

A DREAMER AND HIS WONDERFUL DREAM

The Story of John Bunyan and The Pilgrim's Progress

by

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Chapter 15

THE PILGRIMS DESPAIR FOR THEIR LIVES

Christian and Hopeful, after laying well to heart the lesson of Lot's wife, continued their journey and presently came to a very beautiful place where a limpid stream meandered through a fertile valley. On each side of the stream were soft velvety swards of green grass, and all manner of trees upon which the most luscious fruit was growing. This river was called by David, "**the river of God**," but by John, "**the river of the water of life**." Here they drank deep of the cool refreshing stream, partook of the fruit and rested themselves on the banks of the river. They lay down and slept, for here was a safe place to rest. Here they remained for many days and sang a song that an earlier pilgrim in these parts had composed, which ran thus, "**The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**"

This beautiful scene, with all its rest and quiet refreshment, is a picture of an experience that often comes into the life of the Christian. It is what might be termed "the resting experience." You will doubtless recall that the Lord JESUS once said to His disciples in the midst of their busy labors, "**Come ye apart and rest awhile.**" This resting experience is very necessary for the pilgrim, for it is here that he is enabled to recuperate and prepare for the future conflicts of the Christian life.

The river, so calm, clear and refreshing, is a picture of the Word of GOD that refreshes the weary pilgrim as he drinks deep of its precious promises and encouraging truths, "**O that they had hearkened unto my commandments, then had their peace been as a river!**" says GOD's Word. The fruit could speak of the fruit of the Spirit that is manifested in the life of that one who is living in communion with GOD. Such fruit as "**love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control**" (Galatians 5:22); glorifies GOD, and graces the pilgrim's character. The smooth velvety grass on which they reclined could illustrate the exceeding great and precious promises of GOD, on which the believer may confidently rest his weary soul, and find peace, perfect peace.

After many days they decided to continue their journey, but soon found that the road became exceedingly rough. There were great hills to climb and deep valleys to descend; while rocks and thorns in the pathway made the going very difficult. The feet of the pilgrims, by reason of their long sojourn at the beautiful river, had become so

tender, so that they were much discouraged by the rough and thorny road.

BY-PATH MEADOW

Presently they came to a place, where by looking over the wall that bordered the path, they saw a lovely smooth meadow called By-Path Meadow. In it was a delightfully smooth and easy footpath which apparently led in the same direction as the rough path on which they were then walking. Soon they perceived a stile, or steps over the wall, which gave easy access into By-Path Meadow. Christian said, "Come, good Hopeful, and let us climb over."

Hopeful at first demurred and would not do so but objected, "What if this should lead us out of the way?" Christian sought to silence his companion's objections by pointing out that the smooth pathway lay exactly parallel to the rough road. At length Hopeful was persuaded by his companion, and climbed over the stile into the meadow. They found it very different from the difficult road they had just left, for it was delightfully smooth and very easy to negotiate.

Presently they saw a man ahead of them named False Confidence, so Christian called to him and asked him where the pathway led.

False Confidence replied, "it leads to the Celestial Gate."

"There," exclaimed Christian, "did I not say so? by this you may see that we are right."

But as they followed their leader, darkness gradually enveloped them, so that they lost sight of him who was going before. Suddenly False Confidence, not seeing what was before him, fell into a deep pit dug by the owner of the field to catch false confident fools. The pilgrims heard him fall, so they called to him and asked him what was the matter. All they heard in reply were his groans of anguish, and then followed the silence of death.

At this Hopeful asked, "where are we now?" but Christian had no reply, for the fearful truth of their plight was dawning on him. Then came a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a terrific peal of thunder, and the rain began to pour in torrents.

When Hopeful saw this he groaned and cried, "O that I had kept on my way!"

Christian replied, "Who would have thought that this path should have led us out of the way!"

Hopeful replied, "I was afraid at the very first, and therefore gave you gentle caution. I would have spoken plainer, but you were older than I."

At this Christian exclaimed, "Good brother, be not offended! I am sorry I have brought thee out of the way, and have put thee into such great danger; pray, my brother, forgive me, I did not do it of any evil intent."

Hopeful promptly forgave him and they then tried to find their way back to the stile again, but due to the intense darkness and the rising waters, they could not, in spite of their skill, find the way.

For their encouragement, however, they heard a voice which said, "Let thine heart be towards the highway, even the way that thou wentest; turn again!" Alas! in spite of all their efforts they had to give up and acknowledge that

they were hopelessly lost. At length they saw a little sheltering rock, and being wet through, weary and aching in every bone, and feeling sick and miserable at heart, they lay down to rest awhile and soon were fast asleep.

DOUBTING CASTLE

Early the next morning, while the pilgrims were still fast asleep, the owner of By-Path Meadow, a huge and cruel giant named Despair awakened in his great and strong castle named Doubting Castle.

Rising from his bed, and taking his club, he made his way to where Christian and Hopeful were peacefully sleeping. With a grim and surly voice, he asked them who they were and what they meant by trespassing on his grounds. You can well imagine the dismay of the pilgrims on being thus awakened. They made a feeble defense by telling the Giant that they were pilgrims who had lost their way.

At this the Giant roared: "You have this night trespassed on me, by trampling in and lying on my grounds, and therefore you must come along with me."

This they were forced to do, for the Giant emphasized his remarks with the business end of his club. Added to this was the fact that the pilgrims knew they were in the wrong, and therefore hadn't a word to say. Thus they were driven in front of the Giant and walked as meek as lambs until they reached the Castle.

This dreadful place, with its grim walls and narrow-barred windows and iron gates, might well have struck terror to the bravest soul. Into this place the Giant drove them, and placing them in a dark and dirty dungeon, securely locked them in, and left them without a bit of bread or a drink of water from Wednesday morning till Saturday night. Here poor Christian and Hopeful lay bemoaning their sad plight, and wondering what was to be the end of it all.

Now Despair had a wife whose name was Diffidence or Distrust, and she counselled her husband to go down to the prisoners and give them as severe a beating with his club as he could, without killing them. This pleased the Giant well, so accordingly he came down, and without a word of warning, commenced to belabor them with his club so unmercifully that they cried in anguish and fell to the floor, groaning in agony and bleeding from their wounds. Bruised and almost unconscious, they spent all that night in nothing but sighs and bitter lamentations.

The next day Distrust advised her husband to take down a length of rope, a knife and a bottle of poison, and counsel the pilgrims to do away with themselves. This sounded like good advice to the Giant so he entered the cell where the prisoners still lay on the floor. He pointed out to them that as their lives were attended by so many miseries, and that there was no possible hope of escaping from his castle; the best thing they could do would be to take their own lives and thus they would be delivered from his grasp and from the terrors of his castle.

He then offered them the rope with which to hang themselves, the knife with which to cut their throats, and the poison to drink which would soon put them outside the confines of Doubting Castle. The prisoners, however, would have none of it and desired him to let them go. This roused Despair to anger and taking his club, he was about to rush upon them and kill them on the spot, when a most peculiar thing happened. Without a moment's warning, he suddenly fell down in a fit - for he suffered from these fits in sunshiny weather - and completely lost the use of his hand. Sad to relate, Christian and Hopeful were so weak and faint and stiff from their wounds, that they were unable to take advantage of the Giant's helplessness. To their disappointment, Despair soon recovered from his indisposition and withdrew, leaving them to consider what they would do.

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Poor Christian was in a dreadful way, and seriously considered taking Despair's advice and ending his life.

Hopeful, however, dissuaded him from this by pointing out the sinfulness of such a thing. He then tried to cheer him up by suggesting that escape would yet be possible, and said, "Others, as far as I can understand, have been taken by him as well as we; and yet have escaped out of his hand."

With such words Christian was made to see his folly and relinquished his idea. That evening, the Giant came down to see how they did. When he found they were alive he threatened them with further dire punishment that would make them regret the day they were born. This caused Christian to faint, and when he recovered, he again desired to use the rope, knife, or poison that Despair had left them; but again Hopeful caused him to give up the project.

This time he pointed out how GOD had delivered him from Apollyon, and how bravely he had played the man on that occasion. He further reminded Christian of his attitude in Vanity; how he had not been afraid of imprisonment, torture and death, but had boldly conducted himself in that place for his Lord and Master.

This effectually delivered Christian from such God-dishonoring thoughts, and they waited to see if deliverance should come.

The following day Distrust advised the Giant to take the prisoners, if they were still alive, to the courtyard of the castle, and show them the bodies and the bones of the pilgrims whom he had already killed. She ended by saying, "Make them believe, ere a week comes to an end, that thou wilt tear them in pieces as thou has done their fellows before them." Despair promptly followed his wife's counsel, and driving his prisoners before him, showed them the fearful spectacle of hundreds of dead men's bodies. He then threatened that if they did not do away with themselves, he would do the job for them ere Sunday came. With these doleful words he beat them again, and drove them back to their cell and left them securely locked in, alone with their misery.

Now were the pilgrims indeed in a desperate plight. A few hours more, and the Giant would come down to their cell and kill them with his fearful club. What could they do to escape from the clutches of such an awful being? In their distress they decided to pray and confess their sins to their heavenly Father. They remembered His word, "**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**" (1 John 1:9).

Accordingly, they got down on their knees and told GOD all about it. They did not excuse themselves in the slightest degree; but brought their sins out into the light of GOD's presence and judged themselves unmercifully. They acknowledged their sin in having tried to escape from the path of obedience to His will and Word and work by climbing over the stile. They owned their laziness, indifference and self-indulgence. They bemoaned their guilt, and freely admitted they were receiving just what they deserved; but they prayed that GOD, in His grace and mercy, would make a way by which they could escape from their dark dungeon, the club of Giant Despair and the advice of Distrust.

THE KEY CALLED PROMISE

They continued thus praying and confessing their sins until almost the break of day. Suddenly Christian, as one half amazed cried "What a fool I am to thus lie in this stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key in my bosom called the Promise that will, I am persuaded, open any door in Doubting Castle!"

Then cried Hopeful, "That's good news, good brother. Pluck it out of your bosom and try!"

Thus encouraged, Christian put his hand into the bosom and drew out the key called Promise. Placing it into the lock of the door of the cell, he found that the door opened with ease. Ascending the steps, they came to another door, and again this door opened with the wonderful key, until at length they entered the Courtyard.

Once more the key was placed in the great iron gate, and though it took some time, finally this door also opened. As it did so, it creaked quite loud upon its hinges, and this noise awakened the Giant from his sleep. Grasping his club, the Giant rushed out after them as hard as he could, but as he was about to catch and kill them he was overtaken by another of those peculiar fainting fits which rendered him quite helpless.

The pilgrims, you may be quite sure, wasted no time in getting back again to the stile; and climbing over it as quickly as they could they once more stood in the king's highway and thanked GOD from the depths of their hearts for their miraculous escape from Doubting Castle. They had learned by experience - painful experience - that the Christian pathway of obedience to GOD's will and word, though it might be rough and difficult at times, was ten thousand times better than By-Path Meadow, with its terrible owner, his grim wife, and the fearful Castle!

We may well lay to heart the lesson of By-Path Meadow, Giant Despair, Distrust and Doubting Castle, for its meaning is plain. Many a Christian, finding that the straight and narrow way is difficult and hard to the flesh, demanding as it does self-denial and whole-hearted obedience, seeks to find an easier path by climbing over some conveniently placed stile. The devil will see to it that the stile is quite handy, and he can mimic "providence" to this end, as he did in the case of Jonah.

Perhaps the Christian finds it hard to give out Gospel tracts, and is tempted therefore to give it up. He argues, "Why should I go to the prayer meeting? There are plenty of others, and besides, it looks like rain. Why attend the open-air meeting and be exposed to the ridicule of the enemies of CHRIST? Why not rather stay home and sing, "Rescue the perishing, care for the dying!" Why go to the trouble of taking a Sunday School class with its necessary study and visitation? Why put oneself out just to please some who do not seem to appreciate one's efforts? Why give so much of one's time, prayer, and money to the Lord's work?"

And so the Christian often reasons, and following the example of some false confident professor of Christianity, he climbs into By-path Meadow, and seeks thus to avoid the responsibilities of the Christian life. But what happens? Just exactly what happened to Christian and Hopeful. Spiritual darkness enshrouds him. The storms of passion and temptation sweep over his soul, and despair grips his heart and beats him unmercifully. He is surrounded by dark and dreadful God-dishonoring doubts. He doubts his salvation, questions the truth of the Word of GOD, the goodness and love of GOD, and the power of CHRIST. Then comes distrust which whispers, "Do away with your Christian profession. Give it up and go back into the world, for you were never as miserable then as you are now." Thus the poor Christian is nonplussed and knows not what to do. He is distressed and distracted beyond measure.

PRAYER AND PROMISE

At last he gets down on his knees before GOD in honest openhearted confession of his self indulgence, laziness, pride and sin. As he thus judges himself in the light of GOD's presence, there is revealed to him the fact that the promises of GOD, long neglected and forgotten, are able, through faith in them, to deliver him from all his doubts, perplexities and fears. The repentant Christian then lays hold by faith on these promises and pleads them before the throne of grace; and lo, all his doubts are dissolved like the mist before the rising sun; despair faints before the sunlight of GOD's Word; distrust is silent, and the believer gladly returns to that life of obedience to GOD's will, of the study of GOD's Word, and activity in GOD's work. He has learned by experience that "**God's way is a way of pleasantness, and all his paths are peace.**"

If any Christian reader is in Doubting Castle, take courage and remember that the key of Promise fits any door in that gloomy place. Judge and confess your sins, and GOD will make good to you His "**exceeding great and precious promises.**" Do not make the mistake of attempting to construct a key of your own; for only GOD's key can fit the door. Mere human reason is of no avail in such a contingency. GOD's Word must be believed implicitly and relied upon unhesitatingly. Then, and only then, will the doors of doubt and darkness swing open to allow the soul to enjoy the liberty which CHRIST has made possible to His own.

Ere the pilgrims left the stile, they consulted what they had best do, and finally decided that it would be a good plan to put a notice of warning near the stile, so that others might learn from their experience the danger of seeking an easier path. Accordingly, they first erected a monument of stones and then placed on it these words,

"Out of the way we went, and then we found
What 'twas to tread upon forbidden ground!
And let them that come after have a care,
Lest heedlessness makes them, as we, to fare:
Lest they for trespassing, his prisoners are
Whose Castle's Doubting, and whose name's Despair."

THE DELECTABLE MOUNTAINS

As the pilgrims proceeded, they presently came to the Delectable Mountains, where they went up to see the gardens, orchards, vineyards and fountains of water.

Here they freely partook of the good provision of this bountiful country. Here also they saw flocks of sheep feeding upon rich pasture, and in charge of the sheep were four shepherds whose names were Knowledge, Experience, Watchful and Sincere.

Christian and Hopeful then inquired of the shepherds whose sheep they were. The shepherds told them that they belonged to the Good Shepherd who had laid down His life for them.

They next inquired how far it was to the Celestial City and the reply was, "Too far for any but those that shall get thither."

The next question was, "Is the way safe or dangerous?"

To this the shepherds replied, "It is safe for those for whom it is to be safe, but transgressors shall fall therein." Then the shepherds examined the pilgrims and finding them true men of GOD, gave them a hearty welcome.

The Delectable Mountains illustrate that fuller and wider knowledge of the Word of GOD which opens up to the believer the purposes of GOD for this age, and also for the future. Glorious prospects are revealed to the child of GOD, and from their sublime heights the pilgrim can view the eternal counsels of the omnipotent GOD. As he is enabled thus to enter in some measure into the riches of GOD's grace, he is led to exclaim, "**O the depths of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of GOD! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!**" (Romans 11:33).

WHO ARE THE SHEPHERDS?

The shepherds speak of the graces that keep the pilgrim in these parts. Without these the believer would be apt to get puffed up. How much he needs the guidance of knowledge, the balance of experience, the ceaseless watchfulness of soul, and godly sincerity.

These shepherds could also illustrate those in an assembly of believers, who, by reason of their knowledge in the Word of GOD, experience in the ways of GOD, watchfulness in the will of GOD and sincerity in the love of GOD, are thus fitted to be the shepherds of the flock of CHRIST. CHRIST's commission to Peter was, "**Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep.**" In I Peter 5:1-4 the elders are enjoined to "**Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint but willingly; not for filthy lucre [or money] but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.**"

This gift of shepherding is a much needed one in these days when Satan is so busy trying to scatter the sheep, and the wolves of evil doctrine are seeking to destroy the faith of the lambs. The work of a pastor or shepherd may be an unnoticed work, but it will receive a crown and commendation at His coming. Young Christians are also admonished to "**Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they do it with joy and not with grief.**"

The responsibility of these shepherds is to lovingly lead the flock into right pastures; to feed them with the finest of the wheat of the Word of GOD; to counsel, admonish, warn, discipline and encourage them in the ways of GOD, so that they shall grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord JESUS CHRIST, and be able, in turn, to take the place of those who are removed by death.

This is GOD's divine order for the church as given in His Word. GOD speaks of evangelists, pastors, teachers, bishops, deacons; all working harmoniously together to build up the body in love.

~ end of chapter 15 ~
