

**Pilgrim's Progress (5):  
The Hill Difficulty –  
Where Is the Joy I Once Knew?**

**1 Thessalonians 5:5-8**

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Now turn with me if you have your Bible with you, and if you don't, there'll be one somewhere in the chair to your left or right. Please turn with me to I Thessalonians, chapter five, and verses seven through nine. First Thessalonians five, and verses seven through nine.

If you're visiting with us this evening — and welcome, if you are — we're in the midst of a series over the summer on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and we've got to the stage at last when Christian, having lost his burden (something which occurred as a result of him gazing at the cross — his burden rolled off his back and rolled down the hill and disappeared into the Sepulcher.

Christian, you remember, saw three Shining Ones; and the first said to him, “Thy sins be forgiven thee”; and the second gave him a change of clothing (something that we saw last week represented the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ); and the third placed a seal upon his forehead and a scroll in his hand (and this scroll will become important in a minute, so pay attention to that).

Now let's read together from I Thessalonians 5:4-8, and before we do so, let's look to God in prayer.

*Once again, O Lord, we acknowledge that as Your people we are a needy people. We need Your word to guide us and direct us and build us up and instruct us in the way. And we ask, Holy Spirit, that You would now illuminate the words of Scripture, that we might read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Hear now the words of God:

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those

who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and His inerrant word.

Every now and then in *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan has Christian bursting into song. Sadly, in many editions of *Pilgrim's Progress* those songs, those verses, are actually omitted. Christian sings at the time when he loses his burden the following words:

*Thus far did I come laden with my Sin;  
Nor could ought ease the grief that I was in,  
Till I came hither: What a place is this!  
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?  
Must here the Burden fall from off my back?  
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?  
Blest Cross! blest Sepulcher! Blest rather be  
The Man that there was put to Shame for me!*

Now, one of the things that Bunyan alludes to in the allegory of *Pilgrim's Progress* is the need to stay alert, and to stay awake, because the road along which Christian must travel is not only difficult, but it is also filled with all kinds of dangers. It's exactly what Paul is alluding to in Thessalonians, I Thessalonians, in the text that we have chosen for tonight's study. Thessalonians was Paul's very first epistle, and it bears all of those signs of youthfulness and zeal.

Paul is concerned that Christians stay awake. It is, of course, a very Puritan emphasis. It is a very Bunyan-esque emphasis, the seriousness of the Christian life. Too many Christians breeze through life thinking that because they've made some kind of profession that now they can put their vehicle, as it were, in cruise control, and sit back and fold the hands and sleep.

Now, I know these chairs are very comfortable! They are the most comfortable chairs in church that I have ever sat on, but maybe this is a word for us this evening.

Leland Rykan puts it beautifully when he describes what Bunyan is doing here. He says, describing the Christian life, it is one of "warfaring and wayfaring".

Now the way Bunyan does this is to introduce five individuals and a hill. Now, three of these appear immediately. They are fast asleep at the foot of the Cross. They're chained with fetters, and their names are Simple, Sloth, and Presumption. It's somewhat startling to find here, of all places, at the foot of the Cross...you might have expected to have found these three somewhere else, perhaps a lot further back than at the base of the Cross, but Bunyan is speaking

from his pastoral heart and experience; because having viewed the Cross and having convinced themselves now that all was well, they've left off the sobriety of their profession and they fall asleep. Having been enamored by the Cross and what they thought the Cross gave them, they immediately sit down and fall asleep.

Now Christian wakes them up and warns them that perhaps a roaring lion might be coming by, and Simple says, "I see no danger"; and Sloth says, "Yet a little more sleep"; and Presumption says, "Every vat must stand upon its own bottom." In other words, I don't need you to tell me what to do!

### **I. And several things emerge. The first thing is this: True religion teaches the need to persevere to the end.**

True religion teaches us the need to persevere to the very end. What does the Bible say? "Examine yourself to see if you are in the faith." (2 Cor. 13:5). Now, it's much easier to judge other people than it is to judge ourselves, and in Corinth, especially, the super-apostles of Corinth were demanding proof that Christ was really speaking through the Apostle Paul. They were examining him, and Paul is saying 'Examine yourselves.'

J.C. Ryle, the Anglican nineteenth-century bishop of Liverpool, has a book called *Practical Religion*. It's not as well known as his more famous book on holiness, and the opening chapter of his book *Practical Religion* is called "Self-Inquiry", and it's based on that text of Paul's speaking to Barnabas, saying, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we have preached the word of God, and see how they are doing." In other words, he's saying to Barnabas, 'Let's go back and see. Are those members, those professors of faith in Jesus Christ, are they continuing steadfast in the faith? Are they growing in grace? Are they going forward? Are they standing still? Are they prospering? Are they falling away?'

Think of what a schoolmaster does, or a professor does. Having instructed during the course of a semester, what comes at the end of the semester? The day of reckoning! The day of accountability! How much has gone in? How much does this person really know? An exam will often reveal far more than a paper (goodness knows where the paper has come from!), but an exam will reveal what really lies in a person's mind.

Or think about Regimental Sergeant Major, who's been instructing and drilling the recruit, and now the recruit has been summoned to the parade ground for inspection. And the Sergeant Major comes, and he doesn't look from the window of his office. He marches up and down the ranks of men and scrutinizes each one of them, and looks at them carefully and meticulously.

Or the lawyer — I remember once giving testimony about a motor accident that I witnessed, and I had rehearsed what I had seen many, many times. But when I went to that courtroom and a lawyer began asking me all kinds of questions, I have to say to you, he could have convinced me of almost anything! All the questions that he put to me — “Were you there? Did it really happen? Did it happen in this way? Could it have been in that way?”

Self-examination: that's what Bunyan is speaking of here when he introduces these three characters, Simple, Sloth, and Presumption. The Bible warns us again and again. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, says “Not everyone who says unto Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” Not everyone who professes the name of Jesus Christ will be acknowledged on that Last Day, but only those who persevere to the end.

Yes, the Bible certainly does teach that God keeps us going — that “...having begun a good work, He will complete it unto the day of Jesus Christ”; that those “...whom God has predestined, them he also called; and those whom He calls, He also justifies; and those who He justifies, them He also glorifies. What then shall we say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but freely delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay charge against God's elect?” And so on....Yes, that's true. But it is also true that the regenerate are preserved through perseverance. And that's what Bunyan is doing here.

There are Christians...professing Christians...they hardly ever attend church. They attend when the mood takes them. They only attend an occasional service. They never read the Bible. Days, weeks, months go by, and they never read the Scriptures for personal profit and edification. They hardly ever pray, except when they're in trouble. They call themselves Christians, but their names are Simple, Sloth, and Presumption.

And Christian has to leave these three, and he moves on. And he spies two men. They hop over a wall and join Christian onto the road. They haven't entered by the Wicket Gate. They haven't been anywhere near the Cross or the Sepulcher; they have jumped over a wall to join with Christian. Their names are Formalist and Hypocrisy, and it is to these two that we now turn.

## **II. And Bunyan is teaching us here that true religion teaches the need for the heart to be engaged. True religion teaches the need for heart engagement.**

Let's look at Formalist first. Bunyan, of course, is alluding to what Paul calls elsewhere “having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof.” Bunyan was not just an independent, he was a Baptist; and in the seventeenth century, he was at odds with the state religion (namely, Anglicanism), and that's why he

spends twelve years in prison. And Anglicanism for Bunyan in the seventeenth century meant to a large extent mere ritualism. It was about people going through a form of worship, being concerned with the outward form and ritual, but their hearts were not engaged. And Bunyan is undoubtedly addressing folk just like that.

Now, J.C. Ryle, an Anglican from the nineteenth century, has a sermon, and he calls it "Formalism." Listen to what Paul tells the Romans. He says:

"A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly; nor is circumcision merely outward and physical." He's quoting, of course, from the second chapter of Romans. And a man may be a son of Abraham, according to the flesh, a member of one of the twelve tribes, circumcised on the eighth day, a keeper of all the feasts, a regular worshiper in the temple; and yet, in God's sight, not be a Jew. In the same way, a man may be a Christian by outward profession, a member of the Christian church, baptized with Christian baptism, faithful in receiving the Lord's Supper; and yet, in God's sight, not a Christian at all.

And then he goes on to cite the opening chapter of Isaiah, and if you remember the opening chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah is doing exactly the same thing in the seventh/eighth century setting of Jerusalem. There are people who are going through the outward forms of ritual and ceremony and sacrifices, but their heart is far from God. And it's a dangerous thing...it's a dangerous thing.

And you notice, Bunyan says they hopped over a wall. They have come in by a wrong route, and their end will not be the same as Christian's.

Now let's glance at Hypocrisy. You remember Jesus called hypocrisy "the leaven of the Pharisees." Now, Spurgeon says,

Hypocrisy was a bigger rogue of the two, for he had not any belief in the matter at all. Formalist had, perhaps, some measure of faith of a certain sort. He thought that there might at least be something in the ceremonies. But Hypocrisy said in his heart, "Ah! It is all a pretty sort story, but then it is a very respectable story; and if I pretend to believe it, people will think the better of me." The worst of hypocrites is he who deceives himself.

And Bunyan is giving here two warnings of Formalist and Hypocrisy, and Christian says (and it's a very telling point)...Christian says to these two—and listen to what he says: "Will your practice stand a trial of law?" Will your practice stand a trial of law? They have come in by an illegal way, and when the Lord, the grand Lord issues that grand assize, the great Day of Judgment, they will be revealed for their shortcomings: "You come in by yourselves without His direction; and shall go out by yourselves, without His mercy."

Now, Christian and Formalist and Hypocrisy come now to a hill. And at the

bottom of the hill there is a spring, and around the hill are two roads. One is called Danger, and the other is called Destruction. Hypocrisy and Formalist take those two roads. We never hear of them again.

Christian takes a drink from the Spring (a reminder that God often prepares us for difficulties which lie ahead), and he begins to ascend this hill. Half way up the hill, he comes across an Arbour - a place to take some refuge, a place to take some rest.

*This Hill, though high, I covet to ascend,  
The Difficulty will not me offend.  
For I perceive the Way to Life lies here:  
Come, pluck up Heart, let's neither faint nor fear;  
Better, though difficult, the Right Way to go,  
Than Wrong, though easy, where the End is Woe.*

Bunyan loved music. If you read biographies of John Bunyan, he was apparently wont to burst into song at a moment's notice. You look at some of the portraits of John Bunyan — I think he's everybody's idea of your favorite uncle! — he has that 'hail, fellow well-met' personality about him. And Bunyan is actually doing something here, and we shouldn't miss it. By putting in these little songs, and there are many of them in *Pilgrim's Progress*, he's saying, the importance of Christian music, of Christian worship, that it's a gift of God, that it's one of the ways that God enables us to face difficulty: to sing a favorite verse from a hymn; to sing the twenty-third Psalm. How many of us, when we have found ourselves in difficulty, have begun to sing the twenty-third Psalm to the tune of, perhaps, *Crimond*? Have burst into a favorite chorus? Maybe some of you young people sing some more contemporary songs — they come to your mind as you find yourself facing a difficulty. "Make melody in your heart unto the Lord," Paul says, and that's what Bunyan is doing here by getting Christian to sing these songs.

Now, half way up the hill something interesting happens. He finds this arbor; he goes inside, sits down, and he begins to read — you remember — the Scroll. That third Shining One that had put a mark on his head had given him a Scroll, and he begins to read this Scroll. It's a Scroll—think of the Scroll as the promises of God; think of the Scroll as the assurance that we are in a right and saving relationship with Jesus Christ. And Christian, as he begins to read this Scroll, puts the Scroll aside. And Bunyan says something very interesting. It's very easy to pass it by.

He begins to look at his coat, and to admire his coat, and to think, you know, what a fine chap he really is. And as he begins to think these beautiful thoughts, consciousness just seems to begin to ebb and drift away, and he's fast asleep. He falls fast asleep in this Arbor. It was never meant for sleeping. It was meant to be a refuge. It was meant to be a place to stop and take shelter, and to gather strength, and then to move on.

He wakes up in a start. You know, if you take an afternoon nap...I've reached that point in my life now, where I sometimes take an afternoon nap...and you know, you go to set an alarm clock because you can't trust yourself. And sometimes you go to sleep and you wake up with a start, and you think "I've slept for three hours!" and actually, it's only been three minutes!

He wakes up with a start. He immediately rushes out and goes ahead, and as he goes ahead, he meets two other people and their names are Mistrust and Timorous. And they look terrified! They're running in the opposite direction, backwards, and they're saying that terrible dangers lie ahead. And Christian looks for his Scroll, and he can't find it. He's lost it! He's left it behind in the arbor.

And Bunyan is teaching us that sometimes—and it's a very subtle thing—now, there aren't many subtleties in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; it's an allegory. Sometimes there are little subtleties, and one of those subtleties, I think, that emerges here is this: that Christian has actually been affected by some of the characters that he has met with; that something of their presumption has actually rubbed off on him; and he began to presume that all was well, and in that presumption finds himself in the condition where he has lost his assurance. He doesn't have the Scroll. He doesn't have the promises of God anymore, and he has to go back and get them.

It was a very Puritan thing. One of the most beautiful chapters in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* - and let me encourage you to do that...in the back of your hymnal...not now, but later...or, if you've got a *Westminster Confession of Faith* at home, go to the chapter on Assurance. I think it's the best chapter in the Confession. It's one of the most carefully worded chapters in the entire Confession, and when you read it, you get a sense that those divines of the Westminster Assembly were pastors, and they knew what it was to encourage the Lord's people in the way of righteousness, but also at the same time to warn—to warn of the very significant dangers of presuming upon the grace of God; and that there are certain times, and certain occasions, and certain circumstances in which we can lose the assurance of our faith.

Christian fell into the danger of thinking that all was well, and that he had no need to stay awake and be on guard. And he fell asleep. And he had forgotten the warning, "Let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."

And, my friends, if you take anything away with you tonight, I want you to take that away with you. If you are a professing believer in Jesus Christ, "Let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and be sober." This is a wicked world in which we live. The devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour, and we need to be awake. And we need to be alert, and we need to be sober, and we need to be serious.

May God bless this word to our hearts. Let's pray together.

*Our gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank You for this allegory of John Bunyan's and the way in which it is a key to unlock many passages of Scripture and many truths from Your word. We pray as we study it together now this summer, that You would also at the same time challenge us as Christians and improve our discipleship, and enable us to be a people of God who are serious in wanting to follow You with all of our hearts and with all of our minds and with all of our souls. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.*

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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