

Pilgrim's Progress (10): The Castle of Gaint Despair

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Turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 88. As those of you who have been with us all summer will remember, we are looking through John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, using that as a window, a portal through which to view the truths in passages of Scripture to which it alludes. And tonight we come to the Castle of Giant Despair, so-called Doubting-Castle; and the text for this evening is Psalm 88. Some of you will now think I'm in need of therapy, having chosen Lamentations 3 this morning and Psalm 88 (which is one of the darkest psalms in the entire Psalter) for this evening. But all will be revealed in a moment.

Before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we thank You again for Your word. We especially thank You for this Psalm. It may not be a familiar Psalm to us, it may not be a Psalm that we particularly like, but we know it is Your word and it is here for a purpose, so we ask You to bless it to us now as we read it together, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's word.

[A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. For the choir director; according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.]

O Lord, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You. Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry! For my soul has had enough troubles, and my life has drawn near to Sheol. I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I have become like a man without strength, forsaken among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, and they are cut off from Your hand. You have put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. Your wrath has rested upon me, and You have afflicted me with all Your waves. You have removed my acquaintances far from me; You have made me an object of loathing to them; I am shut up and cannot go out. My eye has wasted away because of affliction; I have called upon You every day, O Lord; I have spread out my hands to You.

Will You perform wonders for the dead? Will the departed spirits rise and

praise You? Will Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave, Your faithfulness in Abaddon? Will You be made known in the darkness? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

But I, O Lord, have cried out to You for help, and in the morning my prayer comes before You. O Lord, why do You reject my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? I was afflicted and about to die; from my youth on I suffer Your terrors; I am overcome. Your burning anger has passed over me; Your terrors have destroyed me. They have surrounded me like water all day long; they have encompassed me altogether. You have removed lover and friend far from me; My acquaintances are in darkness [or perhaps, *my acquaintances are darkness*].

God's word.

I was telling my Sunday School class this morning — and we looked at this Psalm together for a moment — we should write “Adults Only” above this psalm. It is not for the fainthearted. It speaks of a condition of the soul that some Christians know, where all assurance of faith is gone; where, because of trials and difficulties, the light of God's countenance no longer shines.

The Westminster Confession, interestingly, when it writes its magnificent chapter on “Assurance” and posits the possibility of the loss of assurance, cites this Psalm as one of its proof-text passages. Let's have a look at the Psalm...before we comment on Bunyan, for a second, let's have a look at this Psalm.

Let's look at the appeal that he makes in the opening two verses. He wants the Lord to listen to him: “Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my cry!” Why is he saying that? This isn't just a polite, routine, introductory formula. Do you ever ask why should God listen to you? Why should God listen to you? And, you see, if we don't ask that question, we take the miracle of prayer for granted. Heman the Ezrahite is not taking prayer for granted here. He's pleading with God to hear his prayer.

Look at the argument he uses. In verse 3, “*For...*” - “because”. What is the *for* there for? “Because” — he's making an argument, he's making a case. And the reason why he wants God to hear him and to incline His ear to him is because of his condition, and he describes it...the misery of it, the desperation of it. I don't know what he's going through. He doesn't tell us. He's been through it for many years — apparently, from his youth. He's at the edge of death. He's the object of God's wrath. Now, whether he actually is the object of God's wrath is not the issue. That's the way he feels. That's the way he thinks.

Look at verse 8. His companions have shunned him. He's been made a horror to them. He is the victim. In verse 9, “Every day I call upon You...I spread out my hands to You” - he is the victim of unanswered prayer. Why is he telling us this?

And more importantly, why is he telling God this? Is it because he thinks that God doesn't know these facts, that God doesn't know his condition, that God needs to be informed? That God needs to be given a set of data? No. He is informing God because he wants God to show His compassion to him. He is soliciting the compassion of God!

He speaks about his condition, and it's a very Hebrew way of speaking — about him descending into the depths of the sea, or the waves engulfing him. You understand, the Jews were not a seafaring people. There was a coastline, but most of the time that coastline was occupied by the Philistines. The Jews were not seafarers; they did not go out on ships. They did some fishing in the Sea of Galilee, and that's about it. And they're terrified of water! Again and again in the Old Testament Scriptures, the one thing, the one metaphor they employ for their greatest fear is being engulfed by water, and that's how he feels. He fears he may even go into the grave.

Now don't misunderstand him. It's not that Heman doesn't believe in life after death, but in this period of Old Testament revelation, whilst there are here and there glimpses of what is true of the soul that knows God after death, he's simply looking at it from the point of view that the physical body, when it dies, it doesn't praise God. It simply continues to deteriorate and disintegrate.

And, right, Heman is looking on the dark side of things, to be sure. And he explains the anguish that he feels in verse 14: “O Lord, why do You cast my soul away?” God is hiding from him! The light of God's countenance no longer shines on him, and what has happened to this man? Look at verse 14 and then into 15:

“O Lord, why do You cast my soul away? Why do You hide Your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer Your terrors. I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults, they destroy me.”

And you see, in the midst of all that darkness — and by the way, this is not...this doesn't end on a happy note. There's no resolution here. You know the usual story is it begins somewhere and then it gets bad, and then it's resolved and they all live happily ever after. But that is not Psalm 88. Psalm 88 descends into the depths and stays there.

But there's a little light that's shining here. You'd better look for it, because what is it that upsets Heman the Ezrahite the most? It's actually not his troubles. It's the fact that his God doesn't seem to be listening to him. You see...and therein lies the hope of his recovery, because even in the darkness he is still taking his anger and his frustration and his questions and his doubts to the Lord.

Can Christians get into that condition? Bunyan says yes, they can. Christian, you remember, has lost a very great friend, Faithful. He's been martyred in the City of Vanity, and Christian remains in prison for a while, and then God secures, you

remember, his release. Enter: Hopeful. Hopeful has been converted through the valiant testimony of Faithful. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," Tertullian said. And Hopeful says there are many more like him: they have been converted as the result of the testimony of Faithful.

The two of them walk together and they come across By-ends, who is from the town of Fair-speech. He doesn't tell them his name, but he does relate to them some of his kindred, including Mr. Facing-both-ways, and the parson, Mr. Two-tongues, and his wife, my Lady Feigning's daughter. The people of By-ends differ, he says, from the stricter sort in two ways. "First, we never strive against Wind and Tide....We are always most zealous when Religion goes in his Silver Slippers...."

By-ends eventually tells them his real name, and he says it's not his real name, it's a name that's been given to him by people who didn't like him. And as they look back, Christian and Hopeful see three others now who join Mr. By-ends: Mr. Hold-World, Mr. Money-love, and Mr. Save-all, and the three call on Christian and Hopeful, and the five of them discuss the relationship of Christianity to the world and success. It sounds like a "health and wealth" discussion. And these all disappear and eventually they decide to have nothing whatsoever to do with Christian and Hopeful, and the two of them now pass through a narrow plain called Ease, with its little hill called Lucre, in which was a Silver-Mine.

A man called Demas, you remember from the New Testament Demas 'forsaking us, having loved this present evil world' calls out, and Hopeful is tempted to go and have a look, but Christian senses the danger and stops him. By-ends and his friends do eventually go there, and they are never seen again.

They meet on the highway a statue of a woman, with the inscription "Remember Lot's Wife." There's a discussion about covetousness, and next they come to a river. And the two of them stop, and they take some water, they drink some water...and it's a place where the leaves of the trees are good for medicine, and they lie down and they fall asleep, and they spend many days there.

Then they go on a little more, and the road becomes considerably more difficult. Then on their left they spy By-Path-Meadow. It's a parallel path to the path that they're going on, but it seems at first to be a much easier path along which to go. And they climb over a steeple of some kind, and they go on this By-Path-Meadow. This path, of course, as you inevitably realize, will lead them into trouble.

They meet a man called Vain-Confidence, who says he's on his way to the Celestial City, but that evening they hear him fall into a pit. And a storm gathers, and thunder and lightening; they're nearly drowned by the rising rainwater, and Christian asks for Hopeful's forgiveness for having taken them along this way.

And they try...they go into a shelter, they fall into a deep sleep, and what they don't know is that they have strayed into the grounds of Doubting-Castle; and Giant Despair discovers them asleep in this shelter and takes them captive, and locks them in the Dungeon of the Castle without food or water or light.

Giant Despair has a wife called Diffidence (which in the seventeenth century meant something like “mistrust” or “suspicion”), and she urges him to beat Christian and Hopeful mercilessly, and he urges them to end their lives. There's a lengthy and sensitive section here as Christian is tempted to do just that; and then, it is Hopeful that gives him ten reasons why he should not.

And then, on the Saturday...Bunyan says they get to the Dungeon of Doubting-Castle on Wednesday morning, and there they are until Saturday evening...and at the urging of Diffidence, (the wife, now, of Giant Despair), they're taken out into the Castle courtyard and they're shown the skulls and bones of those who have been killed in the past, and they're beaten once more...and Giant Despair doesn't carry out his threat to kill them, because even he is under the sovereign control of Almighty God.

Consider these testimonies. A man in Spurgeon's autobiography comes to the service. He's a Christian, but for the past twenty years he has been convinced that he has no part with Christ. He's lived in a constant state of spiritual depression and melancholia. He's stopped going to church. Prayer, he said, made him even more despondent. And he hears Spurgeon preaching and he's delivered.

Or, a woman who writes to the New Testament scholar and translator J. B. Phillips...she had been caring for her husband. Her husband has a stroke, has become paralyzed on one side, and then she also has a stroke. And she writes, “I can neither cook nor wash, nor garden, nor carry anything, nor play the organ; and then comes this awful thought: what if my bright faith has been a delusion?” And then she closes with this: “Where is the dear Christ of experience, with whom I've walked and talked through the years? Life is so dreary without Him, where before it was such a joyous thing. I suppose I shouldn't be bothering about it at 79, but it seems to matter more now than ever.”

Do you see what Bunyan is describing in his allegory? The Dungeon of Giant Despair? That it's possible as a true believer, as a true child of God, as someone in union and communion with Jesus — that it's possible to lose all assurance of salvation because of the trials, because of the difficulty, because of a whole complex of factors. The way we are made, our physical make-up, a particular psyche, the influences that we find ourselves in, the trials (internal and external) — a whole host of things — and sometimes because God in His sovereign providence withdraws the light of His countenance for a season, for a reason that He knows and that we don't.

Psalm 88 ends in the darkness.

You know, I was telling my Sunday School class this morning, it's like an insurance policy. This is not my favorite Psalm. I don't have it pasted on my front screen on my computer. I don't think I've read it that many times; I've read it on some occasions, but I'm glad it's there. I'm glad it's there because there's at least one person in the Bible for whom life doesn't always end happily. It may not be you. It may not be most of us. It may not be the majority of you, but it may be one or two of you...and oh! how you can identify with Heman the Ezrahite, because you walk in the midst of darkness, and there just doesn't seem to be any light. And I'm saying to you, God has given to you this Psalm because it's saying at least that there's someone who is walking this path with you.

You know, if this is you tonight and you're in the pit and there's no light...it's all dark...I want you to feel the floor. Get down on your hands and knees and feel the floor. And in the sands of the floor you'll discover a footprint...and it's not yours, because it's bigger than yours. And you know whose footprint that is? Your Savior's, who cries in the darkness of dereliction from the cross, "My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?" There may be no light, but you can feel that footprint and you can know that Jesus has been in this pit. Jesus has been in this pit before you, He's marched through it, and He's called it 'Mine.'

Bunyan doesn't end there, of course. Bunyan has Christian and Hopeful...on the Saturday night, Christian puts his hand in his pocket, and what does he find? A key...a key. And the key is called Promise. It's a key called Promise — the promises of God. And God, as we were thinking this morning, is faithful to His promises; steadfast, like a rock. And Christian takes that key and he opens the prison gate, and away they go as fast as they can, back on that road which leads to the Celestial City.

If this is you tonight, my friend, and you can't find that key, get down on your hands and knees and feel the floor, and find that footprint and draw that sweet, sweet nectar of comfort that Jesus has been here too, and let that be the beginning of your comfort and your recovery.

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, this solemn, solemn Psalm — the depths of it, the darkness of it — and we can't even begin to imagine how it could be that the Son of God should Himself be in such darkness for us, for our deliverance, for our salvation, for our redemption. "We do not have an high priest who is not touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in every point tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Help us, then, to draw near and to find grace to comfort in our time of need. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

Please stand. 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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