OBSTACLES TO PROGRESSION

How many times have we felt like Christian? There have been obstacles in the way, and they seemed far more than we could ever deal with. Nevertheless, as it were, there has been a quiet voice inside telling us to keep going on …

There is no doubt about it … Christian was frightened of these two lions. They roared and made a terrifying sound … as lions do! They were obstructing his path, and he was in two minds as to progress or retreat … and the latter seemed more favourable, and much more sensible.

However, he could see the Palace Beautiful in the distance … and that was his next goal. To reach the palace, though, he had to face up to the lions! He had to be watchful, of course, but that wouldn’t be easy because it was night-time and he was tired. He was wearied by the conversation he had recently with Timorous and Mistrust, who had warned him about these two lions and advised him to turn back. He had to strengthen the things that remained for it seemed he was about ready to die (Rev. 3:2). … But he must keep going on if he wanted to reach the Palace Beautiful.

The Palace Beautiful held a great attraction for him. In the mind of John Bunyan, it was a place where the light shone in the midst of the darkness. It was by the side of the highway, and a necessary ‘stopover’ for the pilgrim. … This was a church, - in Bunyan’s setting it would have been a Biblical, nonconformist, independent Puritan church. He visualised Christian being weary for the fellowship of like-minded travellers … He needed a place to shelter and gain strength to continue on the journey. This was the Lord’s house, because it “was built by the Lord of the hill, and He built it for the relief and security of pilgrims”. Here, the pilgrims would speak about their Saviour and encourage each other on the next stage of the journey.

Yet, before he arrived there, he had to contend with the lions. About five hundred feet from the entrance of the Palace, the two lions appeared … roaring. To reach his immediate destination he had to place his faith in the hands of God Who had guided and sustained him thus far. Yes, his first thoughts were to return and catch up with Timorous and Mistrust, - it would have been far easier … but such was the desire within his heart to continue, he walked towards those two lions … and to discover that despite their roars and their attempts to harm him, they were already chained! They could not do anything to him as long as he stayed in the centre of that road.
It reminds us of the great truth Satan is restricted, - he is not permitted to do all he would want to do. If Satan had his way there would be no churches, and no Bibles … no Gospel-preaching, and no Christians. Satan is not in control, though … God is! … God only allows the devil so much liberty … for if Satan was in control, there would be complete chaos … not even the unbelievers could manage under his tyranny! Therefore, we need to be very confident, and remind ourselves often, God is in control.

Nevertheless, though, - even despite the godlessness, - God is good to all. He is even good to those who never give Him a moment’s thought. The psalmist David found it difficult to understand why this was so, Ps. 73:3 I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked … They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. … Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. 8 They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. 9 They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. … 11 And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? 12 Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.

Why is God good to those who resent and reject Him? … There is a doctrine known as common grace. It refers to the grace of God towards all mankind. It is called ‘common’ because its benefits are experienced by the whole human race without distinction. It makes no difference between believers and unbelievers. It is ‘grace’ because it is undeserved and sovereignly bestowed by God, James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness. God is good to all here on this earth … even those who give Him no thought!

But what about these lions? … Why did Timorous and Mistrust, - who … remember … had climbed over the wall to get onto the path, - not keep going on as Christian was intent upon doing? Very simply, it was because they knew nothing of saving grace. They did not have the witness inside them to keep going on. The Palace Beautiful was a take-it or leave-it option for them … no more than that. They were strangers to God’s saving grace that extends only to those whom God has chosen to redeem. … And their fear of the lions proved they knew not God.

Peter wrote about the lions, I Peter 5:8 your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. … Such a frightening prospect! …
But look at Christian again … and you will see something he was not able initially to see. The porter standing nearby called to him, “Fear not the lions, for they are chained”. They made an awful noise, and they bared their teeth, and they tried to make at Christian with their claws … but they were restrained/bound by their chains. They could do him no harm as long as he was obedient to how he had been instructed, and kept to the centre, - they couldn’t reach him!

It’s like when you go to the zoo, … the lions can’t touch you because the bars are between you … Neither can they harm you as long as you heed the warnings, “Don’t feed the lions”. … Listen to the instructions! … Similarly, Christian could pass through those two roaring lions unharmed because the Lord of the hill had them chained!

They weren’t free to roam. They were allowed to be there for the purpose of testing the faith of the pilgrims. You see, entrance into the Palace Beautiful was restricted to those only who belonged to Christ, and who were longing for the Celestial City. … It wasn’t simply a church building, but the gathering of the saints, the Redeemed, the Bride of Christ … He sought out Christian company … and he was intent on reaching this destination, despite the lions.

This is what the theologians term as “The Perseverance of the Saints”. Basically, this doctrine teaches that all who are genuinely and truly saved will successfully and victoriously follow after Christ regardless of the obstacles … and they will reach Glory. … Yes, God is good to all (common grace), … but saving grace is that which is applied to His people, and will ultimately take them safely to Heaven.

… And along the way, He has people like “Porter … whose name was Watchful” … who are familiar with the way. They have heard the roar of the lions, and they have seen the fear of God’s people … and they have been there to encourage them to keep going on. They have discovered the lions are chained! They are restrained … and they can do no harm! Yes, if they were unleashed they would devour the traveller, - no doubt about it … but they are bound in their shackles. …

Who chained them? … It was no less than the Lord of the hill! Jn. 12:31 Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.
The porter told him, “Keep in the midst of the path, and no hurt shall come unto thee” … What a promise, and what wise counsel! But it is based upon experience, Heb. 2:18 For in that he himself [the Lord Jesus] hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

Christian did as he was instructed. He kept to the centre of the path, “trembling for fear of the lions, but taking good heed to the directions of the Porter, he heard them roar, but they did him no harm”. … He didn’t stop being afraid … but he continued on, trusting … despite his fear. … And why did he have to listen so attentively to the words of the Porter Watchful, - to keep to the centre? The reason is simple. You will notice it was “a very narrow passage”, - no room for manoeuvre … his footing had to be sure, - and the lions would have been on either side … and if he didn’t keep a straight course, - if he had strayed either right or left, - a lion would have devoured him!

Indeed, Christian’s faith was being tested. Does the Lord test His people? Yes, He does. Look at how He tested Abraham on Mount Moriah, and Joseph with Potiphar’s wife, and Daniel in the den of lions. … Consider how God has tested your faith recently … and He has proved you faithful. Watchful explained to Christian how the lions tested the calibre of the true pilgrims, and the faithlessness of false pilgrims.

Look at Christian making his way along the path. He could see the whites of the lions’ eyes; he could feel the heat of their breath … that was how close he was … and yet, he continued on through. And when he was arriving at the gates of the Palace Beautiful, he began to clap his hands with joy. … He had made it! With God’s help he had arrived!

The hymn says, “It’s not an easy road, there are trials and troubles, And many are the dangers we meet”. The devil wants you to stop, and go back to where you came from. He doesn’t want any of us to progress and to follow Christ. He doesn’t want us at the prayer meeting. He doesn’t want to see us studying God’s Word. But as long as we keep to the centre of the path and maintain our focus on arriving at the Palace Beautiful, he cannot harm us.

Remember, the Palace Beautiful is the place built by the Lord of the hill into which His people gather. We need the fellowship of the saints … and I believe very sincerely you can tell the difference between those who love the house of God and those who don’t for it shows in their commitment to His people.
It is a true fact of the Christian life that if you are not sure what you are doing, the lions will get you … And if you are not suitably convinced about your destination, - where you want to go, - you will turn on your heels and go back for you will not consider the dangers worthwhile. But if you love Christian’s God, you will keep going on.

Alexander Whyte applied this story to his readers, “Now, who or what is the lion in your way? Who or what is it that fills you with such timorousness and mistrust, that you are almost turning back from the way of life altogether? The fiercest of all our lions is our own sin.” … And that sin can manifest itself in so many ways … in our pride and self-sufficiency. It can raise the ugly spectre of ungodliness, carnality and guilt. Maybe even mistaken priorities is “the lion in the way”, - putting something else ahead of us in the place of Christ … or maybe it is just plain worldliness and personal ambition … and persevering on the road to Heaven is no longer worth the trouble!

Christian was not for giving up, though … and it is not in the spiritual nature of the truly born-again believer to give up. Christian asked the Porter, “may I lodge here tonight?” Oh yes, said Watchman, “This house was built … for the relief and security of pilgrims”. The lions are kept outside. The Timorous’s and the Mistrusts don’t make it this far, - they have no lasting desire to be here. This is Christ’s Redeemed, … built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone; in Whom all the building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple in the Lord; In Whom ye are also builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph. 2:20-22).

Aren’t you glad you are saved? Do you thank God you know your sins are forgiven, and you are on your way to Heaven? You have experienced time and again how the Lord has brought you through one obstacle after another. Looking back on it now, you can testify, “For all the Lord has done for me, I never will cease to love Him”.

May the Lord encourage us through this evening, as we demonstrate our trust and confidence in Him, to His glory! Amen.