of Forgiveness." The traveler notices small, dim figures making their way slowly in the direction of the city, separated from each other by many miles.

"How can they survive the loneliness?" Asks the traveler. "Wouldn't they benefit from traveling together?"

"Well, they aren't really alone. Each one of them is accompanied by the forgiveness of God. They are being swallowed by the desert of the Lord God's vast mercy. The Holy Spirit is saying to them as they travel, 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' They are made whole as they travel."

Just beyond there is an expanse of blue. "Is it sea?" Inquires the traveler.

"It looks like water, but it's a sea of sand. That's the Wilderness of Worship. Here, look through these glasses and you will see that people are walking there, too. Notice how they begin to group themselves here. They are having their first taste of the joy of the City--worship. They are discovering how they were made for the worship of God. It is becoming their life, the white-hot source of everything they do."

"But don't people also worship back in Christian City? What's so special about that wilderness?"

"Worship, that is true worship, can begin only when a life has been utterly abandoned to the desert of God's presence. Out there the heart begins to worship the Father in spirit and truth."

Looking beyond the blue wilderness to where the desert rises in red and fiery mountains, the old man explains to the traveler that among those reddish mountains is the Wilderness of Prayer.

"Passing through that wilderness travelers find it necessary to turn away from every distraction and concentrate on prayer. They quickly learn that there is no possible way for them to survive but by crying out to God continuously. By the time they reach the outer extremes of that wilderness, prayer is their consuming passion and their supreme joy. It appears at first that the City of God is just beyond the Wilderness of Prayer. But there is one more wilderness hidden by those mountains, which you will pass through before you reach your destination. It is simply called the Harvest. You'll know it when you reach it. And beyond the Harvest is the City itself. Your name is known there. Your arrival is awaited with eagerness. Come, let's begin our journey."

"Nightfall doesn't seem to be a particularly propitious time to begin a journey like this," he says.

"Don't go back to Christian City," the old man exhorts, gazing at him earnestly."

"Not even at this hour? That way I could get a good night's sleep and start first thing in the morning," the traveler adds hopefully.

"But your rest is out there," he urges. "Walk on now, into the desert. The Holy Spirit will help you. Don't be afraid to be lost in God. You'll find your life nowhere else."

The Wilderness of Forgiveness

The old man has left the traveler standing alone at the edge of the desert as darkness falls. The lights of Christian City beckon from beyond him. I can imagine him thinking of the warmth of a friendly conversation over a warm meal and of going to sleep in a comfortable bed. But then his expression becomes resolute and he murmurs, "This is doubtless the road I have to take. I will find my life only by losing it, that's a certainty. But how can I know that if I take this path into the desert I will assuredly be lost in God and not merely lost? I can remember many people who took a solitary path which led them not to the City of God but into such unreal thoughts and spurious experiences that their minds and lives were destroyed. Surely the danger of settling for less than life in Christian City has to be weighed against the possibility of losing it in a wilderness of spiritual delusion. I'm sure that the darkness beyond contains not only the path to the City of God but also countless trap doors to hell, where one can be lost in lonely vanity. How can I be sure of distinguishing the true path?" What I first think in my dreams to be a star hanging low over the horizon now take the shape of a cross hanging directly above the path in front of the traveler. He looks up and notices it, his face showing recognition. He whispers quietly, "Forgiveness." And then with deep reverence quotes: "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for Him. For here we have no lasting city, but we

seek the city which is to come..' Yes, I will go on!" The traveler says exultantly, taking his first steps into the desert.

As dawn breaks he sees nothing but sand and sky and a path which can be distinguished from all the others by the cross which hovers where the trail meets the horizon. As the day wears on it is obvious that the traveler is weary, thirsty, sick with heat. Just when it appears he cannot trudge another step, a stranger appears at his side.

"Over the next hill you will find a spring," she says.

"Keep going, you are almost there," she encourages him.

He is soon lying by a spring, drinking water and eating food which the helpful stranger provides.

"This is the Wilderness of Forgiveness," she explains to the traveler. "People often expect God's forgiveness to be like a beautiful park with fountains and rivers and green grass. They cannot understand why it should be a desert. Yet one has to learn that God's forgiveness is everything--everything! And this is possible only in a desert, where a Christian comes to see nothing, appreciate nothing, hope in nothing but the cross of Jesus." She quotes several passages from Galatians to the traveler:

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God...

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

"Do you think the apostle Paul traveled this Wilderness?" Asks the traveler.

"Yes, he did. For years Paul had worked very hard in the City of Religion, to be a religious man. Still he found no peace for his spirit. Then Paul met Jesus; and from the start, Jesus meant one thing to Paul: forgiveness. He was overwhelmed with it. The forgiveness of the cross was the theme of his life from then on. But Paul's first experience of the Kingdom of God as a reality in his life was right in this wilderness."

"So I'm walking where the apostles walked." The traveler's voice is full of awe.

"Remember when Peter lowered the net at the command of Jesus and brought it up loaded with fish? His immediate response was, 'Leave me Lord, I'm a sinner!' Jesus answered, 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.' Implied in Jesus' answer was, 'I will take care of your sin.' And when they brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Jesus--followed Him here into this Wilderness of Forgiveness in pursuit of a cross. After Jesus had died for Peter's sins and risen for his justification and was about to fill Peter with the Holy Spirit, He said to this man who had denied Him three times, 'Simon, son of Jonas, Do you love me?... Feed My sheep.' And with this thrice-repeated question and command, Peter's life was healed with the forgiveness of his Lord."

"For years," the traveler tells her, "I've been trying to get beyond theoretical, doctrinal forgiveness, most probably what is taught in Christian City, in order to know forgiveness itself. I've wanted to be immersed, baptized, LOST, in it. I have longed to hear Jesus say to me personally, 'Take heart, brother your sins are forgiven.' I've wanted to have the blood of the cross flow into my heart and purify it."

"You have come to the right place. Before you reach the other side of this Wilderness, you will experience the relief of having that load of guilt, which still, in fact, weighs you down like a rock, rolled away. You will begin to walk before God without shame. Just as you were once obsessed with the need to build yourself up, you will soon be obsessed with the forgiveness of God."

"Obsessed with the forgiveness of God?"

"You will become so obsessed with God's mercy that you will be free, for the first time in your life, of other peoples opinions."

"Ha! Not me." His response is immediate.

"The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears was obsessed with His forgiveness to the point where she was heedless of the jeers and opinions of others. Or the cleaned leper--he joyfully fell at Jesus' feet giving thanks for more than the cleansing of his body; he had received the inner healing of forgiveness. When Zachaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus, he was watching his own forgiveness walking toward him down the road. So obsessed was he with the forgiveness which visited his life that day the chains of covetousness broke from his heart. You have come to the place where it will happen to you."

The traveler resumes his journey, his mysterious companion walking silently by his side for an hour or two then suddenly disappearing.

"What joy I feel!" The traveler exclaims aloud. "This must be what the disciples felt as they returned to Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus."

"In the cross-shaped light, the traveler makes out the figure of another woman rising over the crest of the next dune and walking slowly down the slope toward him. He appears to recognize her. From his expression I gather that this person has wronged him. Her eyes are fixed on the traveler as she comes up to him.

"Will you forgive me?" She asks.

The traveler stops still. The woman draws closer, asking a second time, "Will you forgive me?" They are face to face when she asks for the third time, "Will you forgive me?" The traveler's mysterious companion is again at his side, quietly instructing him, "This Wilderness of Forgiveness is not only a place for receiving forgiveness, but also for giving it. This woman is but the first of a procession of people from your past whom you have never really forgiven. The supernatural forbearance which has flooded your being all day is being challenged by the bitterness buried in your soul for all these years. You have to make a choice. The sterile, shallow, lip service forgiveness of your past life is powerless even to be polite to this woman. But the forgiveness of God which has been flowing in to the point of becoming an obsession can flow out now if you will allow it to."

The traveler reaches out, takes the woman by the hand, looks into her eyes and replies, "Of course I forgive you!"

She weeps. And just as she forms the words, "Thank you," she is gone.

Then the man who called the traveler a fool in the restaurant back in Christian City comes running and panting toward him. Mopping his face with his handkerchief, the troubled man begins to beg forgiveness.

"Of course, of course," the traveler replies heartily. "It's nothing. Don't think another thing about it."

"Please don't take this matter so lightly. I NEED your forgiveness. Will you REALLY forgive me, from the bottom of your heart?"

"But I already have," returns the traveler. His companion illuminates the situation for him: "He needs your FORGIVENESS. Not courtesy, but active, genuine forgiveness. He needs your LOVE."

"My friend, you are forgiven," the traveler tells him earnestly with respect in his voice.

With visible relief the man sighs, "Thank you!" And disappears into the desert air. His companion reminds him of the verse in Matthew 18 which reads:

Then Peter came up and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times, but seventy times seven."

The Wilderness of Worship

"Water! Who would have thought that in the middle of this desert there would be a sea!" The traveler is exclaiming to himself when next I see him in my dream. From the brow of a mammoth dune he looks down into an expanse of blue stretching to the horizon. "But no, it isn't water," he remembers. "The old man on the mountain pointed to this as the beginning of the second wilderness." As he descends the hill to its edge, the strange sea of sand is not as flat as it seemed from above. There are waves of blue extending into the distance like a frozen ocean. "Perhaps there is a relationship between this and 'the sea of glass' before the throne of God. Perhaps the waves will flatten out as I approach the City of God."

Suddenly a person of unearthly beauty is standing a few feet away from the traveler. "Greetings," the being says. "It's a long way across this stretch. Many have perished trying to make it on foot. I offer you a better way."

"A better way?" Asks the traveler. "Yes, I have the power to cross this wilderness in a split second. And if you will let me, I can take you with me. I can have you safe on the other side directly."

"What must I do?"

"All I require is a token act. If you will merely kneel to pay me homage, I will lift you across this wilderness with the speed of light.."

"But that would be to worship you, wouldn't it?"

"Why do you find that strange? People do it every day. You did it yourself long before you came to this wilderness. The citizens often worship me in Christian City. Some there worship money--serve it like slaves. Their eyes light up at the thought of it. But the love of money is only a symbol of my reality."

"You aren't reaching me with your talk of money. It's never been a problem in My life," the traveler retorts. "How about romance? What could be more beautiful or innocent than being in love? But when the state of being in love becomes a goal and dominates the mind, there is idolatry involved. And it is 'yours truly' behind that idol," he says triumphantly. "But the most personally satisfying worship I receive comes from men and women who are pursuing religious successes."

"Well," the traveler cuts his boasting short, "If I have to worship you in exchange for quick trip across this wilderness, I'll gladly walk, if it takes forever!"

At this, the bewitching creature vanishes in defeat.

I soon hear the traveler reasoning with himself again: "In Christian City it is possible to go through all the surface motions of faith in God while one's real worship, the thing which obsesses the mind day and night, is idolatry. Now that I have left there I can survive only if I'm lost in the worship of God. God has said: 'Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.'"

"Perhaps such worship can be formed only in this desert, with its dryness and pounding heat, searing light and eerie silence."

These reflections are interrupted by a sudden crescendo of indescribable music, singing of unearthly beauty. Voices seem to be everywhere. Yet no one is visible. From the top of a blue wave, the traveler sees seven people standing in a hollow with their hands raised heavenward, uttering the praises to God. In the midst of this music, his mysterious companion returns. Filled with joy, the traveler tells her, "Do you notice how the seven worshipers are really surrounded by a multitude of magnificent beings whose voices blend with theirs? I felt that out here in the desert I have, in a mystery, already entered the outskirts of the City of God."

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gatherings, and to the assemble of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel... Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."

After some time the song ceases. Everything becomes still. No one is in sight but the seven worshipers, who bid the traveler God's peace and file over the dune, leaving him alone with his companion. She leads him to a rushing stream and provides him another meal.

"So this is the Wilderness of Worship," exclaims the traveler, still in awe from his experience.

"Yes, here Christians learn to worship God the Father in spirit and truth. You might call it the outer court of the City of God; for as you have seen, the inhabitants of that City are all around you. Back in the Wilderness of Forgiveness you began to experience the power of Jesus' blood cleansing your inmost heart. Here in the Wilderness of Worship you receive His Holy Spirit. God baptizes you with power and from on high in order for you to worship Him with a worship which, in the wildernesses beyond, will take the shape of deeds. Joel 2 tells us: 'And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit.'"

"I have never experienced such worship as this. But will it last?" Asks the traveler. "Will I still be able to worship the living God with such grace in the deserts beyond?"

"Changes are taking place in you which, if you let them, will last forever. Your heart is being opened by the outpoured Spirit. Your mouth is being opened to speak as God gives you utterance--'Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.' And your eyes are being opened to see visions and dream dreams. You are receiving eyes which see God"

"But don't these same things happen back in Christian City? I am told that this sort of thing goes on in the Apostolic Church of the Future every Sunday night."

"The difference, brother, is that here you do not merely taste worship or dabble in worship. Here in the desert you are lost in the worship of God so that all your praise and thanksgiving goes to Him. Everything you do is done for Him."

"But isn't there a danger of fanaticism?"

"Fanatics worship principles, ideas, human personalities and even demons, but never God. Consuming worship of God is the doorway, not to fanaticism, but to liberty such as you have never known. When you are lost in the worship of God, you no longer worship such things as money, romance, or success. You have found the one true object of worship, and as you worship Him you are fulfilled."

With these words his companion departs. Once again the traveler is alone on a sea of blue sand, lost in the worship of God.

The Wilderness of Prayer

Now the sea of sand comes to an abrupt end in the foothills of a fiery mountain range. There is no vegetation, only walls of dry, hard, burning rock. Bones cluttering the sand at the base of the rocky barrier are mute testimony to the dangers of this desolate land. The traveler fixes his gaze on the cross shaped star as he walks, and recites to himself:

"Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

Hearing voices in the distance, the traveler follows the path at the foot of the mountain toward them. There the path abruptly turns into a gash in the mountain. Entering the opening, he listens as a voice echoes and resounds with such intensity that no words can be distinguished. Moving deep into this rock pass, the traveler nears a huge wrought iron arch under which a man is addressing an assembly of men and women. "This is the way, believe me," pleads the man, his words now distinct. "This narrow gate to my left is so rusty it will hardly swing. Who in his right mind would want to follow that steep path, when this well paved, well traveled way is open and ready? Come through this gate and you will be out of the wilderness before the day is over. Good food and a clean bed await you at the other end. There are prayer meetings arranged at the rest stops every hour along the way."

Without hesitation the traveler passes under the wrought iron arch and proceeds down the road. Others join him. The route on which he now walks is smooth and pleasant in contrast to the blue sand he has just plodded through. A sign repeats the information that there are rest stops every hour, consisting of a prayer meeting and a light lunch.

At the first such stop he talks with a pleasant hostess: "I've come a long way. Please tell me where this path is taking us."

She smiles and replies, "You will be beautifully housed and well taken care of. Your journey will be over by nightfall."

"The traveler walks on, increasingly perplexed. Just as darkness begins to fall after a scenic journey through the rocks and trees, he finds himself on the brow of a hill looking down on a city.

"Welcome!" Exclaims a man standing beneath a wrought iron arch identical to the arch through which he had passed earlier.

"Thank you," replies the traveler. "But where am I?"

"Why, this is Christian City!"

Without another word the traveler turns and runs back the same way he came. With Christian City out of sight, he slows to a walk but doesn't stop until he's reached the other arch, the end of the false path. He cries out, "I have only one desire: to find that narrow gate and enter it before I take a single rest. How could I have been so blind? Of course the wide gate has been almost obliterated by weeds and vines.

Daybreak finds him on a narrow path winding up through scarlet rocks. There is a hum in the air as of a wind through trees, but neither wind nor trees are found here. The hum grows louder and finally can be distinguished as a chant of many voices. Now the traveler sees the people on the path ahead. He has become part of a procession of people all moving toward the City of God. As they walk they are each talking someone unseen. Some of them are crying. Some seem exuberant. Some are mentioning people's names and asking good things for them. Some ask their neighbors ahead or behind for help, but their main concern is with their unseen listener.

The traveler's mysterious companion now returns and addresses him. "Here in the Wilderness of Prayer the contrast with Christian City is extreme, you know. There, they do have prayer meetings and people pray before they go to bed. When life becomes difficult, their prayer becomes intense, until the crisis passes. But in the Wilderness of Prayer, prayer becomes one's way of life--the source of one's whole existence. The time has come for YOU to be lost in a life of prayer. Meditate on these passages in the Gospel of Luke," she adds handing him a sheet of paper on which is written:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was Praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form, as a dove, and voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22)

But so much the more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But he withdrew to the wilderness and Prayed. (Luke 5:15-16)

In those days he went out into the hills to Pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles...(Luke 6:12-13)

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountains to Pray. And when He was Praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. (Luke 9:28-29)

He was Praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to Pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1)

And he came out, and went, as his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place he said to them, "pray that you may not enter into temptation." And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and Prayed. (Luke 22:39-41)

And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said. "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:33-34)

"A prayer life is something we engage in alone, yet it brings us into fellowship with God and man as nothing else will," his companion tells him when he has finished reading. "prayer is going to God, to the Father's door, and asking for bread so that you can give it to your needy brother. When you knock and keep knocking always opens. Always. Out of that communion with God comes something you share with others. And as you share what God gives you, you have a communion with them. A person will have this communion even if he's shy or clumsy. For this life of prayer delivers one from the fear of other people's opinions and the fear of one's own blunders."

"But does it take these eerie mountains, these cliffs, this continuous danger to learn to pray?" Asks the traveler.

"Well, in the past you cried to god in you occasional emergencies. Here you are learning to see your life as a continuous crisis, driving you to call on God day and night. "Shall not God vindicate his elect who cry to him day and night?" The clearer our vision of what happens in the world--how close to the edge of chaos the nations are--the more we understand that the only way to know life is to come close to God the Father in prayer, to cry to Him day and night. We pray without ceasing because the crisis in earthly life is never over."

"But why does it all have to be so hard? It looks to me as though the climb through these mountains is the toughest part of the journey yet."

"Because prayer is our main work. It takes thought, concentration, an active will land the best of one's strength to pray for the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's kingdom, to pray for laborers in the harvest, or to pray for specific people and their needs. You have barely begun to scratch the surface of the awesome things that wait to be done in answer to your prayers, if you will keep going."

"That's it, though! To keep going. I'm getting so tired."

"This is because your prayers are becoming engaged in the Real Battle. Prayer is the ground where we overcome evil with good. In these mountains you will learn to pray for your enemies. The life of overcoming evil with good starts with asking that good will come to those who have done evil to us."

The narrow path leads to a lookout where the traveler and his companion share a meal. Afterwards they walk to the edge of the lookout where she points to the path winding down through the mountains which diminish in size until somewhere near the horizon they appear to reach their end.

"You see, there begins the Harvest," the travelers companion says, pointing to a view beyond them, "Remember these words which Jesus said:

'Do you not say, there are yet four months, then comes the harvest? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the field are already white for harvest. He reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored, and you will have entered into their labor.'"

The traveler look into the distance while his companion explains further: "In Christian City, remember there is fine, wide street called Missionary boulevard, lined with spacious well kept buildings and adorned with fountains and lawns and lovely shrubs. Those buildings house every missionary enterprise known in the Christian world. There are headquarters for literature outreach, editorial offices for elaborate missionary magazines, and smaller facilities that provide a prayer letter service for the lesser known laborers. There are studios that produce world literature telethons and video tapes for missionary appeals. There are

institutions that offer refresher courses for missionaries on furlough, and a computerized itinerary service for missionaries who need to broaden their financial base. There are recruiting centers, rest facilities for retired missionaries and even a budding record company. But lately Missionary Boulevard has been thrown into a panic by some disturbing news. Word has been received that large numbers of missionaries have committed the unpardonable breach of missionary etiquette: instead of taking as their mission field the approved territory of the known world, missionaries have plunged in to the desert toward the City of God.

"But what kind of mission field is this desert?" The traveler asks. "Whose soul are you going to save in the Wilderness of Forgiveness except your own? And when you get to the Wilderness of Worship, everyone there is already alive with God's glory. In the Wilderness of Prayer there is wonderful communion with other travelers, and I'm learning to intercede. But there aren't any lost souls..."

The Harvest

Reaching the outer extremity of the Wilderness of Prayer, the traveler in my dream is taking in his first clear view of his destination. In the far distance, radiant with a holy splendor, is the City of God. Visibly overcome with emotion, his step quickens. Suddenly he encounters a terrible stench of smoke and echoing bodies. Now there are corpses everywhere. Forms with life left are moaning for help.

A woman doubled up with pain begs the traveler, "Please, please do something for me. I can't tolerate this pain anymore!"

"I'm powerless," he tells her. "What do you think I could do for you?" "A little water is all I need. Please bring me some water!"

"Where am I going to find water in the desert?"

"How long do you think YOU'LL last," she replies, "unless you find water for yourself? Please find some and bring it to me."

As the traveler scans the desert in bewilderment, his mysterious companion returns and guides him to a spring surrounded by thousands of empty flasks.

"Drink some yourself," she suggests, "and then fill a flask for the woman."

After drinking this water, the traveler is immediately strengthened and brings some to the woman. By the time she has finished drinking her health is restored. Immediately she takes the flask, runs to the spring and begins helping her neighbors. There are men with deep wounds, children lying on their backs with faint, rapid breathing, and elderly people with dirty bandages around their worn faces. Some victims are screaming with pain and others are weeping silently to themselves. Some are revived with a single flask of water. Others need much more. I see other travellers engaged in this same effort. As victims are healed, they too participate in the labor of raising up others. As they carry water from the spring, the traveler shares this passage from the Gospel of John with another man:

"meanwhile the disciples besought him saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know. So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him food?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his word."

"I guess we're learning what this means," added the traveler.

He spends many days in that place involved in the work of revival. One evening as he rest by the sprig his companion returns and sits down beside him.

"I don't suppose we'll be able to go on to the City of God until we've finished here?" The traveler asks her.

"That is true," she replies.

"But will they wait for us?"

"Don't worry. Just keep reviving these people until they're all on their feet. Then the gates of the City of God will be open and the inhabitants will come out and escort you in. Bear this in mind:

'Do not say, There are yet four months, then comes the harvest. I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see the fields are white for harvest. He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored and you have entered into their labor.'"

"But these needs are so staggering that I am beginning to feel overwhelmed. The joy of seeing restoration take place before my eyes is offset to some degree by the vastness of this sea of despair. Is there and end to it?"

"Brother," replies his companion, "just as you had to lose yourself in God's forgiveness, and in worship and prayer, you are now losing yourself in the harvest. It is one thing to dabble in the harvest. It's quite another to be lost in it."

"But will I have the strength to keep on working among people with such great needs?"

"Isn't that what Jesus did?"

And as he sat at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but the sinners."

"It must have become discouraging for Him, though"

"Jesus wept over religious Jerusalem for its hardness of heart. Obviously His greatest encouragement on the human side came from these repenting sinners. Of these he never tired. You can confidently abandon yourself to this harvest without danger of being engulfed by it, provided you keep your vision of the City, and provided you do your work here with a whole heart. The Spirit of the Lord will sustain you if you will be careful to listen to these people as Jesus listened to the woman at the well, to the lepers, the lame, the blind, the father of the demon possessed boy. Don't be in a hurry. Take time to listen and ask the right questions. Find out where people really hurt, what they really need. Also, you must tell them about Jesus as you go about with your flask. The water in the flask and this message of yours are identical. These dying people are thirsting for Jesus, not theories about Jesus, but Jesus Himself. The message of Jesus is a drink of refreshing water which brings them back to life. Remember the verse, 'Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without pay, give without pay.'

Don't be satisfied until the mercy of god has raised them ALL to their feet."

"Yes. Think about this passage in Revelation;

"And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, for the former things have passed away.'"

"As you first experience the labor of the harvest and discover you are actually able to raise these perishing ones to their feet by giving them living water from the divine spring, Jesus, you have tremendous joy. The wilderness experiences of forgiveness, worship of god and prayer have issued in the power to heal the sick in the name of Jesus."

"'He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works that these will he do, because I go to the Father.' The challenge is to endure."

The Vision

When I next see the traveler in my dream, he has begun to complain, "How long is this going to go on? I would have thought that by now the work would be finished and we could go on. I'm sorry, but I'm tired. I'm going over by that boulder to rest in the shade for a couple of days."

Later another traveler passes the boulder and finds him lying there almost dead. Running to the spring he fills two flasks, returns and pours the precious water down his throat.

"Drink, brother, drink!"

"Thank you! Oh, thank you! I was almost done for," says the traveler between gulps. "But how did I come to this? What went wrong?"

His mysterious companion joins him again. "Brother," she says, "you lost your strength because you lost your vision. The City of God over there is still your destination. It is your home, the dwelling place of our God. While you work, be sure to take time daily, hourly, to pause and look at the City of God. If you fail to look up in the midst of your labors and see the City of God, fail to stop and hear its music, neglect to breathe the atmosphere it sends forth to you, or to drink from that steam which flows out from beneath its gates, you will be exhausted. You must remember that sustaining power comes from the City."

"The traveler resumes his work in the Harvest with fresh vigor. But at nightfall overcome by weariness. He goes to the spring; approaching it is a woman who looks to be quite elderly, yet doesn't appear the least bit tired.

"What is your secret?" Asks the traveler. "You look so youthful and vigor while I have no strength left."

"I have taken my cue from Daniel," she tells him. "Daniel must have been a busy man, yet in the midst of the daily pressures he continued to return to his upper chamber where the windows opened westward. There looking toward Jerusalem hundreds of miles away, he prayed and gave thanks to God. Even though it meant the lions' den, Daniel refused to neglect his prayers. Daniel keeps his vision alive by making the City of God his focus. Ad that's what I do. The more problems I have to contend with her in the Harvest, the more time seems to press in on me, the more firmly I fix my eye on the City of God. I make sure to keep looking up. Every time I eat bread and drink wine I do so in anticipation as well as in remembrance. This is the food of the City, you know. It keeps my eyes AND my heart there."

When the traveler left the old woman, he seemed to be consciously attempting to keep his vision before him. In low voice he was singing the words of Revelation: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away!'"

When I last see the traveler, his mysterious companion had returned with a final admonition for him: "KEEP looking to that City and remember who waits for you there. He has prepared a place for you and will soon be coming for you. Meanwhile, as you look to the City, He will renew your strength so that you will mount up on wings as the eagles, you will run and not be weary, you will walk and not faint."

Two Revivals

At this point I was swept away from the scene of the traveler's journey to the top of a high cliff. I found there a stone tablet inscribed with these words from Revelation 19:

"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed with no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the Word of God. And the armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

Looking up from the tablet, I saw beneath me two revivals simultaneously in progress. Christian City was experiencing a revival which manifested itself in a massive and rapid growth. Within a very short amount of time the population had increased tenfold. Building was going on everywhere. New homes sprawled up and down the surrounding hills. But the most dramatic aspect of this growth in Christian City was the appearance of magnificent new church structures towering over the country side. One cathedral was being completed which had a spire seventy stories high, housing the world's most powerful transmitter. Another church was taking shape in the form of a giant glass dome with revolving stage and wrap around sound systems. The most unusual one looked like an upright cross with fifteen elevators taking people up to the sanctuary housed in the south arm and a Christian restaurant housed in the north arm. There were Christian educational facilities for every age group from pre-kindergarten to graduate school; this group sponsored scenic retreat centers in the style of Swiss chalets with vast seminar halls.

There was a feeling in Christian City that this growth was sign of the world's last days. Books on the end of the age were up near the top of the Christian best seller lists, second only to the Christian sex manuals. Reporters came from all over the world to do articles on the booming conditions there. The inhabitants of Christian City were claiming that when the End came, they would be caught away to the City of God, before the chaos erupted.

At the same time, I saw across the desert far distant from Christian City a very different revival taking place with none of the accouterments of successful religion. Dying men and women were being raised to their feet like the dry bones Ezekiel saw. They were being delivered from their diseases, their sins, and their spiritual prisons, merely by drinking the living life giving water shared it with others, bringing healing to them. As by a spreading fire or a surging flood, the sick ones were being swept to their feet. Laborers there, who'd spent years seeing limited results, found that now it was taking no more than a single drop of water on a parched tongue to raise the dying to life. And each day the process was accelerating.

Finally I saw the last prone body raised to life. What one appeared a battlefield of defeat had become the camp of a mighty army. Suddenly an earthquake shook the ground beneath my feet. The Sky darkened and a sound of war rolled in from the east.

Then I saw Christian City being invaded and destroyed. The magnificent cathedrals, the world's largest cross, retreat centers and seminar halls were splintered apart and flattened by deafening explosions. Dead bodies of the inhabitants who had thought they would escape this holocaust filled the streets. The armies of destruction now pressed on into the desert toward the scene of the second revival. Soon this seemingly indestructible horde was engulfing the Wilderness of forgiveness, the Wilderness Worship and the Wilderness of Prayer. When the City of God came into its view, a single roar like that of a wounded beast filled the air. The horde drove on toward its goal, appearing about to storm the City of God.

But near the wall of the City, the army of revived ones waited poised and ready. When the enemy came within range, the gates of the City burst open. Out marched the Army of Light led by a King of such splendor that the enemy horde had to shield its eyes. The revived ones merged with the Army of Light and joined battle with the enemy. Three-and-a half days later the war was over. The enemy was destroyed and the triumphant ones entered the City of God for which they had been chosen before the foundation of the world.

Again I was swept away to read another large tablet engraved with further words from Revelation:

"Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.' And I saw the beast and the kings of earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse ad against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and whose who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with brimstone. And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he could deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgement was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."

When I had finished reading this, as abruptly as my dream had come to me it ended, leaving me with a deep sense of awe, a new awareness of the undercurrents in my own life, and a renewed desire to seek to know God in spirit and truth.

Never has it been more clear to me that two revivals are in progress on the earth. One is the revival of the Spirit of God by which dead men and women are freed from their sins by the blood of the Lamb and raised to a life which is the life of the sons of God, a life which bears God's nature, manifests God's mercy. The other revival is the revival of religious flesh, a revival which is so appealing and gathers such multitudes and wields such power in this world because it offers all the comforts of religion while allowing you to keep your ego and all rights to yourself.

Surely each of us has to decide which revival he is going to be part of . Am I going to invest my life in some enterprise of booming Christian City? Or am I going to lose my life in the pursuit of God's will of mercy? Am I going to concentrate on building something that will cause the citizens of Christian City to sit up and take notice? Or am I going to spend my life bringing the poor and the maimed and the halt and the blind to the Master's table?