In the City of Destruction

In one particular publication of Pilgrim’s Progress, there is a secondary and very appropriate title, “The Journey of a Justified Sinner”. I trust as we study this book we shall see the full significance of that description. Prior to coming to know the Lord through personal salvation, and from the moment He saved and rescued us we have been on a journey … and at the end of this journey here on earth His Word promises He will welcome us into His Celestial City.

The story of Pilgrim’s Progress begins though, in a ‘wilderness’. John Bunyan had been imprisoned because the law of the land declared he mustn’t preach … Only the Anglican ministers were allowed to preach. Nonetheless, Bunyan would not be silenced, and for his faithfulness to the Lord he was incarcerated in the Bedford jail … the ‘wilderness’. There, he wrote this story of the Pilgrim’s Progress. It is an allegory concerning a man with a great burden of unrepented sin. In this wilderness, Bunyan saw the man in the most appalling circumstances … He was dressed in rags, - they would have been filthy rags (Is. 64:6). They would have been soiled with the pollution and perversion that belonged to the society to which he belonged. He had a load on his back that he could not remove. Everywhere he went, its heavy weight affected all he did. It had fastened itself so tightly he could not free himself. Left unchecked, this burden would inevitably have an increasingly devastating effect upon him … and he saw no means whereby it could be removed.

How did Pilgrim become aware of his problem? Notice, he had “a Book in his hand”. This Book was the Bible and its content troubled him. But before we consider how it troubled him, it would be good to recognise that even in such a place as the City of Destruction, God had made His Word available, Rom. 5:8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. …

Confrontation  Ezekiel prophesied, 34:12 As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep. Using the same symbolism, the Lord Jesus declared, Jn. 10:14 I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. … In the City of Destruction lived a man whom the Lord had purposed to search out and save. In that wicked and sinful place, Pilgrim had his home. There, he lived with his wife and children, whom he loved. He obviously had managed to achieve the things of this world. He worked hard to own and keep his house and family. By day, he joined his neighbours in the pursuit of the requirements necessary to live the life he had become accustomed to. There is no mention, or hint, of any poverty or restraints. …
There is no mention that he was missing out on any of the pleasures and luxuries that surrounded him ... However, he had arrived at the point where, in fact, they had lost their appeal. No matter how much he had of this world’s goods, it was failing to satisfy the deep need of his heart.

What was the problem that was confronting him? It was the problem of a deep-seated unsettling within his soul. His problem came out of his possession of the Word of God. One day, Divine providence had him come across that Book and his attention was turned to its pages ... and he was disturbed with what he read ... such verses as ... Rom. 3:23 all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God ... Is. 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way ... Rom. 6:23 For the wages of sin is death ... Heb. 9:27 it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment ... And Pilgrim became all too aware that this Book was speaking personally to him and it was personally describing his life. As he read it, he began to weep and tremble. Fear laid hold upon him to such a degree that he became a broken man. The Word of God confronted him and he could not escape the fact that he was a lost hell-deserving sinner. He realised he wasn’t his own person, but was under the control and domination of another who was determined to destroy his soul, - in this world and the next.

God brought before him His Word and the sharp two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12) was more powerful than any weapon of man. As the Holy Spirit began wielding the Scriptures, this sinful man was confronted by the awful presence of his own sin. ... Once again, it reminds us that this Book we are privileged to own is the Word of God and it is our responsibility to preach and teach nothing but the Word of God. This is the most powerful weapon when in the hands of God the Holy Spirit. Yes, we have begun a study in the Pilgrim’s Progress but our overriding commitment is to extrapolate from it the truth of God’s Word and make it known. It is only through the Word that sinners are confronted by their terrible state, Ps. 51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ... 9 Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Man’s stories, - not even Pilgrim’s Progress, - can ever confront the sinner as the Scriptures confront the sinner! It was only when Peter preached Christ from the Old Testament that his hearers cried, Acts 2:37 Men and brethren, what shall we do? 38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent. ... It is the Word of God alone that pierces even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

... And in heartfelt desperation, Pilgrim cried out, “What shall I do?” He didn’t know the answer. He didn’t know where to turn. There was no one in that city to whom he could direct his cry. ...
He knew the answer was not in his own house, and that is why he turned away from it. He knew he could not find the answer in anything he owned, or in anything he had worked for. … He had the Book in his hand, and the Lord was confronting him, but as yet, his eyes were as blind as blind could be. He could not see how a poor sinner like him could be set free from the burden that was weighing him down.

Look back to the time when God in His grace and mercy confronted you. At first, you might not have been aware of Him stirring within your heart. … But you can remember coming to the realisation that God was confronting you concerning your need of the Saviour and He began by demonstrating to you the heaviiness of the personal burden of sin that you were carrying … And, as a consequence, the **confrontation** began to develop into …

**CONVICTION of sin**  
When was the last time we saw someone weeping their way to the Saviour? When was the last time we saw someone in the same attitude of conviction as Pilgrim in the City of Destruction? … I remember seeing such occasions when I was a young boy. In the mission halls, as the untrained preacher preached the Gospel tearfully and faithfully from God’s Word … You could feel the burden in his heart for souls to be saved, and God would mercifully and graciously reward the sound preaching by opening the hearts of sinners. They would see the eternal consequences of their sinful condition before God and they would cry to Him that He would save them. Spurgeon used to say that if anyone has not experienced such conviction of sin, they ought to be concerned about the validity of their salvation. Yes, in order for salvation to be effective, there **must** be conviction of sin. It is not merely a decision to be taken lightly, or in a whim … It is a decision that brings the sinner to their knees crying, Acts 16:30 what must I do to be saved? … And they will stay on their knees until the Holy Spirit graciously opens their heart to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ!

It is a decision of such eternal dimensions that it is not merely the sinner’s decision to be saved, for being dead in sin (Eph. 2:1) no dead man or woman can ever awaken themselves out of the deep sleep of death … but it is wholly and completely the work of God’s grace that stops them in the pursuits of their daily living, - as Pilgrim was stopped, - and they cannot do anything but tremble and fear, as the wrath of God descends heavily upon them.
Spurgeon was preaching on Heaven and Hell. He told his vast congregation, “Yes! There are some here who are laughing at salvation, who can scoff at Christ and mock at the gospel; but I tell you some of you shall come yet. "What!" you say, "can God make me become a Christian?" I tell you yes, for herein rests the power of the Gospel. It does not ask you consent; but it gets it. It does not say, Will you have it? But it makes you willing in the day of God's power. Not against your will, but it makes you willing. It shows you its value, and then you fall in love with it; and straightway you run after it and have it.”

As Pilgrim proves, sin is more than we can bear, and its consequences are eternal. Yet though, neither can we over-emphasise the lengths to which our Saviour-God has gone to save us! Indeed, when true God-inspired conviction stirs the heart, peace is only achieved when the work of Christ is applied. Jn. 16:8 he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.

In Pilgrim’s Progress we notice Pilgrim tried to contain the conviction of sin that was troubling him, “he went home, and restrained himself as long as he could” … He tried to ‘manage’ it. He may possibly even have tried to pretend it wasn’t there. However, when the Holy Spirit confronts and convicts the sinner, there is no escape … there is no avoiding Him … His work can neither be ignored nor suppressed.

Pilgrim was compelled to tell his family of the spiritual battle raging within him … and he spoke in terms of endearment, “O my dear wife, and you my children, I, your dear friend, am in myself undone by reason of a burden that lieth hard upon me”. Wouldn’t you have thought if, - for the sake of nothing less than love, - his family would have afforded him respect and concern … and would have received his words more sympathetically? He was struggling spiritually. He wanted them to listen and to understand … but because the Holy Spirit was not yet working in their hearts, they couldn’t comprehend the conflict going on inside him. They thought he was going crazy! I can imagine him, - with the tears streaming down his face, - ‘broken-heartedly’ bringing before them the raging war within his soul … and how difficult it was sharing such a personal intimacy … but he wanted them to understand.

Yes, we can appreciate some of his distress for each of us knows how difficult it is to share with our loved ones their need to be saved … and they don’t want to know! They cannot see it, and it doesn’t make any sense to them! Such was the case in Pilgrim’s home. The more he explained to them and opened up his dire condition to them the less they understood and the harder their hearts became. It was getting “worse and worse” … and God’ Word says, Rom. 9:15 I will have
mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 16 So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy. … 18 Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Pilgrim didn’t know what to do!

Nevertheless, even under such deep conviction of sin, God put it within his heart to withdraw to his room where he prayed for his family and for his own sinful state, - a lost sinner concerned for lost sinners! God was dealing with him, but as yet, he didn’t realise it! … Yes, when the plan of God to save the sinner is being effectuated the Holy Spirit confronts the sinner and shows them their own unworthiness. He convicts them of how weak and frail and totally inadequate they are to free themselves from the bondage and the snares of the devil … Confrontation, conviction …

CONDEMNATION
Whether he was lying on his bed at night, walking alone through the fields, trying to read or even trying to pray, the sentence of death and of judgment was constantly hanging over him. He couldn’t escape it!

Perhaps we need to make the comment that not every sinner faces the condemnation of God to such a degree as Pilgrim did … many do though. The important determining factor, however, in the work of salvation is always that sin becomes so unbearably abhorrent. When the Holy Spirit works in the heart, He shows the sinner sin’s terrible ugliness and its wages … so costly that it caused the Father to turn His face away from His only-begotten Son on the cross as He bore the sins of His people (Is. 53:12). He couldn’t and He can’t look at sin. Sin is as repulsive to Him today as it has always been! God hates sin! … Large sins, small sins … He hates them all! Sin in every shape and form is an abomination to Him! And such is the work of the Spirit that He emphasises sin to the sinner in order to produce repentance and sorrow.

Yes, for your own comfort, notice again how Pilgrim’s attention was arrested by the Word of God. When you see your loved one turning the pages of Scripture and their eyes landing upon the Word of God, that is when you must pray all the harder! … Ps. 119:130 The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple. Sometimes they may even ask us to explain the deep truths to them, but sometimes, - we must confess, - the answers we give them may not touch the heart … Other times they might not even pass a single comment or remark, but praise the Lord they have a Bible in their hands! … And when the Holy Spirit brings them to the Scriptures, He is the One Who is the Expert to bring them to saving faith in Christ.
And the story of Pilgrim emphasises to us to give them time, don’t rush them … God works according to His own agenda in salvation. Believe in Him that He is working, and pray more earnestly for them. When that burden within you to pray increases, trust that it is the Holy Spirit Who is also working in your heart to pray more earnestly and more believingly for the salvation of your loved ones. Often when the Lord is working in their hearts, he is working in ours too. But also be aware when the devil sees the Lord is working, he begins to put even greater obstacles to prevent their salvation … Sometimes he wants us to rush our loved ones to make a decision … and we become impatient and unwittingly interfere with the Spirit’s work and become an hindrance. It serves Satan’s purpose for he doesn’t want to lose the sinner!

Look again at this man walking in the fields, - God has him there … away from all the attractions and allurements in the city. … He is alone where God is watching over him, with the Bible in his hands … It is the Lord Who has him “greatly distressed in his mind”, for the Lord is in the situation! Once more, it is because the Lord is dealing with the man that the sinner laments, “What must I do to be saved?” … He’s lost and confused … He looked every ‘which-way’, for he did not know how to proceed! … Condemnation.

CONCLUSION
Looking back on how God laboured to save us, it humbles us and fills us with joy that He considered us worthy of His grace. I’m saved because of the eternal plan of God, - He loved me, He chose me, He sought me, He drew me to Himself, He’s keeping me … my salvation is all of Him (Jonah 2:9) … and He alone is to be praised!

But for your loved ones who as yet don’t know Him … Don’t give up! We are still in the day of God’s grace. Praise Him when you see them picking up a Bible and reading even a few lines. You don’t always need to say anything to them … but make sure to say plenty to God. Plead with Him to save them. Trust He has you in in that place for their salvation’s sake! … Pray for Him to do such a work, for God alone saves. He works in the sinner’s heart to bring them to Christ … Pray for Him also to work in our hearts that He will grant to us the privilege of using our witness, - quiet and gentle, - to bring about the salvation of those who are near and dear to us.