

Three Paths Into The Kingdom.

By the Rev. Scott I. Frazier

Our story today is about the three ways the Children of Israel could have entered the Land of Canaan. Our story today is also about the three ways we can enter the Lord's Kingdom and become angels. The different ways available to Israel are pictures of the different paths the Lord offers us in His mercy as we hope to be regenerated. Just as Israel is eager, even desperate, to enter the Land of Canaan, we are eager to enter His Heavenly Kingdom and dwell in happiness and peace. This is a story about becoming better people.

The Children of Israel are trying to leave the wilderness and enter a land they know has been promised to them. Unlike the wilderness, a harsh place with little water and little food, the Promised Land is "flowing with milk and honey". That famous phrase is a perfect description of what the children of Israel are hoping for an easy land, a land of plenty, a land seemingly free of need and toil. Imagine the anxiety and expectations of the massed multitudes as they wait for the twelve spies to return with their report of what the land was like. When the spies do come back, they bring back not only reports of the land, but a great sample of grapes brought from the land as proof of its bounty. This is a good land that has been promised them, truly a land flowing with milk and honey.

The internal sense revealed in the *Heavenly Doctrines* tells us that this is a picture of a blessed state. This is a picture of the promise of regeneration: a life of heavenly things that make us happy. Imagine a life where we feel happy when we help the people around us, a life where we look at the people around us and take pleasure in thinking of ways to help them. This is the

milk and honey of the land we hope to enter. The grapes symbolize charity, the ability to help the people around us. When the spies bring the grapes back, we see that the Promised Land includes doing good things, being charitable. The spies bring back evidence that the Promised Land is a wonderful place. If we can get to the Promised Land, we will be the kind of people who take delight purely in helping the people around us and loving the Lord. Who wouldn't want to live there?

But this is not all that the spies reveal. They admit that to enter the land and possess it, Israel will have to defeat giants and fortified cities. It will not be without some combat. Israel may want the land very badly, but the thought of facing giants and fortresses causes fear and doubt. Maybe Israel will not be able to defeat the inhabitants of the land. We also learn that combat is required of us; to become heavenly people, we must defeat our own giants and fortified cities. We must also face and defeat our own pride and false beliefs – the giants and fortresses—before we can truly be regenerate and heavenly. This is no easy task – just as the spies felt like grasshoppers before the giants, so we feel small and helpless against our own evils when we first see them in ourselves.

Faced with this situation, the Children of Israel have a choice. Joshua and Caleb urge the people to go up. They insist that the Lord will give Israel victory. The other spies, however, insist that the task is too great, and imply that the Lord cannot be trusted to follow through on His promise. They can either go into the land now and trust the Lord or not go in and abandon the Lord. We have the same choice. When we are first offered the path to His Kingdom, we can either trust Him and go immediately, or reject His offer and not go. These are the first two possible paths. The third path we will examine later.

Going immediately is the easy path into His heavenly kingdom. Going immediately was what the Children of Israel were supposed to do. They were supposed to listen to the report

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of Joshua and Caleb, trust in the Lord, and enter the Land of Canaan right then. Remember that this is shortly after leaving the Egyptians drowning in the sea. Moses is still with them, and they have not been in the wilderness long. Thinking of the milk and honey, and of the grapes that the spies brought back, the Children of Israel could have entered the land, fought against all the inhabitants in their way, and inherited the land soon. The Lord offered them the easy path first: believe in Me and conquer. This is the path of Joshua and Caleb, the easy path.

In our lives, we are also offered the easy path. The first time we learn of who we are supposed to be, the first time we find out another virtue we are supposed to cultivate as adults, we are offered the easy path. Take, for example, forgiveness. The Word is very clear that we should forgive people and not harbor enmity in our hearts. We should always look to the good in other people and remember that in some way every person is in the image of the Lord. To become like this, we must do battle against our own evils and falsities and see that those evil and falsities are not us. This is the promise the Lord makes. If we believe Him from the beginning, each of us can be that kind of person relatively easily and perhaps even quickly.

Is this an impossible claim? Is this too hard? Is the Lord being unreasonable? *The Heavenly Doctrines* tell us that being this kind of person is possible. Divine Providence tells us: If we believe, as is the truth, that all good and truth come from the Lord, and all evil and falsity from Hell, we will not appropriate good to ourselves and take credit, and we will not appropriate evil to ourselves and be guilty. This appears to be impossible, but this is what being human - and angelic - is all about.

Perhaps this is easier said than done, but this is the promise – the Lord says, we do. If we remember that anger and hostility are not us, that we shouldn't nurse our grudges and dwell upon others' evils, that, in a word, we should be forgiving, then we

will be forgiving. If we start this way, if we avoid forming habits of evil and anger, our spiritual path is much easier. We do not avoid combats against evils, but we enter the promised land soon and with fewer combats. This is true with every kind of spiritual struggle we have, not just with forgiveness. The Lord says, we do: this is the easy path.

But this is not what the children of Israel did. They chose not to believe Joshua and Caleb but instead doubted the Lord. They believed the other spies when they reported that the land was too difficult to possess. They not only hesitated, but they questioned Moses, they threatened, and they seriously considered turning around and returning to Egypt. They didn't merely have a moment of weakness; they decided to abandon the Lord. When they learned what was expected of them, they revolted and refused to continue. They wanted the milk and the honey, they wanted more grapes, but they were unwilling to believe that the Lord could give these things to them.

And what did the Lord do? At first it looks as if the Lord punishes them. He announces, through Moses, that Israel must wander in the wilderness for forty years. He announces that all the adults who doubted him in that moment (except, of course, Joshua and Caleb) will have to die. The Lord announces that they will not get the land. This seems to be a severe punishment, but it is merely the result of their decision to abandon the Lord.

And yet it isn't even really a punishment. As is always the case in the Old Testament, an expression of anger or wrath on the part of the Lord is actually an expression of Divine Mercy. The Lord is not punishing the Children of Israel – He is giving them a second chance. Yes, they will face forty years of wandering, and yes, all the adults must die off first, but their children will inherit the land. Even after they have abandoned the Lord and murmured against His chosen leader, He is providing them with a back-up plan. This is not the easy path He offered first, but the

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hard path. It is still a path into the promised land, but a path involving much more combat and toil than the first path. What the children of Israel will discover about this second path is that it solves their problems: they will be toughened into a desert army, they will be new people (the children of who they used to be), and they will be strengthened to try again.

In our lives, we often hear what the Lord asks, and we doubt. Sometimes we have momentary doubts; sometimes we reject Him altogether. Perhaps it is only rarely that we take the easy path and believe Him the first time. The Lord knows us very well and always has a second option, a second path, but a path made harder by our own rejection. The Lord's solution for us in our states of doubt and rejection is for us to wander for forty years and become new people. In our lives, the harder path is the path of temptation, symbolized by the forty years, by which we finally put away our rejection, symbolized by the death of the entire generation. We can still enter the promised land of heavenly life, but we must face real temptation to defeat what we have already confirmed in our lives. Temptation in this case is unpleasant, necessary, and useful. It is a second chance, not a punishment.

For example, if we have confirmed in ourselves an inclination to harbor grudges, if we have the habit of thinking ill of our neighbor, if we have already made criticism and scorn part of our lives, the Lord still has mercy on us. Our path is much harder than if we hadn't confirmed these evils in our life, but all is not lost. Through temptation we struggle to stop harboring anger in our heart, and the Lord brings us forgiveness, but it is a harder path. This harder path does lead to the promised land, and temptation does lead to a heavenly life of love to the neighbor. Temptation toughens us up to try again, and no matter how many times we approach the promised land and fail, the Lord will always offer us another path to try again.

These are the two paths to the Lord's Heavenly Kingdom that work. The easier path is better than the harder path, but both work. The Children of Israel at first took neither path. Instead, they tried a third path, the wrong path. After rejecting the easy path that Joshua and Caleb wanted, the Children of Israel then heard what the Lord had announced about the forty years of wandering. We can imagine the feeling of dread and even betrayal they must have felt as they realized what their initial rejection meant. They were doomed to wander for forty years? They would all die? What a terrible fate! They did not see the mercy of the Lord in this harder path and rejected it as well. Instead, they decided that they would, in fact, go right then into the land, as Joshua and Caleb had first insisted.

That path was closed, however. The Lord would not go with them, and neither would Moses or the Ark of the Covenant. Even knowing this, the people wanted to go up anyway. They tried to enter and possess the land without the Lord. Despite the warnings, the Children of Israel now tried to do something on their own that they had previously been unwilling to try even with the help of the Lord. As we read today, they met with total failure.

We face the same potential mistake. When we find out what the Lord offers us – a path of temptation – we can also become indignant and feel betrayed. Why does it have to be so hard? Can't we just be good the way we are? Why must we struggle to become good people? Perhaps we are good just the way we are. We want the easier path back. We want to inherit the kingdom of happiness now, without temptation. This isn't a moment of doubt, and it isn't fear of the task at hand. This is the belief that we can be good and defeat our evils on our own. The Lord warns us that we need His help, but we don't believe Him. We can live without His Word, without His revealed truth, without His Ten Commandments, and we can be happy.

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What if we decide that we can be happy without being forgiving? What will happen if we do not struggle against anger, scorn, and enmity? What if we are just going to be happy and maybe help people without addressing our own anger. We'll keep our anger because it's "who we are", our personality, our style. We don't have to repent; we can just stay the way we are and find eternal joy.

This is when the Amalekites attack. The Amalekites attacked and defeated the Children of Israel before they even got to the Land of Canaan. Israel didn't win the battle and had to retreat. We face the same defeat at the hands of our own evils. *The Heavenly Doctrines* tell us that the Amalekites symbolize hidden evils that pollute our thinking. Amalekites don't offer arguments against the truth; they hide in our loves and destroy whatever good we try to do. The Amalekites are going to defeat us every time we think we don't need the Lord. Our own evils will defeat us until we admit that we have to change and that we need to change because the Lord says so.

Even in this case, though, the Lord shows the Children of Israel mercy. After they have rejected his first path, after they have rejected his second path and tried their own, He is still willing to help them. They still have the second, harder path available to them. In the same way, no matter how many times we try to be happy on our own, we can always go back to the Lord and accept his path of temptation. The Children of Israel eventually do possess the land flowing with milk and honey. We, too, always have the opportunity of living the will of the Lord and being happy in His Word and His Kingdom.

There are three paths to heavenly happiness. The easy path is to believe the Lord from the beginning and resist evils before we confirm them. The hard path is to defeat through temptation our confirmed evils, with the Lord's help. The wrong path is to believe we do not need His help and can be happy with our evils.

When we see the easy path, we should believe the Lord and take it. When we see the hard path, we should believe the Lord and take it. When we see the wrong path, we should reject it and return to the Lord and His Word. “As for Me and My House, we will follow Jehovah.” Amen.

Lessons: Numbers 13:1-3, 21-33; 14:2, 26-33,39-45; *Divine Providence* 320, 321

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