CHRISTIAN ENTERS IN AT THE GATE (Part I)

Christian has returned to the way leading to the wicket gate … Notice how John Bunyan phrases his development to that stage of his journey, “so in process of time, Christian got up to the gate”. It indicates in the intervening period he had to deal with certain issues that came as a consequence of travelling along those laneways that led off the road from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

On his arrival at the wicket gate he noticed the sign, Knock, and it shall be opened unto you (Mt. 7:7). It required him to knock to gain admittance. He knocked on the gate a number of times, and called out, “May I now enter here? Will he within Open to sorry me, though I have been An undeserving rebel? Then shall I Not fail to sing his lasting praise on high.” In the will of God, he had succeeded in coming thus far and he knocked persistently until the gate was opened.

In an earlier prison writing (written in 1676, two years before he wrote Pilgrim’s Progress, Feb. 1678), The Strait Gate, he gave it a subtitle, “Or, great difficulty of going to heaven: plainly proving, by the Scriptures, that not only the rude and profane, but many great professors [confessing believers], will come short of that kingdom.” There, in that publication, Bunyan explains the word ‘strive’ is expressed by several other terms …

“(1) It is expressed by that word, ‘so run that ye may obtain’ (I Cor. 9:24-25).
(2) It is expressed by that word, ‘Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life’ (I Tim. 6:12).
(3) It is expressed by that word, ‘Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life’ (John 6:27).
(4) It is expressed by that word, ‘We wrestle … with principalities and powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this world’ (Eph. 6:12).”

Therefore, when he saith, Strive, it is as much as to say, Run for heaven, Fight for heaven, Labour for heaven, Wrestle for heaven, or you are like to go without it.”

With trembling passion, and fears he would not be allowed in through the gate, he called for someone to answer his knocking. Yes, he was seeking entrance, and such is the work of God within his heart that he could not and he would not give up until someone answered. … You can feel the emotion in his words, “At last there came a grave person to the gate …” The person who meets him, described as ‘grave’, indicates a man who stands for no-nonsense. This man called Goodwill was involved in the serious business of greeting sinners seeking relief from their burdens. Therefore, he was earnest, grave, for such was the seriousness of his business. He knew if someone came up to him at the gate and they were laughing and joking, there would be little depth, if any, to their repentance. His was a sombre task to assess the seriousness of their enquiry.
Many people who have claimed to come to Christ have not come by the way of repentance and sorrow for their sin. … But there can be no true salvation without true repentance, Ps. 39:12 Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee. … Christian, indeed, recognised his condition, “… a poor burdened sinner. I come from the City of Destruction, but am going to Mount Zion, that I may be delivered from the wrath to come. I would, therefore, Sir, since I am informed that by this gate is the way thither, know if you are willing to let me in!” … And yes, he had come to the right place for the Keeper of the Gate is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (II Pet. 3:9).

Before our society became all sophisticated we used to use these terms more frequently in our pulpits … “a poor burdened sinner”. It describes the person outside of God’s grace. … Notice though, Goodwill’s examination of Christian. Goodwill wanted to make sure Christian, - for his own sake, and for the sake of the Kingdom that lay beyond the gate, - was serious about his pursuit after God. … And you can see how willingly Goodwill welcomed Christian. He opened the gate, - note, Christian couldn’t open it, - and then, as Christian took a step or two towards it, Goodwill grasped hold of him and pulled him in!

At that point, poor Christian asked, “What means that?” … What did you do that for?!! To understand what was happening we need to refer to the second part of Pilgrim’s Progress in which Christian’s family have come onto the road to the Celestial City. Christiana and her four sons along with Mercy are instructed by Great-heart at the house of the Interpreter. There they are told, “The pardon that you and Mercy and these boys have attained, was obtained by another, to wit, by him that let you in at the Gate: And he hath obtained it in this double way. He has performed Righteousness to cover you, and spilt blood to wash you in.” In other words, the One Who admitted him through the wicket gate was no less than the Lord Jesus.

Why is His appearance described as “grave” though? In St. George’s Free Church, Edinburgh, Alexander Whyte (born in Kirriemuir, 1836) preached a series of sermons on Bunyan’s characters. He explained, “The gravity of the gatekeeper was the first thing that struck the pilgrim. And it was the same thing that so struck some of the men who saw most of our Lord that they handed down to their children the true tradition that He was often seen in tears, but that no one had ever seen or heard Him laugh. … To be a man without sin, a man hating sin, and hating nothing else but sin, and yet to have to spend all His days in a world lying in sin, and in the end to have all that world of sin laid upon Him till He was Himself made sin, - how sad a task was that! …Great, no doubt, as was
the joy that was set before our Lord, and sure as He was of one day entering on
that joy, yet the daily sight of so much sin in all men around Him, and the cross
and the shame that lay right before Him, made Him, in spite of the future joy, all
the Man of Sorrow Isaiah had said He would be, and made light-mindedness
and laughter impossible to our Lord, - as it is, indeed, to all men among
themselves who have anything of His mind about this present world and the sin
of this world, they also are men of sorrow, and of His sorrow”.

As Christian confessed his burden of sin, - yes, his understanding of his true
condition was limited, - but he knew enough to know he was a Hell-deserving
sinner whose heart’s true desire was to leave the old ways behind him and begin
on his journey to Mount Zion. ... And he profoundly sought deliverance from
the impending wrath. He would not allow his former citizenship of the City of
Deception to hinder him in his journey ... nor even the love he had for his
family. You know, it is one of the greatest obstacles the devil places in front of
many who are being convicted of their sin, “What would your family say?” “If
you became a Christian, you would be setting out on a different path without
them, - you would be on your own!”

Nevertheless, it was a journey Christian was compelled to take for such was his
craving to enter the way of eternal life. As he was drawn by Goodwill through
the gate, it symbolises the eagerness of the welcome Christ gives ... like the
prodigal son returning to his father (Lk. 15:20). He will turn none away who
seek Him with all their heart, soul and mind.

Another reason the gatekeeper pulls him in through the gate is because of the
danger of the enemy, - even up to the last moment! Christian had already fallen
foul of the enemy ... in the Slough of Despond, and through the pleasant
conversation with Mr. Worldly Wiseman ... but he also mustn’t linger outside
the gate because it can be the most hazardous place of all. It is where the desire
of many who wanted to be saved came under the greatest attack, and sadly
many fell ... almost within touching-distance of the gate “‘Almost persuaded’
now to believe; ‘Almost persuaded’ Christ to receive ... ‘Almost’ cannot avail;
‘Almost’ is but to fail! Sad, sad, that bitter wail – ‘Almost’, but lost!”

In grace, though, Christ pulled Christian through the gate, and explained, “A
little distance from this gate, there is erected a strong castle, of which Beelzebub
is the captain; from thence, both he and them that are with him shoot arrows at
those that come up to this gate, if haply they may die before they can enter in.”
Christ rescues the repentant sinner! ...
Spurgeon suggests some information describing the nature of the arrows:
1. The suggestion of the vileness of our sins; that they are too many, too frequent, and too hideous to be forgiven.
2. The suggestion that it is too late to be saved; the day of grace is past since many gospel invitations have been refused.
3. The suggestion that the Holy Spirit has been too resolutely resisted following earlier religious involvement.
4. The suggestion that a pilgrim is not one of God’s elect; therefore his entrance is impossible.
5. The suggestion that the unpardonable sin has been committed, and that a pilgrim has now been abandoned by God.
6. The suggestion that to trust in Jesus Christ is presumptuous; he is too great and pilgrims are too insignificant.

Now … is this where Christian was converted … when he entered through the gate? … Or, was it when his burden rolled away as he would later approach the cross (p.51-53)? The simple answer lies in the fact the conversion of Christian is a personal testimony of John Bunyan himself. When we began our studies we looked at his background. He was a mess of a young man! After military service he described himself as the “ungodliest fellow for swearing they ever heard”. He boasted, “It was my delight to be taken captive by the devil at his will: being filled with all unrighteousness; that from a child I had but few equals, both for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God”.

In this condition, - described in Pilgrim’s Progress as the City of Destruction, - John Bunyan lived with his wife and four children. His father-in-law died and left two Puritan books that had a strong influence on him over the next four years. During this time a battle was ensuing within his soul. It was coming to the conclusion of this four-year spiritual journey that John Bunyan entered through the ‘wicket gate’ and was welcomed by the Lord. This, then, is a personal testimony of Bunyan’s experience commemorating the day he entered through that gate, Who is the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 10:7,9).

What about the burden he continued to carry though? … Is it not the experience of many of us that even after we were saved there were issues we continued to contend with? … Despite the new-found joy of coming to Christ, there were areas the Lord’s work of sanctification was still working on. Christian had so much to learn. He didn’t have an extensive knowledge of the doctrine of Christ or a deep understanding of the atonement. He didn’t yet understand all these deep truths, but he did understand the invitation to enter through the gate.
He confessed his burden of sin, and responded to the invitation to enter through the gate… Mt. 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest… Is. 1:18 Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool… Jn. 7:37 If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink… 6:37 that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. … Yes, he understood enough! … At that point he declared, “I rejoice and tremble”. What did he mean? It may sound odd to rejoice and tremble at the same time … over our salvation, and yet when we consider the depth of our redemption’s plan we understand what he meant.

Yes, on one hand, I’m saved. I have no fear of being cast into eternal Hell for Christ has saved me. When I leave this scene of time, - whether Christ comes for me, or calls for me and I must pass through the valley of death, - He shall take me onto Himself and I shall never be parted from His presence. Yes, I rejoice in my salvation … but I also tremble when I consider what He saved me from. I could have taken any of a number of different paths that were opening up to me, and I guarantee I would not have been with the Lord where I am with Him today … I guarantee you that! If I was to think too long, - like Christian, - I also would be trembling.

But I also tremble when I consider how Christ died on the cross in my place. Me, - totally undeserving, - … “He took my sins and my sorrows, He made them His very own; He bore the burden to Calvary, And suffered and died alone.” … Of course, I tremble … because but for the grace of God I never would have believed. Even yet, the more you survey the Gospel the more you can understand the words of the hymnist, “I wonder how He could love me, A sinner condemned, unclean”.

We haven’t got very far in this section, so we’ll have to come back to it again … But surely, these issues must not be rushed. They are fundamental to our faith in the Lord Jesus, and we ought to spend time looking at them afresh. We mustn’t become familiar with our salvation to the extent we take it for granted for that is when the devil can ‘slip in’, dilute our experience and we become complacent and ungrateful. We belong to the people of the Lord and we are a blessed and privileged people, as the hymn writer has written, “To Christ, who won for sinners grace By bitter grief and anguish sore, Be praise from all the ransomed race Forever and forevermore.” … The same hymn begins, “When I survey the wondrous cross On which the Prince of glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.” … May we then continue to seek after the blessing of the Lord in the great plan of salvation He has worked for us! Amen.