

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

cluster of beautiful dolls. One charming little doll she took in her hands, kissed it, and put it back in its place. Then she took it up again, looked towards right and left, nobody was watching, and she slipped it into her muff and came sliding up to her mother's side blushing like a peony. The stall-keeper did not notice the theft. But Nellie's conscience was troubled. She was ill at ease, and could not rest until she slipped back to the counter and put the dear little doll once more in its place. Even then the child felt uncomfortable and miserable, and when evening came and she kneeled to say her prayers, she quite broke down and sobbed, 'Oh, mother dear, I have been so naughty! To-day, in the Arcade,

I cracked one of the commandments. I did not quite break it; but I'm sure I cracked it.'—A. A. RAMSEY, *Things that are Lovely*, p. 112.

FOR REFERENCE.

Cox (S.), *The Bird's Nest*, 1.
 Gibbon (J. M.), *The Children's Year*, 87.
 Horton (R. F.), *The Hidden God*, 65.
 Parker (J.), *The People's Bible*, vol. iv. 312.
 Ramsey (A. A.), *Things that are Lovely*, 110.
 Shephard (J. E.), *The Children's Portion*, 48.

The Pilgrim's Progress.

BY THE REV. JOHN KELMAN, M.A., D.D., EDINBURGH.

The Delectable Mountains.

The Door into Hell.

THE Delectable Mountains certainly up to this point can hardly be said to justify their name. The succession of ghastly sights and suggestions is unbroken, until it culminates in this abominable door, which is but a flue for the infernal fire and smoke. This surely is bad art, to shatter the expectations raised by so finely named a mountain-range in this merciless fashion. Bunyan might have answered that very probably it *was* bad art, but he had found a good deal in real life that as art was equally bad. In that 'age of great revolutions' men were ever conscious of extreme contrasts; and even the fairest tracts of the world were honeycombed and tunnelled with passages to hell.

To John Bunyan hell was a frightful and crude reality. Its brimstone was ever in his nostrils. His imagination had been fed on such stories as that of the Salisbury blasphemer at the tavern of which he tells us, that 'hearing a hideous noise and smelling a stinking savour, the vintner ran into the chamber, and coming in he missed his guest, and found the window broken, the iron bars in it bowed, and all bloody, but the man was never heard of afterwards'—a tale which may have been in George Macdonald's mind when he wrote the legend of the devil-bridegroom in *Malcolm*. Such tales have ceased to impress the public mind. But Bunyan's work, like Dante's, remains impressive in spite of light-hearted dismissals. There is a note of reality in Bunyan's references to the

subject, that bears the authentic mark of experience. He, like Dante, was 'the man who had been in hell.'

This door, situated in the mountains of lofty spiritual experience, does not, however, mean that Bunyan believed that a man might fall from grace, as Spira had almost convinced him. Those for whom this door stands open are the hypocrites who from the first had been but pretended pilgrims. Look into that door, bend over, and down, far down, you may see them, as Dante saw them, pacing their dismal round under their leaden hoods. Hopeful, trembling for his own sincerity, asks some questions which ring with the personal note of self-distrust. His habitual unobtrusiveness is staggered into utterance at so very terrible a fact in life as this. Then the pilgrims join in the somewhat conventional exclamation, 'We have need to cry to the Strong for strength!' There is something not quite satisfactory about the exclamation. It is too much the sort of thing one is expected to say in the circumstances. It is curious how many people lapse at once into such commonplace and trite generality when confronted with mordant and apparently personal truth—'It's a mercy we're all spared,' 'Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.' And just as Christ turned aside the latter platitude, and struck home to the conscience of the speaker, so the shepherds do here. Such conventionalities are really uttered as last refuges from personal conviction. The shepherds do not set much store by pious exclaima-

tions, but insist upon the realities of the situation. The pilgrims might have wandered far from the way while they were all the time crying to the Strong for strength. Strength they had already—enough strength to need and to demand action. The immediate need is to use the strength they have—to use it in thoroughness of moral exercise, in self-control and enforced perseverance, in laying hold on God's promises and acting on His commandments. That is the Christian common sense of the case, and it remains true for ever. We all have strength enough if we would only use it.

Mount Clear.

At last we come to the only adventure on these mountains which seems congruous with their name. Is it that Bunyan had discovered that great secret so finely expressed long afterwards by Walter Pater, 'the hiddenness of perfect things'? At any rate, such a vision as this often hides itself among fears and threatenings and the sense of danger; and its light shines the brighter for the thick darkness which it dispels.

Mount Clear stands for a season of lofty spiritual insight—clearness and exaltation being both involved. The optic glass recalls many passages in literature, from Milton to Browning's 'Death in the Desert,' when the wonder of the telescope has caught the poet's imagination for spiritual uses. In his *Hall of Fantasy* Hawthorne has introduced this very glass—'Nor must I fail to mention that in the observatory of the edifice is kept that wonderful prospective glass through which the shepherds of the Delectable Mountains showed Christian the far-off gleam of the Celestial City. The eye of Faith still loves to gaze through it.' The glass may stand either for the power of spiritual imagination, or for the word of revelation as given especially in the Gospels and the Apocalypse. Some are adepts at its use, but many others, from various causes, find their hand shake too much for a steady image. This detail reminds us of Enoch Arden:

She when the day, that Enoch mentioned, came,
Borrowed a glass, but all in vain: perhaps
She could not fix the glass to suit her eye;
Perhaps her eye was dim, hand tremulous;
She saw him not: and while he stood on deck
Waving, the moment and the vessel passed.

Bunyan has expressed a great truth in the saying that the recent sight of hell kept them from the

perfect use of the optic glass. There were times when he tells us he was 'so far from the mouth of hell, that I could not, when I looked back, scarce discern it.' Fra Angelico was a master in the use of this optic glass, but then it was said of him that he could not paint a devil. But these pilgrims, fresh from hell-gate, their imagination still distracted and filled with its horrors, could not for the time steadily gaze on and realize the spiritual vision.

There is, as a rule, a fine reticence in John Bunyan's descriptions of heaven. He knew the shaking of the hand, and the danger of unbridled imagination. As an artist, even, he knew it. Such imaginations as the *Gates Ajar*, or even the *Little Pilgrim in the Unseen*, have satisfied few readers, though (such is our wistfulness when we have beloved ones beyond the river) they will always find an audience. Perhaps the most gorgeous attempt to describe the city with its transparent gold and its blessed inhabitants is in the fourteenth-century poem 'Pearl,' recently retranslated and issued in a popular edition. Wordsworth's famous sky-picture, quoted by Cheever, is very great:

Glory beyond all glory ever seen
By waking sense, or by the dreaming soul!
The appearance, instantaneously disclosed,
Was of a mighty city,—boldly say
A wilderness of building, sinking far,
And self-withdrawn into a wondrous depth,
Far sinking into splendour without end!
Fabric it seemed of diamond and of gold,
With alabaster domes and silver spires,
And blazing terrace upon terrace high
Uplifted; here, serene pavilions bright
In avenues disposed; there, towers begirt
With battlements, that on their restless fronts
Bore stars—illumination of all gems.

But the classical passage connected with this, as with the fuller vision of the Celestial City at the close of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, is one that it is difficult to believe John Bunyan had not read. It is from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Book I., Canto x.

Thence forward by that painfull way they pas
Forth to an hill, that was both steepe and hy;
On top whereof a sacred chappell was,
And eke a litle Hermitage thereby,
Wherein an aged holy man did lie,
That day and night said his devotion,
Ne other worldly busines did apply:
His name was heavenly Contemplation;
Of God and goodnes was his meditation.
Great grace that old man to him given had;
For God he often saw from heaven's height:

This, then, is the Pilgrim's first definite glimpse of heaven. As years advance and the Pilgrimage draws nearer to its close, it is fitting that this should come; and such optic glasses as the fourteenth chapter of St. John or the twenty-first of Revelation become the daily helpers of the aged saint.

The Four Shepherds.

These, supplying four chief aspects of the ministerial office, have been described so perfectly in Dr. Whyte's four closing chapters of his first book, that little is left to be said upon them. *Knowledge* is the first—a standing plea for a ministry thoroughly educated, though by no means a justification of all that has been included or excluded in this or that school of divinity. *Experience* comes next, reminding us that Knowledge kept apart from life is worse than useless for the spiritual guide. In Bunyan's days we find Patrick Walker constantly applying to his heroes in the Church such epithets as 'exercised and painful Christians.' The minister must be also in a very full and deep sense, a *man*; and the blend of humanity and education is the ideal. Then comes *Watchful*, and we think of the sentinel in Æschylus' *Agamemnon* leaning on his elbow in year-long watch on the roofs of the Atreidæ—dew-drenched, night-bewildered, with fear at hand instead of sleep. Or, still more, we think of the hunting of man, and the great art of 'stalking a human soul.' Ministers are men that 'watch for souls as they that must give account.' We have already learned this, in another connexion, from the porter at the Palace Beautiful. Yet it is not only to ministers, but to all the people, that the command of watchfulness applies. No man can be watchful by deputy. Christ's words are, 'What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch!' Last is *Sincere*—last but not least, for in this word is summed up the whole of the minister's personal character. Everything will ultimately depend chiefly upon that. Neither fulness of equipment, nor faithfulness to the official duties of his profession, will for any man be accepted as a substitute for personal character. From that alone will a wholesome and beneficent influence go forth. Behind all work, and more potent than it all, stands personality, whose subtle effect will be felt further, more deeply, and longer than any conscious effort of his ministry.

Taking all these types together, along with such former ones as Evangelist, Help, the Picture in the Interpreter's house, etc., we see how much goes to the making of an ideal minister. Evidently ministers must live higher up, and at the same time deeper down, than other men; on the heights of spiritual vision, and yet among the roots of human life.

The Final Stage.

Here a new dream begins, with a new and final section of the story. It is to be a dangerous and uncanny part of the road—for the spiritual perils are by no means over when we have reached an advanced stage in life. Bunyan's England was an ill-lit country by night, and we shall find ourselves among the perils of darkness. His England had not yet abandoned her primitive beliefs in magic spells and enchantments drear, and these, too, we shall now encounter. So, into this dangerous tract, 'the same two pilgrims are going down the mountains along the highway towards the city.' And that in itself is dangerous. It is on the easy descent to the level stretch that most vigilance is needed. We are ever safest while we are climbing.

Ignorance.

We now meet with a character to whom an apparently disproportionate amount of the *Pilgrim's Progress* is devoted. There was a chapter in *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, one of the two books which formed his wife's dowry, which had evidently made a deep impression on Bunyan. The title of the chapter is 'The Sin and Danger of Ignorance.' We shall find so many traces of that chapter here, that we may fairly conjecture, as one of the reasons for this somewhat excessive treatment, the unusual impression which the chapter referred to had made. And, indeed, it is the liveliest chapter in the book, and full of a sparkling wit which must have delighted Bunyan. But the great emphasis laid upon this encounter indicates a deeper fact. The Puritan theology laid great stress on knowledge. It considered itself to be a very complete statement of the entire course of God's dealing with men. For salvation it was necessary to understand clearly and assent heartily to this very full and detailed system. Consequently Ignorance was the most deplorable of all conditions, fundamentally wrong,

and therefore hopelessly dangerous. To-day, very few imagine that they know so much as every one who made any pretence to be a Christian thought he knew for certain in the seventeenth century. All the more carefully should we study this passage. It may be that some of us take our Ignorance too lightly, and that it is not only possible, but is actually our duty, to know for certain a good deal more than we do. Also, as Mason has said, 'We are all ignoramuses by nature,' and if that be so it cannot but be well for us to consider carefully what can be said as to the sin and danger of Ignorance.

Nothing could be happier than the phrase which introduces Ignorance, 'a very brisk lad.' Bunyan speaks of himself as having been in his youth 'a brisk talker' on the things of religion, and some of his harshness with this other brisk lad may be really self-condemnation. This is a rustic who apparently dwells in no town, but just in the country that lay a little below the mountains on the left hand. So ignorant is he, that he does not seem even to know the name of the country he was born in. He had always taken it for granted; it was to him 'mine own, my native land'; and he had never troubled about its name. It is a curious fact about the country of Conceit that almost none born in it ever knows the name of his fatherland. And the name by far the commonest among its inhabitants is that of Ignorance. That is the class-name of the folk that dwell there. They are all ignorant, for conceit and ignorance go as inevitably together as humility and knowledge.

His entrance upon pilgrimage had not been by the wicket gate—the invariable test of genuineness with Bunyan,—but down one of those many lanes of which we read in this part of the journey. Our present interview with Ignorance is short and introductory only. It leaves us with three impressions of him, which we shall at a later period have to reconsider and test by our fuller acquaintance.

1. He is the type of that same kind of satisfied respectability for which the Rich Young Ruler stands in the Gospel story, only without his wistfulness that asks, 'What lack I yet?' He knows his Lord's will, prays, pays his debts, and has kept clear of open and discreditable sins. He has kept the commandments from his youth up. This is the type of shallow and unenlightened conscience which Puritan theology especially

abhorred. By its apparent blamelessness it was a thousand times more dangerous than open vice.

2. His religious experience is as shallow as his conscience. He has entered the path without knowing anything about the wicket-gate, except that it is a very long way off from his own country. A change indeed he had made, but not *that* change. John Bunyan knows no other kind of conversion but one, and at this point inserts a sidenote, 'He saith to every one that he is a fool.' Similarly, his hope for ultimate salvation is founded on one of the great popular delusions of shallow respectability. He hopes to get in at the Celestial Gate 'as other good people do.' That is the very stamp and hall-mark of spiritual ignorance:

I would live the same life over if I had to live again,
And the chances are I'll go where most men go,

as Adam Lindsay Gordon has it in his *Sick Stockrider*. But the most elementary lesson in all spiritual experience is the loneliness of the soul, and the solitariness of God's dealing with it. The shelter of the crowd is the most common hallucination of the unthinking. For all such, Matthew Arnold's essay on 'Numbers' in his *Discourses in America* would prove salutary reading.

3. Yet there is, in spite of all that, a wonderful attractiveness about this brisk lad. His final answer to Christian, if it is not convincing, is at least in admirable temper and in perfect taste. It is almost cruelly so. For Bunyan might have been expected to caricature one whom he was to treat so unmercifully in the next paragraph. Instead of that, he has done ample justice to the man's natural gifts and attractiveness, only the more pointedly to trample on him in the following sentences. He, like Robert Louis Stevenson, 'cannot bear idiots,' and Ignorance is a fool. The temper of the parting paragraph is by no means pleasant, and Hopeful's doggerel is certainly as disagreeable in spirit as it is barbarous from the point of view of poetry. Surely the pilgrims have forgotten St. Paul's injunction to bear fools gladly—a peculiarly difficult counsel, it must be confessed. But they seem also to have forgotten the gentleness of him who looking upon the brisk lad that ran after him, loved him; and who is 'able to have compassion on the ignorant and on them that are out of the way.'

It would seem, from this excessive harshness,

that there must (as we have already hinted) have been a stroke of conscience upon Bunyan as he wrote. He was one who could never easily forgive himself, and this Ignorance answers closely to Bunyan's own early character as described by himself. Also, as we shall see, the writer was possessed with the conviction that 'To be ignorant is to be dangerous.' 'There is nothing so dangerous,' says one writer, 'as ignorance in motion.' Bunyan's compassion for mankind kept in check his compassion for individuals who threatened to destroy them. In a shooting party, the man ignorant of how to carry his gun is a source of danger to his fellow-sportsmen, to the keepers, to the dogs, to every living thing about him except the birds. In a great revolution, when the populace has suddenly mastered the means of war, it is the Ignorance of the new masters that is the source of the most frightful danger to the country. But this man also wields weapons—his tongue, his personality, his pleasant and polite manners, his presence in the highway. And in each of these John Bunyan sees a menace to society.

Turnaway.

The ghastly incident which follows is a mere flash, but is evidently meant to be sardonic—John Bunyan at his bitterest. There is a short passage in the *Plain Man's Pathway* (the book which certainly was in the author's mind when he wrote of Ignorance) entitled 'Contempt of the Gospel.' Quite possibly this may have suggested Turnaway at this point. But how vastly more impressive is this one flame-picture than all treatises that could be written on the subject. We have grown accustomed to devils in this pilgrimage, nor will John Bunyan leave any reader of any work of his unfamiliar with them. But in this scene there are two new and peculiar features which greatly heighten its impressiveness.

The first of these is the inscription on the paper fastened on his back, 'Wanton professor and damnable apostate.' The judicial character of this inscription brings its grim reminder of the executions of old days, of which the writing on the Cross of Jesus is the most famous example.

The whole machinery of law, the hopeless sense of justice in doom, give their chill finality and completeness to the fate of the poor wretch Turnaway. The second feature—and it is the most powerful touch of all, both from a dramatic and from an ethical point of view—is that the victim, as he is carried along, hangs his head down as if ashamed. He cannot face the eyes of any spectator, now that all is over with him; and yet what a stretch of vain pilgrimage he saw with that bent head of his on his last ghastly journey!

What sin is this, whose punishment forms the climax to the angry mood in which Bunyan writes of Ignorance? It is the sin we have already so often found to be Bunyan's pet aversion—turning back. Pliable, Mistrust, Timorous, Demas, and others have come in for their share in Bunyan's scorn for this. Behind them all stood the figure of Francis Spira, the apostate whose dying agonies had so appalled him. From *Greatheart* we afterwards learn that Turnaway had got no further than the Cross, when he gnashed his teeth, stamped, and said he would go back to his own town. Thus in his heart he was a traitor to the laws of pilgrimage. The Cross of Christ, here as elsewhere, tears off the mask, and shows the real hatred to religion underneath the pretence of loyalty. This is the crucial point with Bunyan. His Christian many a time may wander, but never once does he turn back on his old religious experiences. And like him was the writer who tells his story—'One who never turned his back, but marched right forward.'

So we take leave of the Delectable Mountains. They afforded us a momentary glimpse of heaven, but it was an incident wedged in between two visions of hell. It is easy to dismiss this circumstance, as a mode of thought characteristic of Puritan days. Yet it will bear its message to the end of time, to all those whose imagination dwells too lightly on the dream of heaven—too lightly, because without sufficient realization of the moral tragedy that life ever is, and the tremendous dangers that beset the path of every pilgrim heavenwards.