

**Bethel Christian Fellowship  
Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Story Of The Pilgrims Progress (21):  
“Giant Despair And The Key Of Promise”**

**April 30, 2017**

If there is one thing we have learned about Christian, it's that he's no stranger to trouble. He has fled the City of Destruction, fallen into the Slough of Despond, and climbed the Hill called Difficulty on his hands and knees. He has battled against Apollyon in the Valley of Humiliation, lived through the horrors of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and survived the nightmare of Vanity Fair. But none of these will have prepared him for the ordeal that he will now face. It will be unlike anything he has experienced thus far.

On this leg of the journey, Christian and Hopeful will foolishly leave the King's Highway for what they think is a better pathway. It will land them in By-Path Meadow, where they will fall into the hands of Giant Despair. He will force them into Doubting Castle, throw them into “a very dark dungeon,” continue to beat them until they are half-dead, and then advise them to do away with themselves quickly, since they were unlikely to ever come out of that place alive.

Despite the Giant's best efforts, the pilgrims hang on from Wednesday morning through early Sunday morning. Only then does Christian remember that he has a key called Promise, which will open any door in Doubting Castle. By using this key, they both go free.

This part of the story is especially significant because it illustrates that even experienced pilgrims like Christian and Hopeful are not immune to times of despondency and despair. It further illustrates the importance of using the spiritual resources at our disposal to overcome such times. It also reminds us that there are *always* unintended consequences for making wrong choices in the Christian pilgrimage – which leads us to our first question.

**1. Q.** Why would Christian and Hopeful leave the King's Highway for what they think is a better pathway?

**A.** Because the other pathway looks much easier. The problem begins as they are walking along a Pleasant River, “which David called ‘the River of God’ (Psalm 46:4), but which John called ‘the river of the water of life’ (Revelation 22:1).”

*Now I saw in my dream that they had not gone very far when the River and the Way parted for a time. This made them very sorry, yet they dared not go out of the Way. Now the Way from the River was rough, and because their feet were already sore from their travels, they became very discouraged. They continued to press on but began to wish for a better way. Before long they saw lying in front of them on the left side of the road a Meadow; it was called Bypass Meadow. Then Christian said to his brother, “If this Meadow lies alongside our way, let's go into it.” He climbed up some steps that led over a fence so that he could take a good look. There he saw a path that lay parallel to the Way but was on the other side of the fence. “This is the way I want to go,” he said, “because it will make our traveling much easier. Come on, Hopeful, let's go on over.”*

The book of Proverbs repeatedly warns us against taking spiritual detours. Here's but one example of a Father's wise admonition to his son: "*Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; keep your feet from evil*" (Prov. 4:25-27.)

2. Q. What's the root of Christian's problem?

A. He is walking by sight and not by faith, which is the equivalent of going in reverse: "*Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight*" (2 Corinthians 5:6-7.) Any time we choose to live the opposite way, we are moving backwards, not forwards.

3. Q. How long does it take Christian to see the error of his ways?

A. Not long at all. Soon after he leads himself *and* Hopeful over the fence and into the meadow, they meet a fellow-traveler. They foolishly rely on his "well-meaning" advice, instead of seeking God's counsel and direction. It will lead them into deeper trouble:

*So Hopeful was persuaded by his friend and followed him over. Once they were inside, they found it was very easy on their feet. Soon they could see a man ahead of them walking the same path. His name was Vain-confidence. They called out to him and asked him where this way led. He replied, "To the Celestial Gate."*

*Christian turned to Hopeful and said, "See, didn't I tell you? Now you can be sure that we made the right decision."*

*So they followed, and he kept ahead of them. But soon night began to overtake them, and it grew so dark that they lost sight of the man. Vain-confidence, not being able to see the way clearly, fell into a deep pit. The owner of the grounds put it there on purpose to catch presumptuous fools, and there Vain-confidence would die. Now Christian and Hopeful both heard the man fall. They immediately called out to find out what had happened, but there was no answer, only a faint groaning.*

The wisdom of the Proverbs again rings true: "*There is a way that seems right unto a man, but in the end it leads to death*" (14:12).

4. Q. How do the pilgrims react, once they realize how foolhardy their decision has been?

A. They both demonstrate *repentant hearts* by resolving to return to the King's Highway. Christian asks Hopeful to forgive him for misleading him; Hopeful quickly does so, and then assures Christian this can providentially work for their good (Rom. 8:28). The Holy Spirit then comes alongside them both, affirming their desire and encouraging them to turn back. Here's the important exchange that takes place between Hopeful and Christian:

*"Take comfort, Christian, my brother, for I forgive you, and I believe that this will work out for our good."*

*"I'm glad I have such a merciful brother with me, but we must not stand here like this; let's try to go back again."*

*"But let me go first," said Hopeful.*

*"No, please let me go before you so that if there is any danger, I might come to it first since this is all my fault."*

*"No," replied Hopeful, "I cannot let you go first because your mind is troubled, and it might lead you astray again."*

*Then they heard a voice, and they were encouraged as they heard it say, "Let your hearts be toward the Highway; the same Way that you came, turn back to."*

5. Q. Will the road to recovery be an easy one?

A. No. "A dreadful storm came with rain, thunder, and lightning, and the water began to rise quickly. . . . no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't get back that night to the steps that led over the wall. Finally they found a little shelter and decided to sit there until daybreak. Being very tired, however, they fell asleep." Little do they realize that their situation is truly desperate. Before they can wake up, Giant Despair is upon them: They have missed the opportunity to make a wise use of their time: "Be very careful, then, how you live – not as wise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15).

6. Q. What is the unswerving and unrelenting goal of Giant Despair?

A. He is determined to destroy all hope in the lives of both pilgrims. Their suffering under his merciless hand begins the very moment he finds them on his property.

Next morning, they were roused by a loud and angry voice which demanded, "Who are you and what are you doing in my grounds?"

Opening their eyes, Christian and Hopeful were confronted by the towering shape of Giant Despair. They replied that they were pilgrims who had lost their way. At this stage, the giant bellowed, "You're trespassers on my land. Come with me!" Then he pushed them over the ground towards the grim, stone fortress known as Doubting Castle. There, he forced them through the door and down some steps into a stinking dungeon, where he left them.

That night he told his wife, Diffidence, about his new captives and asked her what he should do with them. "First thing tomorrow," she suggested, "make yourself a crab-tree cudgel and beat them without mercy." Accordingly, in the morning, the giant entered the dungeon and began to abuse the prisoners, after which he beat them until they were almost senseless. All that day and night, Christian and Hopeful writhed and groaned in agony.

7. Q. Who is the real power behind the throne of Doubting Castle?

A. It's the woman whom Giant Despair has married. As we have just learned, her name is Diffidence (meaning lack of confidence or trust). It's logical for these two to be married, since always tells her husband what to do. After the beatings, she counsels him to advise them to take their own lives, which the Giant does: "I am leaving you a knife, a rope, and some poison; you choose which means of death you prefer. Why should you choose life, since it involves so much bitterness and pain?" When Hopeful reminds Christian of the victories he's already won, Christian chooses to bear all the hardships and give up any thought to do away with himself. Diffidence then gives the Giant a new directive, which he immediately follows: "Take them to the castleyard tomorrow – and show them the bones and skulls of those we've already killed. Make them believe that before a week ends you will tear them to pieces as you have done to those before them."

8. Q. Do these two pilgrims have good reason to despair?

A. Yes – looking only at the circumstances, there seems to be no hope. But in a different context, the Apostle Paul writes of his own despair *and* of the hope that he has in God: “*We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves, in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope*” (2 Cor. 1:8-10, NASB).

9. Q. How then is Christian delivered from his misery and despair?

A. After wrestling all night in prayer, he remembers what was close to his heart all along – the key of promise – and he puts it to good use:

*But it so happened that Saturday at about midnight the pilgrims began to pray and continued in prayer until almost daybreak. Then Christian, a short time before daylight, became astounded and passionately exclaimed, “What a fool I am! Here I lie in a stinking dungeon when I could be walking in complete liberty! I have a Key in my pocket called Promise that I am sure will open any lock in Doubting Castle.”*

*“That’s great news, my brother!” cried Hopeful. “Get it out right now and try it!” So Christian pulled it out and went to the prison door. He put the Key in the lock and turned it, and the door flew open easily. Christian and Hopeful both stumbled out. Next they went to the outer door that leads into the castleyard, and Christian used his Key to open that door also. Finally they went to the iron gate and put the Key in that lock, and although it was extremely stubborn, it too opened. As they thrust open the gate, it made such a loud noise that it awakened Giant Despair, who hastily arose to pursue his prisoners. One of his seizures struck him, however, and his limbs failed so that there was no way he could go after them. Then they went on until they got to the King’s Highway, and so, being out of the Giant’s jurisdiction, they were safe once again.*

There is an old gospel hymn that we don’t sing very often – but we should. Written in 1886, the words to “Standing On The Promises” are just as relevant today as when they were first sung. The second stanza, in particular, reinforces the premise that the promises of God – *when believed* – can deliver us from *any* prison of despair:

*Standing on the promises that cannot fail,  
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,  
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,  
Standing on the promises of God.*  
(R. Kelso Carter)