**THE PALACE OF THE KINGDOM**

Time and again John Bunyan portrays Christian being encouraged with fleeting glimpses of the distant Celestial city, at the end of his journey. At the beginning, when Christian, - or Pilgrim, as he was then, - first met Evangelist, he was pointed in its direction, “Do you see yonder shining light? … Keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto” (p.16). When Obstinate questioned him, he replied, “I seek an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away” (p.18). As he and Pliable continued along the road, he told his travelling companion, “There is an endless kingdom to be inhabited, and everlasting life to be given us, that we may inhabit that kingdom forever” (p.20). … And so, he continued to instruct Pliable concerning this Heaven. He had a definite perspective on his journey.

Notice a change, though, when he irresponsibly strayed into the company of Mr. Worldly Wiseman. This very ‘happy-chappy’ managed to curtail Christian’s enthusiasm … and you will notice you have to look hard to find any slightest hint of the journey to the Celestial City (pp.24-29). In fact, at this point, Christian’s excitement concerning his final destination was at its lowest since he had left the City of Destruction.

Nevertheless, in the mercy and grace of God, Evangelist revisited Christian and pointed him again to the wicket gate through which he entered (p.35). When Goodwill opened the gate to him, Christian introduced himself, “Here is a poor burdened sinner. I come from the City of Destruction, but am going to Mount Zion” (p.36). … He was back on track again! … A little further along the road he came to the house of the Interpreter, and once more, he spoke of his journey and his destination, “Sir, I am a man that am come from the City of Destruction, and am going to Mount Zion” (p.40). … Time and again, the example of Christian emphasises the ‘blessed hope’ of the believer … “Going home, I’m going home, There’s nothing to hold me here. I’ve caught a glimpse of that Heavenly land, Praise God, I am going home.”

Christian had experienced much since he had left his family and friends. Some of his experiences were pleasant, but, - it must be acknowledged, - the majority of his experiences were painful. Nevertheless, he was looking forward to Heaven.

There is a here a reminder for us. Paul told the Romans, 12:2 Be not conformed to this world … Col. 3:2 Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth … Why? … Because the things of this world disappear and disappoint! …
A stark contrast to how the writer to the Hebrews describes the Christians’ journey, 11:16 But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. … It was never God’s intention for His people to become at home in this world … but to be looking forward to being with Him in Glory.

This is the Christian’s focus. This is the destination, - because of the grace of God, - we shall one day reach. To arrive there, it requires absolute commitment. There is no ‘dilly-dallying’. There is no lack of urgency. It is the forthright longing of God’s people to be with Him forever. In another of Bunyan’s writings (The Heavenly Footman), he wrote, “They that will have heaven, they must not stick at any difficulties they meet with; but press, crowd, and thrust through all that may stand between heaven and their souls. So run!” … As Paul put it, Phil. 3:14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

In Bunyan’s dream, a little distance from the palace gate there sat a man at a table with a book and pen. He was waiting for those who had the genuine commitment and courage to register their intention to enter the palace. However, Christian also noticed a rabble of the fiercest men dressed in suits of armour. They were trying to frighten and intimidate anyone who would try to enter through the gate. Then Christian saw another group … between the registrar, - the man at the table with his book and pen, - and these fierce armour-wearing men. This third group obviously wanted to go in through the palace gate … but, they were fearful of the threat from the cruel men.

At that point, a big burly man pushes through and tells the registrar, “Set down my name, sir”. … And notice the registrar didn’t have to ask him what his name was! … Our names are already known to the King! Is. 43:1 I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.

This big burly man had a right and a claim for citizenship that he would allow none to deny him! In the words of Paul, II Tim. 1:12 I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. … In through those gates is the city where I have my citizenship. That’s my city! It is mine by rights to dwell there for all eternity! There’s none who will keep me from entering it! … That is true perseverance of the saints! … In order for the Israelites to inhabit Canaan they had to leave behind Egypt … They had to contend with the obstacles and hindrances of the wilderness … They had to confront the settled and fortified city of Jericho …
But nonetheless, *God brought them through* because He was bringing into *their* land … the land He had promised them while they were still in captivity in Egypt! … If they had done nothing at the very beginning, and hadn’t faced up to the Egyptians, the wilderness, their enemies, their fears and everything else that came along their way … they would never have reached Canaan

And so, this big burly man, - with the helmet on his head and the sword in his hand, - advanced towards the enemy. His determination would not allow him to quit until he had achieved his purpose. He did not fear the armed bullies. He fought against them, with his armour on … And so Paul wisely instructed, Eph. 6:11 *Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil*. The devil and his forces are a mighty and intimidating foe, but *they are* defeatable!

Yes, the conflict is fierce and often unrelenting. This big burly man *crashed* into the armed men … He didn’t try to befriend them or negotiate with them … He launched into them with all the ferocity of the weapon in his hand, - the sword! … And yes, our big burly man not only gave many wounds … but he also received many wounds. Nonetheless, he knew the battle was worth fighting … “he cut his way through them all, and pressed forward into the palace”. He kept going! He wasn’t for allowing anything or anyone to stop him! His eternal destiny lay in through the gates of that stately palace.

How many had fallen at the commencement of the struggle! … Sadly, they didn’t have it in them to fight the battle … they didn’t have the driving desire to continue. Jesus said, Mt. 24:13 *he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved*. There is no such thing as ‘opting out’ half-ways through the conflict and somehow hoping to arrive at the destination. Those who are convinced of the rewards will not surrender to defeat because *we are more than conquerors through him that loved us* (Rom. 8:37) … and whether it is death or life, or demons, principalities, or powers they will not keep us from entering Heaven! There’s nothing present or future … *there’s nothing* that will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

Consider the attacks many Christians find themselves contending with. Sometimes the devil comes to them and tells they are not good enough. He gets them to compare themselves with others, and they fall far short … or so he leads them to believe. He shows them their inadequacies and their failings … and then he convinces them God wouldn’t be interested in them!
Besides, there are many who start on the journey, - like Obstinate and Pliable, - but who give up. Some look for it with glasses that are tainted by the world and, as a consequence, few there be that find it (Mt. 7:14). Others are afraid when they see the enemy waiting for them, - they cringe when faced with conflict. Still more count the cost, and they don’t feel it’s worth the sacrifice.

How easy it would have been for the big burly man to have done what others had done, and given up when they saw those bullies and rascals! But he must not give up and he dare not! His eternity, - his entrance into the palace of the King, - depended upon fighting and defeating every last foe that stood between him and the gate.

Let’s pick up on a word that is used twice here in this small section, - the word ‘pleasant’. You will notice Interpreter took Christian by the hand and led him into a pleasant place … And you will also notice when he “pressed forward into the palace … there was a pleasant voice heard from those within … saying: Come in come in; Eternal glory thou shalt win”.

… At the beginning of Scripture, - Gen. 2:9, - we read, out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant [chamad, delight greatly, desire greatly] to the sight. That same word is used again when Isaiah prophesied concerning Israel, 54:3 thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited. … 5 For thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called … 11 behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. 12 And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant [chephets, altogether delightful and to be greatly desired] stones. 13 And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children. … God’s promises for God’s children.

But here is a warrior for God, and he has battled his way up to and through the gate of the palace. When he entered, the old garments with the blood stains of the conflict were immediately removed, - they were taken from him, - and he “was clothed with such garments as they” … What kind of garments? … They were golden garments … Remember how at the beginning when Interpreter led him into the pleasant place and showed him the stately palace, “beautiful to behold; at the sight of which Christian was greatly delighted. He saw also upon the top thereof certain persons walking, who were clothed all in gold” … Who were the certain persons? To discover their identity you need to go to almost the end of the dream … “Then I saw in my dream, that the shining men bid them call at the gate: the which when they did, some from above looked
over the gate, to wit, Enoch, Moses, and Elijah, &c.” (p.216) … Yes, at home in Heaven with the saints of such a mighty calibre! … Along with them … and one with them! … We are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28)!

Beautiful words … “So he went in, and was clothed with such garments as they” … What an encouragement to others standing back watching … wondering if they could make their way through the ‘gangs of armed men’! How many times, though, we have seen men and women who hardly looked as if they were up to the task … and yet they won through for the Lord? We’ve seen them lying in the hospital bed, hardly able to utter a word, and yet they keep on battling until they enter through that gate. They won’t give up! Their bodies are wrecked with pain … but they keep going on. What a witness! The enemy thought they would quickly and easily fall under the dreadful opposition, but instead the cry within their hearts declared, Phil. 4:13 I can do all things through Christ Who strengtheneth me. … Those are the folk God uses to encourage the rest of us! … And once they passed through the gate of the palace, the Lord granted them new garments of gold from the wardrobe of Heaven!

Indeed, even though this section is so brief it is nonetheless at the very heart of Pilgrim’s Progress. The Christian life is not one of passivity … one of ease and continuous calm … It is often a dangerous journey! Bunyan wrote …

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather
There’s no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

… And look at Christian’s response to how he perceived what he was being shown, “Then Christian smiled, and said, I think verily I know the meaning of this”. This was an encouragement to him … to keep going on and not to give up. It was an encouragement for him to realise others went through the difficulties and problems too … but ahead lay the promise that he would one day, - gloriously and triumphantly, - enter through the gates and into the palace of the Kingdom. May God keep us pressing forward to that day also! Amen.