

Giant Despair and Doubting Castle

Pilgrim's Progress, by John Bunyan, is a book first published in 1678 to describe the Christian life, as a pilgrim (named Christian) makes his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City (heaven). As an allegory, the names are symbolic, as Mr. Wordly Wiseman, Lord Hate-Good, Prudence, Charity, Valiant for Truth, Hopeful, etc. Every Christian should be familiar with this book.

After leaving the City of Destruction, Christian enters at the gate (Mt. 7:13-14), and starts along the strait and narrow path. After many experiences both good and bad, he meets Faithful and they go together through Vanity Fair, where they are tried, and Faithful is martyred. As a result of his faithful life and courageous death, another takes his place, called Hopeful. He and Christian walk together and finally come to the river of the water of life, where they have a time of sweet comfort and blessing. From there the river and the narrow way drift apart, and the way becomes difficult, and their souls are discouraged. Then they come to a stile to cross over into By-path Meadow, which appears to go the same way as the narrow way and yet is much easier. Christian persuades a reluctant Hopeful to take that way, and they are initially encouraged by the report of one Vain Confidence, who assures them that this way also leads to the Celestial City. They eventually notice that they are far off the narrow way, and in the dark, they hear Vain Confidence perish in a fall. Realizing that they are quite out of the way, they fear and start back to get back to the narrow way. They eventually halt and are captured by a giant, named Despair, who imprisons them in Doubting Castle. They are locked in a dirty, stinky dungeon in chains, with no bread, water, or light, nor any friends. The giant returns periodically to threaten and beat them mercilessly. After they hold up under this, the giant's wife, Diffidence, gets him to encourage them to suicide. Christian is almost persuaded, but Hopeful talks him out of it. When the giant returns with more threatenings, angry that they had not killed themselves, he renews the attempt. Again Christian was almost willing, but again, Hopeful kept him from it. The giant also showed them the bones of others that had perished in his dungeon. At the very depths of despair, Christian is reminded that he has in his bosom a key, called Promise. They use this key to escape the dungeon, and the castle. The gate to get out of the castle is said to open "damnable hard", but it does open, and they escape, eventually getting back safely to the stile and the narrow way.

This part of the book relates many things that are not uncommon among Christians:

1. They got used to the comforts at the River, and so were discouraged when the way turned hard.
2. They left the strait and narrow path because the other way looked like it was going to the same end, and because it was easier. Mt. 7:13-14
3. Hopeful agreed because Christian was older and supposedly more mature.
4. Led on by Vain Confidence, they strayed until they could not help but see that they were out of the way. At this point, Vain Confidence perished and they tried to get back.
Bunyan points out that it is easier to get out of the way when we are in, then to get back in the way when we are out.
5. Realizing their backslidden state, they fell into the pit of Giant Despair.
This is where a Christian knows he is in sin, but sees no way out, and sinks into hopelessness and despair. Ps. 40:2 calls it a horrible pit of miry clay (although there looking back after deliverance)
Ps. 42 describes the soul who is seeking God, yet feels forgotten (42:9) and overwhelmed (42:7). "My soul is cast down within me." He is accused and taunted by others – "Where is thy God? (42:3, 10) He finishes by repeating "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me?" He apparently doesn't *feel* better, yet determines within himself to maintain faith and hope – "hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God." That verse occurs twice in Ps. 42, and again in Ps. 43, which is similar in nature.
Ps. 77:7-12 – we must remember God's works in years past, and to know that God will restore us

6. The giant frequently beat them with a cudgel.

This speaks of the condemnation of the devil, telling the prisoner that they will never get out and that they deserve it, that they left the right way, and God will never receive them again, and that no one else even knows or cares of their plight.

7. At the very depths of despair, they were tempted to commit suicide, more than once.

Hopeful (true to his name), spoke against that, with these points:

- a. God says "Thou shalt do no murder". If not of another, how much less of ourselves.
- b. To kill another is to kill the body, but to kill one's self is to kill body and soul together.
- c. Though it is tempting to think of finding peace in the grave from the current pains, yet what of Hell, where murderers go?
- d. "All the law is not in the hand of Giant Despair". Perhaps God will so work as to allow our escape somehow.
- e. We have the example of others who have escaped from Despair. Ps. 40:1-3
- f. Remember how valiantly you have fought and won in the past, in the Valleys of Humiliation and of the Shadow of Death, and at Vanity Fair. Will you forget all that you have experienced till now?
- g. I (Hopeful) am in the same circumstances and have not your strength, but am willing to hold on
- h. Therefore let us be patient, pluck up the heart of a man, and so be ready to make our escape.

8. Around midnight as they prayed, Christian remembered the key in his bosom, called Promise, through which they were able to make their escape.

The first door was to escape the dungeon itself – the acute feelings of despair and hopelessness. The second door was to escape Doubting Castle, and the third (the hard one) was to get out of the castle yard. I perhaps cannot distinguish the meanings of the second and third doors, but the point is that the promises of God's Word will not only release us from depression and despair, but also from the doubt that comes from being out of God's way. That the last gate opened "damnable hard" is a recognition that total deliverance from despair, depression, and doubt is not a simple "Sorry about that, God", but requires determination and persistence in prayer and application of the Word, and fervent seeking of God

What promises is Bunyan thinking about? He doesn't say, but here are a few:

- Ps. 91:3 – Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler
- The prodigal son thought he was beyond the father's love, and yet was received back with joy.
- Mic. 7:18-19 – God "retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."
- Jer. 30:17-18 – "For I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds"
- Hos. 14:4 – "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him."
- Dt. 4:25-31 – God said when they forsook him to follow other gods, he would scatter them among the nations. "But if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek for him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the Lord thy God, and shalt be obedient to his voice; (For the Lord thy God is a merciful God:) he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant ..."

9. They finally got across the stile and back into the way, and erected a pillar with an inscribed warning to keep others from going through Bypass Meadow.

- a. It is possible for those afflicted by depression, doubt, and despair to make a full recovery.
- b. Those experiences can then be used by them as "the voice of experience" to keep others from the same mistake, or to encourage other such prisoners to make their escape.