HELP COMES TO THE RESCUE

I Cor. 12:27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. 28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

In our previous study of Pilgrim’s Progress, we spent most of our time considering Christian’s companion, Pliable. We saw him as being careless, clueless, and callous - he wasn’t much of a help, and he ended up abandoning Christian … John Bunyan didn’t have a high opinion of him, as his closing statement concerning him indicates … “And thus much concerning Pliable”.

It’s sad. Each of us has known people who have put up to wanting to be followers of Christ, but sadly … they didn’t follow for too long! Shortly after the initial spurt of energy, their spirituality proved to evaporate very quickly. In the meantime, as Pliable returned to his family in the City of Destruction “Christian was left to tumble in the Slough of Despond alone”.

The true evidence of someone whom the Lord is dealing with is borne out in this fact, … “still he endeavoured to struggle to that side of the slough that was farthest from his own house, and next to the wicket-gate”. That is one of the indications God is at work in someone’s life. It’s what we call the evidence of the work of God’s irresistible grace. When He sets out to save, the sinner has an urgency that will result in them succeeding to believe in Christ as Saviour.

In the plan of God another man comes unto the scene. His name is Help. Let’s look at what is happening now and draw our own spiritual lessons from it …

THE WAY THROUGH

What a question this man called Help asks Christian! … “What are you doing there?!” Now, Christian wasn’t there for the good of his health! He wasn’t enjoying being there. He was looking out … and then someone comes along “and asked him what he did there”! … It sounds a silly question, but on closer examination it is not as silly as it sounds for Christian had to clearly recognise and then articulate his need. … Remember the question Jesus asked the blind man, Lk. 18:41 What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? … The blind man had to confess his need, Lord, that I may receive my sight.

Here was a man under deep conviction of sin. Previously we read about him, “I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and
trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, “What shall I do?”

He is reading the Bible ... He’s on a journey away from the City of Destruction. He is concerned about the state of his soul, and he has the Bible in his hands. It’s like a road map, and it is telling him he’s lost! He hasn’t been paying particular attention to the road beneath his feet. He has had the companionship of Pliable who has ‘turned his head’ with all his continual talking … and Christian hasn’t been concentrating the way he should have been. (By the way, Pliable was never convicted of sin, - he was simply ‘along for the ride’ … to see what it was all about. In fact, it strikes me that Pliable would have been in the habit of following anyone who had a ‘good story’ to tell. He kept asking questions, but he wasn’t particularly listening to Christian’s replies. Pliable, - unlike Christian, had no awareness of a burden of sin on his back). But let’s look at Christian …

Now, what kind of a slough (pit) was this? It was the “scum and filth” of the “fears, doubts and unbelief” that accompany conviction of sin. Such a pit is nothing you can touch, but it is nonetheless very real. It is a place that only takes you in one direction … further downwards! It makes the burden feel heavier, … and remember Christian already has the sin-burden on his back and the “fears, doubts and unbelief” are making it heavier. … You know what it’s like, “Maybe I’m making too much out of this personal faith in Christ” … “Maybe I’m letting it get to me” … “Maybe, I’m taking it too seriously”. … Christian was sinking, and he feared for his life.

But we must also make the point that the Slough of Despond is not a necessary experience that the person seeking Christ must go through. Some of us came to Christ without the feelings Pilgrim/Christian suffered. You see, if Christian would have been paying more attention he would have noticed the stones that were made available in the Slough of Despond for him to walk on. Yes, the muck might have been nearly covering them … but if Christian would have been focussed clearly, he would have seen them … and he would have avoided falling into the Slough. Conviction of sin is necessary for salvation, but the Slough of Despond is not conviction of sin. He could have done without falling into it … and he would have saved himself this experience!

How many times have we thought, “Oh, if only I had come to Christ when He first called me, instead of rebelling and going my own way and heaping upon myself trouble after trouble!” …
We can look back and see those ‘steps’ that would have taken us through the Slough, and we would have missed out on falling into the mire. And the Slough of Despond is not even a desirable experience, - it doesn’t make you into some kind of a ‘better’ Christian. You hear the testimony of some, - and it’s great to hear them, - but they tell you all the details of what they used to do outside of Christ … but they are no better or no less saved than someone who had carefully ‘picked their way over the stones’. In fact, it is often the case that the more ‘colourful’ parts of their testimony are given more time than their testimony to God’s grace after they were saved.

The experience of Christian in the Slough of Despond actually hindered the work of grace in his heart. John Bunyan shows us here that there is a way for the unbeliever seeking Christ to avoid falling into the Slough, and it is by heeding the advice and the directions given by the Word of God, and by those like Evangelist whose desire it is to see people saved. When Jesus said, Mt. 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest … He didn’t mean to come to Him as a last resort, - to run round everywhere else and then eventually come to Him. Christian would have saved himself a whole lot of heartache if he had sought out those steps!

You know, either Christian had his Bible closed or else he didn’t have the Bible in his hands … why do I think that? Well, because, if he would have had the Bible opened it would have made him aware of the danger and he would have avoided the Slough as he followed the directions, Ps. 119:133 Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me.

But, the real proof the Slough of Despond is totally unnecessary and unprofitable is the presence of the stepping stones. Instead of running from Christ and the message of the Gospel, if Christian had carefully gone from one stepping stone to another, he would have saved himself all those “fears, doubts, and unbelief”. It was when we tried to get away from Christ that our problems became even more serious. What a difference though when we look into the Scriptures and see the children by the side of the Sea of Galilee coming to Him without any hesitation … that’s the wisest way and the least difficult way to accept the Saviour’s invitation.

One of the best commentaries on Pilgrim’s Progress is by George Barrell Cheever in the nineteenth century (he campaigned for the abolition of slavery in the US). He wrote, “Satan casts the professor into the mire, to the reproach of religion, the shame of their brethren, the derision of the world, and the
dishonour of God. He holds our hands while the world buffets us. He puts bears’ skins upon us, and then sets the dogs at us. He bedaubeth us with his own foam, and then tempts us to believe that that bedaubing comes from ourselves”.

It’s so true, isn’t it! There were good, firm and immoveable steps, - sound promises for Christian to stand upon, - but “fear, doubts, and unbelief” caused him to flee along the nearest way … and he fell in!

Christian … yes, there was the way through, if only you had paid attention to the steps. If only you had taken care. If only you hadn’t tried to find a way through the Slough yourself … If only you had closed your ears to Pliable’s worldly rubbish … if only you had asked the Lord to direct your path … You would have seen the steps and avoided falling into the Slough of Despond. … God will never lead you where He will not keep you! The way through …

**The Way Out**

Just when Christian was floundering and sinking deeper into the mire, there suddenly came to him a man called Help. This is the only time John Bunyan mentions him, and here he only tells us his name. This man, Help, reached out his hand, and speaking words of encouragement to Christian, pulled him out of the mire, set him on the King’s highway, and then went about his business.

Christian was lifted up and lifted out. He was compelled to ask a question though … why was there such a place as the Slough of Despond? Surely more people would make it to the gate if there were no such obstacles? It should be made easy to reach the wicket gate? Why hadn’t the Slough been filled in so that travellers would not be caught out? In the second part of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christiana asked the same question. In her case, it was an old gentleman who explained to her, “Yes, too true, for many there be that pretend to be the King’s labourers, and say they are for mending the King's highway, that bring dirt and dung instead of stones, and so mar instead of mending.”

You see, the slough couldn’t be mended because it had a purpose. Like Pliable, there were many who simply ‘played about in it’. Like Pliable, they had gone back. … There were also workers who claimed to come in the name of the King to make attempts to fill it in, “For above these sixteen hundred years”, - (and Bunyan was referring to pre-Reformation times), - many had been employed to ‘mend’ it but, he said, “to my knowledge, here have been swallowed up at least twenty thousand cart loads, yea, millions of wholesome
instructions, that have at all seasons been brought from all places of the King’s dominions, (and they that can tell, say, they are the best materials to make good ground of the place,) if so be it might have been mended; but it is the Slough of Despond still, and so will be when they have done what they can.” In other words, said John Reisinger, “The biggest problem with the Slough of Despond is the people who, in the Name of the King, pretend to mend the highway but really bring "dung and dirt instead of stones, and so mar instead of mending." These are the preachers who do not preach the truth of free and sovereign grace.”

There is only one way out, and it is the way Help described to Christian, Ps. 40:1 he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. 2 He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.

Spurgeon told his people, “The men of this brigade of “helps,” if I understand Bunyan aright, are stationed all around the borders of the great dismal Swamp of Despond; and it is their business to keep watch, and listen along the brink of the Slough for the cries of any poor benighted travellers who may be staggering in the mire.” The way through … the way out …

**The Way Forward**

“The ground is good when they are once got in at the gate” … what a beautiful statement! A few moments earlier Christian had been struggling in the mire … Then the hand of salvation, - the hand of the Helper, Ps. 30:10 Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me: L ORD, be thou my helper - was extended to him and he was lifted out! He didn’t want to return to the mire. The City of Destruction was on the other side … and he no longer held any desire for it … “The world behind me, the cross before me”. He had been lifted out of the Slough of Despond … yes, he still had the burden on his back, but, - more than ever, - he was determined to enter in through the gate Evangelist had told him about. “No turning back, No turning back!” … He’s moving forward …

This is the true drawing power of the sovereign and saving grace of God. The only means whereby the sinner comes to Christ is through the work of God alone. The person themselves cannot boast, neither can a preacher … For every soul that is saved, Christ has all the glory in their salvation … from beginning to end!
This does not compare to the notions of those who erroneously reckon we have a say concerning God’s work of grace, - “Christ can only save us if we let Him in”. … A few years ago I was offered a series of literature entitled “Try Jesus”, but I wouldn’t accept them. All the Baptist ministers in the area were given them … but the whole concept of ‘trying Jesus’ is an Arminian concept, foreign to the Bible because it implies the initiative does not necessarily begin with God … but with a person’s own desire. You and I don’t ‘happen along’ to see, - and to try out, - if God’s salvation is any use or not. By nature, - the sinful nature, - we would never give God ‘a try’. No, Christian demonstrates to us that it is the determining and irrevocable power of Christ alone to save … otherwise, we would have gone back home like Pliable and never have discovered the way forward with the Saviour.

Yes, the promise to Christian was … “The ground is good when they are once got in at the gate”. … And Christian was intent on persevering to that gate.

**CONCLUSION**

Aren’t you glad you’re saved? Some of us floundered in the Slough of Despond, others heeded the steps the Word of God showed them and they were spared the “fears, doubts, and unbeliefs” of the Slough.

You may remember back to the beginning of our series when I was telling you about the testimony of John Bunyan. He was a rebel! He knew he should be saved, but he rebelled … and because he rebelled he ‘took the long way round to come to Christ … through the Slough of Despond.

It’s not inconceivable that someone might be studying with us this evening who is not yet saved. The Holy Spirit is showing the Gospel to you, - that you must come to Christ and believe in Him … but you’re hesitant, and you’re trying every other way but! … Look hard and you’ll see the stones. Yes, as Help told Christian there’s times when “this place doth much spew out its filth, as it doth against change of weather, these steps are hardly seen” … and there are times too when you can become dizzy … but nonetheless, the steps are always there … sometimes you’ve just got to look hard for them! There is a way through.
Isn’t it a wonderful salvation we have?! It’s a journey that is worth every trial. Yes, Pliable returned home none the better than when he had left, - in fact, he returned worse because he had to contend with the banter of his so-called friends, and he was ‘sneaking among them’, and he had heard of a better way which for a while would have made him unsettled and discontent. As he had listened to Christian on the road leading up to the Slough of Despond he had been ‘enlightened’ and he had even ‘tasted’, - to a small degree, - of ‘the heavenly gift’ (Heb. 6:4ff.) … but he went back, and there is no more record of him coming onto the road again that led to the wicket gate.

Seth & Bessie Sykes were very active and well-known in Springburn, Glasgow. On the grand scale of things, they were just two ordinary people. In 1929 Seth was a tram conductor, but he resigned and both of them travelled the length and breadth of Britain with a barrel organ, singing, preaching the Gospel and telling stories from the Bible with lantern slides. Here is a hymn they wrote …

Some thank the Lord for friends and home
For mercies sure and sweet
But I would praise Him for His grace
In prayer I would repeat

Some thank Him for the flowers that grow
Some for the stars that shine
My heart is filled with joy and praise
Because I know He’s mine

I trust in Him from day to day
I prove His saving grace
I’ll sing this song of praise to Him
Until I see His face

Thank you, Lord, for saving my soul
Thank you, Lord, for making me whole
Thank you, Lord, for giving to me
Thy great salvation so rich and free

Indeed, “Help comes to the rescue” … Ps. 121:2 My help cometh from the Lord.