

Pilgrim's Progress (8): The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Ephesians 6:18

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Please turn with me in your bibles to Ephesians six and verse 18.

As you will know, if you've been with us throughout the summer, we began...oh, three months ago, now...in *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's famous allegorical interpretation of the Christian life, and we've been working our way through the First Book of *Pilgrim's Progress*, stopping at various locations along the way.

Tonight is the eighth stopping point, and a somber one it is. It's called "The Valley of the Shadow of Death." And as we shall see in a minute, one of the things John Bunyan wants to teach us here is the value of prayer as a weapon with which to assault the devil. The devil assaults us, but we in turn assault him with the weapon, as John Bunyan so marvelously calls it, the weapon of *All Prayer*. And that little phrase "All Prayer" is one, of course, that he picks up from Ephesians 6 and the description of the Christian armor. We were looking at it to some extent last time, two weeks ago when we were looking at John Bunyan together.

And now this evening, let's read together from verse 18. Before we do so, let's ask for God's blessing in prayer. Let's pray.

Father, again as we bow in Your presence we need Your blessing. Without You we can do nothing. Come, then, Holy Spirit, and illuminate for us these words of Scripture, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Ephesians six, and verse eighteen:

"With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...."

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

Now as you remember, Christian has left a palace called Beautiful. From there he had glimpsed, you remember, the Delectable Mountains in the distance. Before he left, he was given a sword and a shield, and a helmet — weapons

designed to help him in battles that would soon ensue as he makes his journey towards the Celestial City.

Last time, we left him in the Valley of Humiliation, and you remember that there Christian encountered Apollyon, his fiercest enemy. This is the serpent of old of the Garden of Eden, who rose, you remember, in the Scriptures to be the great red dragon of Revelation 12.

Now you remember it had been Christian's instinct to turn and run, but then he remembers words of counsel that had been given to him: that these weapons can only protect the front. He has no protection for his back, so he dare not turn his back on Apollyon, but face him. Of course, what Bunyan is trying to teach us is the need for bravery and courage and resourcefulness in the Christian life, and especially in encountering the enemy.

Now as he moves from the Valley of Humiliation he enters yet another valley: the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And I want us to see a few things that John Bunyan teaches us by way of that which Christian experiences in this Valley of the Shadow of Death.

I. Trials may go on and on.

The first is an important lesson for every Christian, especially for young Christians: the lesson that trials may go on and on. Not only does the Bible teach us that there are trials of various kinds, but trials can also have a sustained quality about them. There is what the Bible calls "an evil day", but sometimes Satan's stratagems employ a constant attempt to break down our defenses by a sustained prolonged attack. And one of the most remarkable lessons that the Apostle Paul learned, that he speaks of toward the close of the first missionary journey in Pisidian Antioch in the regions of Galatia...he says on his way back to Antioch itself where he had first embarked on this first missionary journey...he said he learned this lesson: that it is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of God.

Now Christian makes it through the Valley of Humiliation, but not unscathed. He bears some of the scars of that battle. And now Bunyan does something very important, because you might think that, the battle with Apollyon being past, that the period of trials and tribulations would now be over, and that you would turn the page and the light would go on and the music would get into a major key, and everything would be wonderful, and there would be some romance, and so on. You could imagine how a novel might turn there.

But not for Bunyan, because Bunyan understands that in the Christian life sometimes when you end one battle you enter another; and having left one valley, he now enters this Valley of the Shadow of Death. It's a very lonely place

which Bunyan describes as being much worse than the Valley of Humiliation. And two men meet him who urge him...they're running past him, and they urge him once again to turn and flee. How many times in *Pilgrim's Progress* we have that little motif of folk running backwards and saying to Christian, "Run away!" as though Bunyan is saying to you that in the Christian life you will encounter again and again those who will advise you not to persevere and not to be resourceful in your encounters with trials and tribulations, but instead to grow sulky and miserable and resentful and cynical, and turn with your tail between your legs and head for home. Maybe that's the lesson that you need to learn tonight, as you're facing this sustained battle in your life: the need to persevere; the need to keep on going. Some trials go on and on.

II. Trials arise because of the narrowness of the Way.

Secondly, trials arise because of the narrowness of the Way. They had looked into the Valley, and what they saw were Hobgoblins, and Satyrs, and Dragons, as well as a continual howling and yelling as of people under unutterable misery. And some had stopped and went no further. The sight of it or the sound of it utterly terrified them and brought them to a halt, but Christian kept going. He kept going because he knew that the way to the Celestial City ran through this Valley; that there was no other way to the Celestial City but through this Valley of Humiliation.

And as he walks, he notices on one side that there is a Ditch in which the blind lead the blind—you hear Bunyan picking up these biblical motifs?—and on the other, a dangerous Quag...or what we might today call a quagmire...into which David once fell and would have choked had he not been rescued.

Now let me pause there, because Bunyan...you remember what Spurgeon said of Bunyan, that if you pricked him anywhere his blood would be bibline...he's picking up a text from Psalm 69. If you want to hunt and search for it, it's verse 14 of Psalm 69, and it's a verse that says "Rescue me from the mire...."

Now, on the one hand it's a Psalm of David, but the astute ones amongst us will recall Psalm 69 is a psalm that is quoted in the New Testament as a Psalm that ultimately finds its fulfillment in the sufferings of Jesus. Psalm 69, you remember, is the Psalm that records for us how vinegar will be given to Jesus, a sour draft of gall will be given to Jesus upon the cross. Matthew especially picks up that verse in Psalm 69 and applies it to the sufferings of Jesus, saying that the prophecy had been fulfilled.

Do you see what Bunyan is doing in alluding to Psalm 69? Because on the one hand, it's a Psalm of the psalmist; on the other hand, it's a Psalm about Jesus Christ. And what Bunyan is saying to us, reminding us, is that there is no temptation that we pass through, there is no trial that we pass through, that

doesn't in some way find its reflection in Jesus; that we do not have an High Priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; that, in other words, Jesus has passed through this Valley, this Valley that some of you tonight may well be going through with sheer cliffs on either side, and hobgoblins and fiends and all manner of terrible things coming upon you...that Jesus has passed through this Valley before you as the great Warrior, as it were, blazing a trail in this Valley for you and I to follow.

Now Bunyan's description of the Valley is vivid. He describes it as narrow and dangerous, and Bunyan says of Christian that when he sought in the dark to shun the Ditch on the one hand, he was ready to tip over into the Mire on the other. Also, when he sought to escape the Mire without great carefulness, he would be ready to fall into the Ditch.

And how many of you can reflect that, know exactly what he means: that in order to avoid one problem you run almost immediately headlong into another. Trials arise because of the narrowness of the Way.

III. One of the most damaging trials of all is the loss of our assurance

A third lesson that we learn from the narrative at this point, another biblical lesson that we learn, is this: that one of the most damaging trials of all is the loss of our assurance.

One of the most damaging of all trials is the loss of our assurance. It is clear, I think, that in Bunyan the place described as the Valley of the Shadow of Death is not to be understood as meaning death itself, nor to merely refer to that experience of coming close to death or of losing a loved one.

But Bunyan is using this description—of course, we're all familiar from Psalm 23 "...in the valley of the shadow of death" and so on—but Bunyan sees a much more comprehensive and spiritual understanding of the Valley of the Shadow of Death. It's a Valley where darkness reigns. It's a Valley in which the demons, Satan's cohorts, if you like, are at work. It's a Valley in which especially Satan will do his utmost to rob us of our assurance.

One very well known commentator on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* puts it like this:

"This land of darkness into which our Pilgrim now entered seems to represent the dark and unhappy frame of mind into which a true believer may fall."

And Bunyan now depicts something here which some of us are all too familiar with. He describes the Wicked Ones "creeping up behind him, and whispering, and suggesting many grievous blasphemies to him, which he verily thought had

proceeded out of his own mind.”

Now, as I was thinking about this this past week that has gone by, I remember reading Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who preached a marvelous series of expositions on Ephesians, as Ligon is now embarking on...and I remember reading, when Lloyd-Jones is reflecting on Ephesians 6 and the Christian armor, how he makes mention of this in his own pastoral ministry...how he had come across godly Christians, Christians whose godliness was beyond reproach, and yet on occasions had experienced suddenly, for no apparent reason, their minds being filled with horrible, horrible thoughts, and words that they would never dream of uttering suddenly filled their minds upon waking up in the morning...and just horrid, horrid thoughts in their minds.

Or lying in bed at night, or even in church...even in a service of worship, and suddenly a thought comes into your head, apparently from nowhere, and it begins to grow and multiply, and all of a sudden you sort of catch yourself on, and you say ‘How could I possibly be thinking these things in an act of worship?’

And Bunyan is saying here this is the devil's work. This is the devil's work. Where do these things come from? And they come from the devil, that he plants these thoughts in our minds; that he suddenly, unawares, whispers these things and allows them because of the fallenness of our human nature to take root and to grow, and to multiply—to rob us, then, of our assurance. Because there are dear children of God who are trusting in Jesus Christ but have experienced these things, and they begin to think, well, I can't possibly then be a Christian if I have these things.

And here is Bunyan, the pastor now, saying No, no, my friend. No, no. The basis of our assurance is not freedom from trials, and not even freedom from blasphemous thoughts. But that what do we do when we discover these blasphemous thoughts? Run to Jesus! And we fall on our knees and we say ‘I'm so dreadfully sorry!’ and we repent and we ask forgiveness, because “nothing in our hands we bring, simply to Thy cross we cling.”

Bunyan is saying Satan will hurl these things at you, and Bunyan is saying you hurl them back at him! You pick them up and throw them right back in his face!

IV. There is one weapon which is more important than any other in encountering and overcoming these trials, and it is, of course, the weapon of All Prayer.

And there's a fourth lesson, and it's this: that there is one weapon which is more important than any other in encountering and overcoming these trials, and it is, of course, the weapon of All Prayer.

Bunyan says that Christian discovers something in the Valley: that all of the other weapons—the sword and the helmet and the shield, and so on—are of no use to him. They're of no use to Hobgoblins and Fiends whispering things in your ear...that the only thing that works in this Valley is the weapon of All Prayer.

Bunyan says that Christian was forced to put up his sword and to betake himself to another weapon, the weapon called All Prayer. And he also says that the noises around him in the Valley are mingled with Christian's ceaseless prayer to God. You've known this. All of you here, children of God, you know this. When you find yourself discouraged, when you find yourself battling with thoughts and ideas and attitudes that you just wish would go away, you find yourself praying over and over and over to the Lord. It's an interesting point that prayer is the only weapon that fortifies Christian in this Valley; that the more dangerous the journey, the more spiritual our resources must be.

Scripture demonstrates to us that in a remarkable way, that this is a hard thing. It's a difficult thing. It was more difficult for Moses to pray than it was for Joshua to fight. Moses needed to have his arms kept upwards by the help of others. Spurgeon comments that Moses needed help to keep his arms raised, which Joshua did not. And similarly, in the Garden of Gethsemane the one request that Jesus made of His disciples, that they would watch and pray, was the one thing that they were unable to do. It's the greatest weapon of all. And do you know, my friends, if we really believed that, if we really, really believed that, we would be a much more prayerful people than we are...in our personal lives, in our family lives, in our corporate lives as a church of God.

Now, Christian was comforted by what he thought was the voice of a man saying, "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no Evil..." and this is Faithful. We'll come to him next week, but at this point he's not identified as to who he is. He's the most beautiful character, I think, in all of *Pilgrim's Progress*. He's a man that every one of us would want to have as a friend. And the sound of these words gave Christian comfort - first, because he realized that others were passing through this Valley and experiencing the trials that he was experiencing; second, because he reasoned that if God had been with others in the Valley, then He would also be with Christian in the Valley, too; and third, because he overtook them, he might enjoy...if he were to overtake these voices, these people...he might enjoy their company and fellowship.

And there's one thing for Bunyan—and actually it's a very Puritan thing—friends and friendship were a very important thing for the Puritans of the seventeenth century. Bunyan, I think, was a man who had very close friends. I think his wife was a very close confidant and friend, for example. And the companionship between Christian and Faithful that we will expand on next week is one of the most beautiful, but also one of the most important, lessons in the Christian life.

Now, there are two Giants that he sees guarding a Cave, and one is called

Pagan and another called Pope. (The second we won't go into. It might offend some. But it comes from, of course, the context of the seventeenth century.) But it's interesting what he says. He says about Pagan that he has been dead for many a day, but of Pope, he describes in this way:

“...though he be yet alive, he is, by reason of age, and also of the many shrewd brushes that he met with in his younger days, grown so crazy and stiff in his joints, that he can now do little more than sit in his Cave's mouth, grinning at Pilgrims as they go by, and biting his nails, because he cannot come at them.”

Well, you need to go back into the history of the seventeenth century to fully understand that, but Bunyan is living within...oh...60, 70 years of one of the greatest persecutions against Protestant Christians in Christian history.

In 1553, Mary Queen of Scots put to death something in the region of 280 martyrs: men, and pregnant women, and bishops. Some of you have been to Oxford and there you've seen that astonishing memorial, the Martyrs' Memorial that was designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, and it stands there in the center of the street; and there'll be people passing by, and they won't have a ghost of an idea who these people are. And who are they?

Well, one is of course Thomas Cranmer, who faces North holding a Bible; and one is Nicolas Riddley, who faces East; and the other is Hugh Latimer, who looks West with his arms folded across his chest. These were martyrs who had been put to death by Catholicism in the sixteenth century.

Now, martyrs were of course important, and they still are important, and there are more martyrs in this century than in any century. Tertullian's great words, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”.... And there was a time in England, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when in every Christian home there would be a Bible—the King James Version, perhaps the Geneva Bible—but there would be Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and there would be *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. *Fox's Book of Martyrs* would be decidedly un-PC today, I suppose. Just an astonishing account of believers put to death because of their love of Jesus Christ.

And here, then, is Christian. He is making his way through this Valley of Humiliation, and as we've seen before and we will see it again, he bursts into song. I'm not going to sing it to you, but maybe Bill Wymond will sing it to you afterwards...I don't know what the tune is, but the words are wonderful words:

O World of Wonder! (I can say no less)
That I should be preserv'd in that Distress
That I have met with here! O blessed be
That Hand that from it hath deliver'd me!
Dangers in darkness, Devils, Hell, and Sin,

Did compass me, while I this Vale was in:
Yea Snares, and Pits, and Traps, and Nets did lie
My Path about, that worthless, silly I
Might have been catch'd, entangled, and cast down:
But since I live, let Jesus wear the Crown.

“Let Jesus wear the Crown...” and on that so wonderfully positive note, we’ll bring this study to an end.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You now again for this great book of John Bunyan's, but we especially thank You for the way in which it takes us to the Bible and teaches us these truths for Christian discipleship. And we pray especially tonight that we might employ more than we do the weapon of All Prayer. Guard and protect and keep the lives and souls of Your dear children who tonight are passing through this very Valley and know the onslaughts of the Wicked One. Make their prayers effectual, we pray. And this we ask for Jesus' sake. 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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