CHRISTIAN’S PRIDE AND IMPATIENCE

There are two ‘parts’ to John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. The first ‘part’ relates to the journey of Christian, and the second ‘part’ relates to the journey of his wife Christiana and their four children.

We, of course, are at the point in our study of the ‘first part’ where Christian has left the Palace Beautiful after having spent about four days there … and he was ‘chomping at the bit’ to restart his journey. Christiana, on the other hand, when she arrived at the Palace Beautiful remained for about a month and she greatly and gratefully benefited from all the resources she received there.

Now, as Christian was setting out on his journey we can detect a certain tone in his voice as he spoke to Prudence, “As it was difficult coming up, so far as I can see, it is dangerous going down”. He had only started on his journey again and already he was apprehensive. Prudence replied to his concerns though, “Yes, so it is, for it is a hard matter for a man to go down into the Valley of Humiliation, as thou art now, and to catch no slip by the way”. … What did she mean, “as thou art now”? Often what someone says mightn’t catch up with us until sometime afterwards … and it is very possible the words of Prudence, - “as thou art now”, - had something to say about Christian’s state at that time. … It probably didn’t mean anything to him initially, but her words warrant deeper consideration, for as Christian proceeded down the hill, “he caught a slip or two”.

However, when we compare this part of the journey with when it came to the time Christiana and her four sons were descending into the Valley of Humiliation, she managed to avoid any slips for her guide specifically made the point, “We need not to be so afraid of this Valley, for here is nothing to hurt us, unless we procure it [i.e. ‘bring it about’] to ourselves. It is true that Christian did here meet with Apollyon, with whom he had also a sore combat; but that fray was the fruit of those slips that he got in his going down the hill . . . It is the best and most fruitful piece of ground in all these parts. . . . Behold how green this valley is, also how beautiful with lilies! I have also known many labouring men that have got good estates in this Valley of Humiliation; for “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6).”

In other words, Christian’s experience was not necessary for his confrontation with Apollyon came as the result of his somewhat over-confidence. He had started to become ‘too sure of himself’, and less trusting in the Lord. ...
Pride was creeping in for he was beginning to credit himself with being able to manage this journey fairly well on his own. Now, it is not to say Christian was an arrogant man … for he wasn’t. It is not that kind of pride that caused him his problem, - he wasn’t the type who looked down on others. Everyone he met he was courteous to. However, his problem was that he thought himself more capable in the journey than he actually was. His trust was more in himself than in the Lord. … It had somehow ‘gone to the back of his mind’ that it was the Lord Who had brought him thus far …

And from almost the moment he left the Palace Beautiful he was stumbling here and there … and alongside his pride, I think another one of his problems was his impatience. He had somewhere to be, - the Celestial City, - and he wanted to get there as quickly as he could. … And his impatience, - coupled with the self-pride, - made him believe he could continue on this journey in his own strength.

We have already seen something of his impatience and lack of properly assessing the situation. For example, if he had been more patient and if he had taken more time to examine the Slough of Despond, he would have seen those steps that would safely have taken him across to the other side. Also, if he hadn’t been in such a hurry he wouldn’t have been as ready to listen to the Mr. Worldly-Wiseman who tried to tell him about a ‘short-cut’. Perhaps we also see something of this more recent impatience when he asked Porter at the gate of the Palace Beautiful, “Sir … may I lodge here tonight? … I am come from the City of Destruction, and am going to Mount Zion, but because the sun is now set, I desire if I may to lodge here tonight” (p.62). … It seems Christian was in such a hurry that he only thought he needed to spend one night at this place.

Now, bear in mind how tired and exhausted he was … so tired that earlier he had fallen into a deep sleep under the Arbour Tree, when he shouldn’t have (p.58) … and, when he arrived at the Palace Beautiful, - a place where he could safely take a well-needed rest and ‘recharge his batteries’ … he didn’t feel it necessary. He was not going to avail himself of the opportunities for which the Lord of the hill had built the Palace Beautiful for … i.e. to give rest to the travelling pilgrims. He only intended to remain one evening … and that wasn’t enough to bring him up to the required fitness he needed to continue on the next part of his journey. The meagre rest of one night wouldn’t have been sufficient!

We see this again when he spoke with the damsel, Discretion. He told her, “It is Christian, and I have so much the more a desire to lodge here tonight” (p.63).
In his conversations with Piety, Prudence and Charity before, during and after the feast he went to bed that evening with the full intention of getting up the next morning and continuing on his journey… “So in the morning they all got up; and after some more discourse, they told him that he should not depart till they had shown him the rarities of that place” (p.72). They then showed him the study and the armoury, - obviously they considered he needed to learn about the significance of those two places to prepare him for the rest of his journey. They saw his knowledge was lacking in those two areas, and that staying a while to learn about these things would have been profitable for him.

But we can see Christian was really ‘chomping at the bit’ to return to the journey… but not yet! … “… on the morrow he got up to go forward, but they desired him to stay to the next day also” (p.74). They wanted to show him the Delectable Mountains… away in the distance, where he saw “a most pleasant mountainous country, beautified with woods, vineyards, fruits of all sorts, flowers also with springs and fountains, very delectable to behold… Immanuel’s Land”. But he was in a mad rush to get going! … “He bethought himself of setting forward”. The family weren’t going to hold him back any longer, except to insist he makes one last visit to the armoury (p.75).

Eventually, - it seemed to him, - he made his way down the hill… stumbling a couple of times, - I would imagine he wasn’t taking proper time to watch where he was putting his feet… but he nevertheless safely arrived at the bottom. However, what state was he in, really? Yes, he had a great time in the Palace Beautiful, - he enjoyed the meal and the sleep and the company. He enjoyed the conversations about the Lord of the hill, and he listened intently to what they were telling him, and he took in all that he saw in that place… but he was in such a hurry to move on! Was he wise though? His wife and the four sons stayed for a month… Christian only took the time to stay for a few days… Was he ready to move on?

Previously, - before arriving at the Palace Beautiful, - he had encountered so much… He needed the benefit that place was offering him. The Lord of the hill had provided for him and for others this oasis where, - with fellow-travellers and believers, - they would be at one ‘under the Lord’s roof’ with the Lord’s people. … That was what he needed, - not just a fleeting visit, - but time well-spent with people of his own kind.

True fellowship in the Lord is greatly under-estimated, even though it is a gift of God. Many believers don’t rate Christian fellowship as highly as they ought.
Yet, the psalmist wrote, 133:1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity ... 119:63 I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts. ... Following the Day of Pentecost we read, Acts 2:42 they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. ... The writer to the Hebrews instructed his people, 10:24 let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another.

We need the company of other believers. Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote, “The Church of Jesus Christ… is a gathering of people who come together in order to worship God and to build each other by mutual faith and strength”. ... We need each other … and the Lord has provided other Christians, - from all kinds of backgrounds and experiences, - to encourage us in our journey towards Heaven. The problem with Pilgrim, though, was that he was in such a hurry to move on he didn’t really see the need for Christian companionship as a priority ... but he was wrong ... and the Lord confronted him about it by permitting Apollyon to meet with him in this Valley of Humiliation.

... Now, notice how Bunyan describes him, “poor Christian was hard put to it ... Christian began to be afraid, and to cast in his mind whether to go back or to stand his ground”! He was not in the fit state he ought to have been for he hardly had the strength in him to deal with this next phase of the journey. He should have rested another few nights at least, - his wife and sons had the good sense to stay in the Palace Beautiful for a month ... The residents in the Palace Beautiful would have had him stay longer too ... but he was in too much of a hurry to get away. And this was the occasion where the Lord demonstrated to Christian that he was trying to do far too much in his own strength!

No sooner had he left his companions ... and they had started to return to the Palace Beautiful ... that the enemy appeared, and Christian wondered if he could face up to him!

Yes, back in the Palace, this would have been no problem. Christian would have known exactly what he should have done ... but he was in such a hurry ... and he had gotten himself into such a flurry, he hadn’t taken the spiritual advantage of all that that had been so freely offered to him back in the Palace. He saw now why the three sisters had insisted on the importance of the armoury!

Christiana, on the other hand, had taken the time in the Palace Beautiful, - in the company of other believers, - to make herself ready to be better prepared for the journey ahead. ...
Later on, as she was walking down the same steep hill her husband had previously travelled, but she took care not to stumble, … the hill was no less steep, and there were parts of it still slippery, “but they were very careful, so they got down pretty well”.

She had Mr. Great-Heart to accompany her as they entered the Valley of Humiliation, and he assured her, “We need not to be so afraid of this valley; for here is nothing to hurt us unless we procure it to ourselves. ’Tis true, Christian did here meet with Apollyon, with whom he also had a sore combat; but that fray was the fruit of those slips that he got in his going down the hill. For they that get slips there must look for combats here … when they hear that some frightful thing has befallen such an one in such a place, are of an opinion that that place is haunted with some foul fiend or evil spirit; when, alas, it is for the fruit of their doing that such things do befall them there. … This Valley of Humiliation is of itself as fruitful a place as any the crow flies over."

In other words, Christian’s confrontation with Apollyon needn’t have happened … but it was the result of his own impatience and self-reliance. He was in such a hurry, and he had lapsed into thinking he could continue the journey in his own strength. But the Lord was now about to teach him a hard lesson … and he was going to use no less than Apollyon to do it.

The fellowship of like-minded believers was what Christian had starved himself of, - he was ‘too quick’ to get away. No matter how much he had enjoyed it for those four days, he didn’t take full advantage of the people God had brought him into contact with. I’m sure he didn’t mean to, but it seems – a little – as if he had taken the Lord’s people for granted. The Lord provides friends, - brothers and sisters in the faith, - … He brings them along our path. … He uses them to build us up in the faith … and He was so gracious to provide the friends for Christian in the Palace Beautiful, but Christian reckoned he only needed them for a short time … and then he could ‘set them to the one side’.

Yes, those were great conversations they shared, - and they did him good, - … but he was in such a hurry to continue on. Yes, we need the times of rest, - we can’t always be going! Paul wrote, 1 Thess. 5:11 Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do. 12 And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; 13 And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.
As we think about the Lord Jesus … He didn’t rush around every country in the world, nor run from ‘Dan to Beersheba’ … from the north to the south, from the east to the west … He simply had a path to trod, and His Father accompanied Him on that path they both, - along with the Holy Spirit, - had planned from before the beginning of the world. … And consider all He achieved! You know, the Lord has a path for each one of us to walk … and He desires us to walk that path in His strength. If we don’t, we shall stumble ‘coming down those steep hills’ and we shall face those oppositions we could have avoided.

The Valley of Humiliation was the part of the journey where Christian was to learn his strength was insufficient … “poor Christian”. If only he had stayed a while longer in the Palace Beautiful where he would have been built up to the required and necessary standard …

Often, as we look back, we can see how we brought certain heartaches and difficulties upon ourselves. We could have avoided them … but now we can understand how the Lord permitted them to happen … even sent them. Sometimes, we just don’t take proper account of our actions … and the Lord has to intervene to make sure we do!

He is gracious, though, for even when we do proceed foolishly, - or without His warrant, - He does not reject us or allow us to continue alone and unguarded. He has promised, Heb. 13:5 I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. He stayed with Christian, and He saw the pilgrim through.

As we continue to examine this child of God in the dark and dangerous valley, we shall see the Lord knoweth them that are His (II Tim. 2:19) and that He never abandons us. Even in the valley, we learn the devil is no match for God, for God takes care of His own people. We are like Christian on many an occasion, - we can be headstrong and impatient … we want to get somewhere and we have no time to wait. Yet, our God … Ps. 103:10 He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

Christian, then – in the will of God – gradually gathers himself, and he becomes strong enough to face up to Apollyon, and he does it with the Word of God. He is a lesson to us that we must never trust in our own abilities for it was only in the Lord’s strength he was going to pass through that valley. In the words of Samuel, I Sam. 7:12 Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. Like Christian, that is how we have got this far. May the Lord be pleased to teach us what we need to learn through our simple study! Amen.