**The Prison of Despair**

Interpreter had taken Christian to the entrance to the Palace of the Kingdom where he showed him the evil company of men standing near the gate intimidating the approaching pilgrims. Interpreter then led Christian “into a very dark room, where there sat a man in an iron cage”. … A poor man in an absolutely hopeless state …

**Hopeless**

He has no light. He has no freedom. He is incarcerated with no prospects of being set free. He stared at the ground … looking into nothingness. His hands were folded. Sounds of despair were the only noises he made. He was described by the psalmist, Ps. 107:10 Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron; 11 Because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the most High: 12 Therefore he brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help.

This man was in a hopeless predicament, of his own making. He had none to help him … in his prison cage … surrounded by darkness. He was beyond hope! Every day and every night was the same! There was no light, … not even the faintest glimmer. His desperation was more than he could bear … and more than words could describe. He had been utterly abandoned!

His predicament was all the worse because he had not thought he would fall into such a dilemma, and he had made no preparation … He was in an eternal ocean of everlasting darkness, and imprisoned in a cage out of which there was never any hope of release. He cried, “Oh eternity! Eternity! How shall I grapple with the misery that I must meet with in eternity?”

Here is a man who wasted every opportunity he had been offered. The words of the rich man in Hell come to mind, Lk. 16:23 … I am tormented. This man was in a place from which there was no way out! … A million years from now, and there will be no change … Ten million years from now, and there will be no change! … “I am now a man of despair, and am shut up in it, as in this iron cage. I cannot get out. O, now I cannot!” … Hopeless …

**Helpless**

We are then informed this man once professed to be a Christian. There was a time when he claimed to have assurance of salvation, and the joy that accompanied it. He would have told you he was looking forward to the prospect of entering the Celestial City.
He would have shared in the company of others with similar aspirations. … There was a time when he would have said he watched and was sober in his conduct. He would have told you he read and sought to live by God’s Word …

But, what happened to him? … Sadly, he was found out to be only a ‘professor’, and not a ‘possessor’. By his own admission he neglected to watch and be sober. He allowed his eyes and his heart to wander. He sinned against the clear knowledge of the Word of God. He contended with God’s goodness. He grieved the Holy Spirit. He courted with the devil, and the devil won him. As a consequence, God abandoned him.

Does God abandon people? Does He not ‘run after’ them and try by every means to convince them to return and cajole them into ‘being saved’? … Such a ‘gospel’ makes God out to be something similar to the dog sitting at the table waiting for the scraps. … It’s a ‘gospel’, - not even worthy of the name ‘Gospel’, - that presents God almost helplessly hoping that some sinner might eventually decide and choose to come to Him and ask for His forgiveness … and make His Son’s death worthwhile. But that is not the God of the Bible … and it is not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The four Roman ‘nones’ in Romans chapter three tell us, v.10 There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. 12 … there is none that doeth good … because we are in the ‘habit’ of sin, dressed in the filthy rags (Is. 64:6) of our unrighteousness.

In Romans 1:18 Paul writes, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness. … How do ungodly and unrighteous men hold the truth? They hold the truth because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them (v.19). In other words, God reveals the consequences of sin to the sinner. For how long has He been doing that? … v.20 the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead … He has demonstrated His grace from the creation of the world … from the beginning of time! Therefore, they are without excuse.

“What happens to those who have never heard the Name of Christ, and who have never been taught the Gospel, and who have never believed in the Saviour to be saved?” … How would you answer? The only answer is … that we must trust in the God Who is the Judge of all the earth, and He will do right (Gen. 18:25), in accordance with His own perfect will. …
Therefore, we submit to His righteous and eternal purposes. Since He is perfect, He judges sin perfectly … by His own perfect standards … and the sinner who keeps holding onto their sin and will not let it go, Jesus said, Jn. 3:18 he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Some would say, though, that if a person who has never heard the Gospel is a good Muslim, or a good Roman Catholic, or a good Buddhist … or just a good person, God will save them. … No, there is no truth whatsoever in that claim. … There is nothing we could do that would ever deserve God’s grace, - we, of our own selves, can never merit His rewards. We depend upon what we refer to in doctrinal terms as God’s unconditional election of those whom He has chosen according to His infinite mercy and everlasting grace.

Entrance into Heaven is God’s alone to give … If it was left to our initiative, we would end up in the same predicament as the man in the iron cage. But, - you might think, - we are only a few that will be saved eventually … The vast number are heading out towards a lost eternity … and the devil will have encaged more souls than Christ will have in Heaven … for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: 14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. … But the plain truth is that none would find it if they had not been led up to it and through it!

Here is a verse for your encouragement … Col. 1:18 in all things he [Christ] might have the preeminence. Spurgeon wrote, “Think of the countless hosts in Heaven: if thou wert introduced there to-day, thou wouldst find it as easy to tell the stars, or the sands of the sea, as to count the multitudes that are before the throne even now. They have come from the East, and from the West, from the North, and from the South, and they are sitting down with Abraham, and with Isaac, and with Jacob in the Kingdom of God; and beside those in Heaven, think of the saved ones on earth. Blessed be God, His elect on earth are to be counted by millions, I believe, and the days are coming, brighter days than these, when there shall be multitudes upon multitudes brought to know the Saviour, and to rejoice in Him. The Father's love is not for a few only, but for an exceeding great company. "A great multitude, which no man could number," will be found in Heaven. A man can reckon up to very high figures … and they can count great numbers, but God and God alone can tell the multitude of His redeemed. I believe there will be more in Heaven than in hell. If anyone asks me why I think so, I answer, because Christ, in everything, is to
“have the pre-eminence”, and I cannot conceive how He could have the pre-eminence if there are to be more in the dominions of Satan than in Paradise. Moreover, I have never read that there is to be in hell a great multitude, which no man could number.” … *Good point, Spurgeon!*

What great times we are looking forward to … *and we shall not be alone!* But, in the meantime, in a land where the Gospel *is* preached faithfully in many places, there is definitely no excuse for anyone to say, “I never heard”. This man in the cage had no excuse … *he* had heard. It is stubbornness that *blocks* out the Gospel. It is stubbornness that denies Christ on the throne of the heart. Gospel tracts handed out … and people throw them down on the pavement … unaware that what they have done will contribute to their eternal destiny, unless they repent. Tracts dropped through the doors make their way to the bin, without even a glance. They see the verse on the outside wall of the church … and are oblivious to its warning. In eternity, no one in this United Kingdom can claim they had no opportunity to believe in God! … The words of Paul are as true today as ever they were, *Rom. 1:21* when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became *fools* … And that was what this man in the cage had allowed to happen in his life … even despite knowing the Gospel!

As a consequence, … *yes* … God *abandoned* him. … *Hopeless* … *Helpless* … and he became …

**HARDENED**
When his Christian friends would have advised him to search his heart and prove his faith, he would have rejected their wise counsel. When the Word of God commanded him, he disobeyed. He continued to the point of contradicting God, and repentance became impossible. *Prov. 29:1* He, that being often reproved hardeneth *his* neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

When God shone the light of His Word on that man’s soul, the man ‘pulled down the blinds’ and stopped the light from shining in! He provoked God, and he disqualified himself from the race. Consequently, his heart hardened so that he *would* not believe, and so he *could* not believe. God’s mercy and grace was beyond him, - it had been removed, and was out of his reach. He ended up despising the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His salvation. He treated as unholy and wretched the blood and sacrifice of the Saviour on the cross. “I
have crucified him again by my life; I have despised his person; I have despised his righteousness; I have regarded his blood as something quite unholy; I have done despite to [spitefully opposed, insulted] the Spirit of grace. Therefore, I have shut myself out of all of the promises of God; and there now remains for me nothing but threatenings, fearful prospects of rebuke, fiery indignation, and certain judgment that shall, as would some adversary, wholly consume me.”

God’s offer of mercy and grace was no longer available for this man, for Paul explains, Rom. 9:16 *it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy …* 18 Therefore hath he [God] mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. The heart of this prisoner in the cage had become so hardened, he would never find mercy.

Had he been truly saved? Had there been a time when he was a true believer? No. While it is true he had walked with genuine believers, sat in church beside them, sang the hymns with them … Underlying it all, he readily confessed, “… in the enjoyment of which I did then promise myself much delight”. In other words, his heart was elsewhere! He was wearing a façade. What Christ was offering was seen by this man as merely a means to an end, - something he could use for his selfish and sinful gratification. He wasn’t truly born again … You know, some people come to Christ in order to escape eternal punishment in Hell, and that is important … but, there is something even more important … Yes, the consequence of coming to Christ and being ‘born again’ is that you will escape Hell, but the main reason the Holy Spirit directs you to come to Him is that you would have life, and that you would have it more abundantly (Jn. 10:10) … and you would live your life, - now, and in eternity, - for the glory of God. That is God’s purpose for saving you!

… And true repentance is not a response of some concocted ‘free will’ that we think we can turn on or off as suits our whim, but true repentance is an individual response initiated and wrought by the grace of God. Only He can bestow the grace necessary to bring about the change of heart, for it is the Holy Spirit Who brings the sinner to understand their need of salvation, and repent … It is the Holy Spirit alone Who makes effective the work of regeneration.

Bunyan illustrates this Scriptural truth as Interpreter finally asks the man, “But canst thou not now repent and turn?” Knowing fully his condition, the man had to reply, “God has denied me repentance; His Word gives me no
encouragement to believe. Yes, He himself has shut me up in this iron cage so that even all the men in the world are unable to obtain my release” … !!

CONCLUSION  Hopeless … Helpless … Hardened
What must it have been like for that man to have remained in that cage … as Christian and Interpreter walked away and left him?! As they walked away … they left him as they had found him in the dark and lonely cage. On previous occasions, - as he sat in the meetings, - there would have been times that man was “almost persuaded” to truly believe in Christ as Saviour … but, as the hymn says, “‘Almost’” cannot avail; ‘Almost’ is but to fail! Sad, sad, that bitter wail - ‘Almost’, but lost!”

This man was never a believer … he was never even a backslider. To be a backslider you must first show genuine signs of ‘sliding forward’, - there has been a hunger and thirst for personal righteousness and holiness. The religion the man in the cage previously had, though, was one of mere self-satisfaction and self-centredness … and there was no evidence of Holy Spirit conversion.

As they walked away, Interpreter said to Christian, “Let this man’s misery be remembered by thee, and be an everlasting caution”. Peter exhorted his readers, II Peter 1:10 brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure. Am I truly born again? … That is what Peter tells us to examine! … We can’t follow after “the lusts, pleasures and profits of this world” and also claim to be a follower of Christ. We can’t travel in opposite directions at the same time!

Don’t forget what Interpreter has shown you, Christian. Make sure to do what the man failed to do! … Watch, pray, and be sober. It’s not the way of the world, but it is the way of God for His children.

Perhaps, a very fitting passage from Scripture with which we should conclude our study is found in the epistle of a man who had wandered away from Christ, but was so graciously restored … It was Peter, again, who wrote, II Pet. 3:17 Beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. 18 But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.