

Lesson Two BEGINNING TO SLOUGH OF DESPOND

In the previous message regarding the life of Bunyan, we have found that he was a preacher who lived in the seventh century or the 1600s. He was an outcast by the Church of England which was the established religion. He was not an ordained minister by the Church of England, so when he persisted in preaching the gospel, he was thrown into prison. While he was in prison it was there that he decided to record his experiences with Christ which resulted in the pages of this book called *Pilgrim's Progress*. His deep, abiding relationship with the Lord is recorded in this book which is written in the form of a similitude or a parable - a comparison. We will be looking beyond that which we see on the surface to see the spiritual meaning which Bunyan would have us to understand. Bunyan did not actually dream this, but he is writing in the form of a dream, as if he had dreamed this story, and he is telling it from this particular standpoint. Open your books as we begin on the first page, and we read:

As I walk through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den.

This den is the Bedford jail where Bunyan spent twelve years as a prisoner. He is writing from his jail cell. The first line is filled with meaning just as every sentence is. "*As I walk through the wilderness of this world.*" The phrase "*As I walk*" indicates that our existence in this life is a walk. It is not just a dead thing, it is a pilgrimage, walking through the path of life. Notice that he likened it unto a wilderness. If we go on a walk, we ought to be observing what is on either side of our pathway and what is in our pathway. So what Bunyan would have us to understand is that as we are going through the existence of this life, this world is like a wilderness. That is, it is hard to understand what the meaning of life is all about. As we are walking through it, we ought to be asking ourselves some basic questions. Why am I here; where did I come from, and where am I going? As you examine all the different religions and philosophies of this world, you will find yourself in a wilderness, because the answers to these questions are not found in the philosophies of this world. It is hard to understand what the purpose of life is all about. So then he says:

I lighted upon a certain place where there was a den and laid me down in that place to sleep, and as I slept I dreamed a dream. I dreamed and behold I saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place with his face from his own house, a book in his hand and a great burden upon his back.

What are the meanings of these particular terms? First of all, he sees this individual clothed with rags. This is a text taken from Isaiah 64:6 from the book in his hand which is the Bible, that **"all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags"**. That is, even our best acts in the sight of God are sinful, and we appear as an individual clothed with dirty or filthy rags. This individual had his face turned from his own house. That is, he was seeking for a deeper meaning in life rather than that which he had found in his home, or that place of security in which he had formerly been comfortable. He no longer can gain comfort in that, and is looking out away from the things of this life. He has his back to his house and is looking out over the horizon with a book in his hand. Bunyan would have us to know that the book he is reading is none other than the Bible. He has a great burden upon his back, and he realizes he is clothed with rags. This is his realization of his sense of sin. This great burden which is upon the individual's back is Bunyan's way of telling us that the Pilgrim has come to a conscious awareness of his sinful state before God. This is what the Bible calls a convicting work of the Holy Spirit which comes before true conversion. After a person is converted, he generally comes to a spirit of peace, and he has a hope in Jesus Christ, but prior to this, there is a work of the Holy Spirit which produces a great sense of remorse, distress and despair. In Romans 8:15, we read, **"Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption whereby we cry abba father."** The individuals who have been converted now possess a different spirit than they had prior to conversion. When God is going to convert a sinner and bring him into a relationship with Himself, before the sinner has a settledness in that relationship, there is a work of the Holy Spirit which is referred to as the **"spirit of bondage"** which brings a fear or a respect of the wrath of God. This is something that is greatly needed in our churches today. We need to understand that before an individual will truly flee to the cross of Christ, he must also first of all have an appreciation of what the wrath of God is, and what he needs to flee from. This is what the Bible calls the **"spirit of bondage,"** the burden upon his back, which is the deep sense of sin.

Now let us look at this individual as he returns to his own home and begins sharing the experience he is going through with his family. Let us look at their reaction and how they receive him in his home. We read,

In this plight, therefore he went home and restrained himself as long as he could, that his wife and children should not perceive his

distress. But he could not be silent long because that his trouble increased. Wherefore, at length, he brake or revealed his mind to his wife and children, and thus he began to talk with them. "Oh, my dear wife, said he and you the children of my bowels, I your dear friend am in myself undone by reason of a burden that lieth hard upon me. Moreover, I am certainly informed that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven in which fearful overthrow both myself with thee my wife and you my sweet babes shall miserably come to ruin except some way of escape may be found whereby we may delivered.

Now Pilgrim is under the sense of the guilt of sin. He is concerned about what is going to happen to him and also to his family. However, when he shares this with the other members of his family, here is their reaction.

At this his relations were sore amazed. Not that they believed that what he had said to them was true, but because they thought that some frenzy distemper had got into his head. Therefore, it drawing toward night and they hoping that sleep might settle his brains with all haste they got into bed.

When he shared this tremendous weight of sin with those who were very close to him, his wife and children, they thought that he was losing his mind. At this point some psychologists and many modern ministers say that Bunyan went too far. They contend that this is not the true experience of a person, that he went too far in emphasizing the sinner's state of mind. Modern psychologists would intervene at this point and say that it is not healthy for an individual to be in such a distraught state of mind. Therefore, their advice would be to avoid or stay away from anything of this nature. Is this experience described by Bunyan something that has just been invented by a man, who was certainly fallible, or is this descriptive of a scriptural experience as revealed in the Bible. Let us listen as David describes an experience in his own life in Psalm 38:1-4. Let us see if we don't find the same thing that Pilgrim found when he shared this with his wife and children.

Oh Lord rebuke me not in thy wrath, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure, for thine arrows stick fast in me and thy hand presseth me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger, neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head and a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly.

Compare this with how Bunyan describes the Pilgrim:

I go mourning all the day long, for my loins are filled with a loathsome disease and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and sore broken, I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart. Lord, all of my desire is before thee and my groaning is not hid from thee. My heart panteth, my strength faileth me, and as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me.

David says in verse 11:

My lovers and my friends stand aloft from my sore, and my kinsmen stand afar off.

Pilgrim realizes that his family has no sympathy with what he is going through. In his footnotes, Bunyan quotes this passage of scripture, ***"They also that seek after my life, lay snares for me, . . ."*** He also quotes several other like scriptures that describe the experience of an individual when he comes to Christ, that bring a great distress of mind over his lost condition. It is not just a theoretical thing anymore, it is something whereby the wrath of God is laid upon him as this burden is upon his back.

Pilgrim tries to sleep through the night but he doesn't get much rest. He gets up the next day and begins walking in the fields.

Now I saw upon a time when he was reading in the fields that he was, or as he was accustomed, reading in his book, and greatly distressed in his mind. And as he read, he burst out as he had done before, crying, "What shall I do to be saved?"

Please take note that this individual didn't have this burden of sin only when he went to church, and it didn't leave him when he left church. Many individuals can go to a church, hear a sermon, and they get sermon sick. It is rather like those who go out to sea and get sea sick, but as soon as they get back on the land, they are well again. When an individual is being dealt with by the Holy Spirit of God, he doesn't escape this sense of burden just when he walks out the door of the church. An individual, who God is dealing with, cannot get away from Holy Spirit conviction. This burden is put upon him whereby he cannot rest until it is settled with peace in Jesus Christ. So Pilgrim is still crying out, *"what must I do to be saved?"* Then he said:

I saw also he looked this way and that way as if he would run. Yet he stood still because as I perceived he could not tell which way to go.

Pilgrim knew that he had a need, but he didn't know what to do. He knew that he needed to flee from the wrath of God, but he didn't know which way to go. He did not yet understand what conversion was all about. He said:

I looked then and saw a man named Evangelist coming to him who asked, "Wherefore do you cry?"

The Evangelist is the local pastor. In Bunyan's life it was his pastor named John Gifford. You read in the rectory of the church of which Bunyan was a member that Bunyan's pastor, John Gifford, spent night after night explaining the gospel to John Bunyan. In other words, this pastor spent many hours leading this individual to Christ. We will meet the Evangelist quite frequently throughout the book. Let us examine how this pastor/Evangelist counsels with this individual. He says, "**why are you crying?**" and the Pilgrim answered:

Sir, I perceive by the book in my hand that I am condemned to die and after that to come to judgment. And I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second.

Pilgrim says, "I have been reading here in this book that I am going to die, and I don't want to do that. And not only that, but I read that after I die, I am going to come to judgment. ***"It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment."*** (Hebrews 9:27). He says, "I don't want to die and yet I am not able to stand before God's judgment. I am just miserable, I am in great distress of mind." It is very important that we watch how the pastor counsels with the Pilgrim at this point. The main goal of today's soul winner is to immediately give an individual assurance of his standing with God. In other words, they go through three or four questions, tell them to pray a prescribed prayer, and then tell them that everything will be all right. Let us see if that is the way this pastor counseled with this individual. We will see that it is exactly the opposite. This pastor is wanting this individual to experience salvation, not just to have a theoretical knowledge of salvation. So rather than just asking him to believe so many facts by a nod of the head, he is going to deal with him in what may seem a very crude fashion, maybe even harsh.

Then said the Evangelist, "Why not willing to die, since this life is attended with so many evils."

Now, isn't that different? In other words, he said, "if you are so burdened with all of this, why don't you just die?" Does this sound like a modern preacher? Does this sound like someone who is really trying to help somebody else? Do you remember what Job's wife said

to him? **"Why don't you just curse God and die?"** (Job 2:0). Why did he ask a question like that? Why would he not try to relieve this individual's burden? There is a reason for it. This Evangelist wants to make sure that this individual is not just concerned about worldly cares with this life, but he wants to see whether this is a real work of the Holy Spirit giving him a vision of what lies beyond this life. Notice how the Pilgrim answers the Evangelist.

Because I fear that this burden that is upon my back will sink me lower than the grave and that I shall fall into tophet, (that is hell) and Sir, if I be not fit to go to prison, I am not fit to go to judgment, and from thence to execution, and the thoughts of these things make me cry.

What type of an answer did he give? Why didn't he want to die? He said because there is a life beyond and I am not prepared to meet God. That is what the pastor wanted to draw out of him, to see whether he really had this burden for his standing with God or whether he just had some worldly cares that had made him sorry, sad or burdened.

Then said Evangelist, "if this be thy condition, why are you standing here?"

If you are of such distress and you are not fit to meet God, why are you standing here? Notice that the Evangelist didn't press him for a decision. I hope we see that. The individual is not yet ready to decide for Christ. What would modern day soul-winners do in a case like this? If anybody expressed an interest about going to heaven, they would immediately put the pressure on them to make a decision. Notice Evangelist did not press Pilgrim for a decision. Pilgrim didn't have enough information to know what to decide. You can't make a person decide. You may trick him psychologically, but he will not be ready to really come to Christ. So he answered:

"Because I know not whither to go?"

Pilgrim said, "I don't understand how to get to heaven. I don't understand how to flee from the wrath of God." So what did Evangelist do?

Then he gave him a parchment roll and there was written within, "Flee from the wrath to come."

What is this parchment roll? It is not the same as the Bible, because the individual already had a book in his hand. Later on in the book, it explains what this scroll was, when he is coming down the hill of difficulty, and had lost this parchment. This roll was the assurance

of his life and acceptance at the desired haven. That is, this was the plan whereby he must follow in order to enter into the Celestial City or to flee from the wrath of God. We will find an individual named Ignorance when we come to the end of the first part of the book. He walks right up to the gates of heaven, knocks and expects to be permitted to enter. Only, when they open the gate, they ask him, "where is your scroll?" However, he has none, meaning that he has no awareness of his need to enter into heaven by the way in which it is prescribed. Thereby the scroll is the plan he must follow to enable him to enter into heaven. It is his ticket into heaven. Now remember, he is not yet converted, but he has been given step by step understanding of what is going to be necessary to lead him to a true state of conversion and then on into everlasting life. Turn with me to Matthew 3:6-7. John the Baptist is preaching one day and baptizing many people. **"And there went out unto him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region round about Jordan and were baptized of him in Jordan confessing their sins."** These people that John the Baptist baptized confessed that they were sinners. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, **"O, generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"** Do you see that the people that were baptized, confessed they were sinners, but the Scribes and Pharisees, saw themselves as righteous people, needing no repentance? So John said, "I am not going to baptize you until you give evidence of repentance, until you acknowledge that you are a sinner under the wrath of God. So who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" In this parchment scroll it was written, "Flee from the wrath to come."

Then the man read it and looking upon Evangelist very carefully said, Well, whither must I fly?

Or which way do I go? This is very, very important, and I hope you pay particular attention to this.

Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, "Do you see yonder wicket gate?" And the man said, "No."

What is Evangelist asking the Pilgrim? "Do you see yonder wicket gate?" And the man says "no." He is honest and says "I can't see it."

Then he says, "do you see yonder shining light?" And he says, "I think I do."

What does the Evangelist mean by this? The wicket gate is that which is found in Matthew

7:13: ***"Enter ye in at the straight gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction and many there be which go in there-at; because straight is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life and few there be that find it."*** The wicket gate is true conversion. This is how Bunyan would liken it. He

believed that very few of the people in the Church of England at that time were really converted. There was no gospel preached, it was a cold, dead type of religiosity. In those huge state churches, they had a huge door, which they would open on Sundays for the multitudes to go into the church. Inside that huge door, there was a little door that you could go in during the week time, so you wouldn't have to open those huge doors. Were any of you raised on a farm in which you had a barn door like that? Do you remember during haying season how you opened the big doors and could back the hay truck in there? But when you wanted to go in the barn during the week, you had a little door cut into that big door so you didn't have to swing that big door back open. Bunyan was saying that in the big entrance into the established church, there is a narrow way, and there are many people going through the established church which are not going in at the straight gate or "true conversion." They go in through church membership, they go in through baptism, they go in through all these false ways, but there are few that find what it means to be truly converted. So Evangelist is asking the Pilgrim, "do you understand what it means to be converted?" The man says, "no." You see, he is being honest. Then Evangelist asked Pilgrim another question, "Do you see yonder shining light?" Bunyan has in his footnotes a reference to Psalm 119:105 - ***"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."*** In other words, "are you getting light from the Bible? If you don't understand what it is to be converted, are you getting any help when you read the Bible?" And now Pilgrim says "yes, I think I am, I think I am. I don't understand what it means to be converted. I don't see the wicket gate, but I think I am getting some light and am learning a little more than what I normally knew." So do you see how this man is counseling the Pilgrim? He is bringing him along step by step whereby he can experience his relationship with Christ. He is just not giving him some theoretical knowledge and then pronouncing him converted and assuring him that everything is all right. Then notice what the Evangelist says:

Keep that light in your eye and go up directly thereto so shall thou see the gate, at which when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what to do.

Do you see how the Evangelist has not yet pressed Pilgrim to make a decision for Christ?

This Pilgrim doesn't yet understand what it means to be truly converted, and so he says, "yes, I am getting a little light." Evangelist says, "so then keep your eye on that light and go toward it." In other words, "keep reading, keep praying, keep asking for understanding and don't let anything distract you from that light. Don't let anything come along which would take your eye off from the understanding you are getting from that light." We are going to see in our next setting that he allows something to happen to get that light out of his sight.