

## John Bunyan's Doubting Castle

### A Message for Today's Christian

John Bunyan (1628-88), son of a tinsmith, a man with limited education, but endowed with a powerful mind and a vivid imagination, was active as a lay preacher in the Parliamentary Army during the Civil War. With the persecution of the Puritans which followed the restoration king led by Charles II (1660-85), Bunyan, who had Baptist sympathies, was arrested in 1660 for preaching without a license. Declining to be freed on the condition that he no longer preach, his famous reply was: "If I am freed today I will preach tomorrow"

Bunyan had no formal theological training. He accepted the Bible as inerrant, studied it and discovered on his own the classical Reformation teachings concerning man's fallen nature, grace, justification by faith and the atonement.

Bunyan was a Christian "realist." He always depicted a Christian as a man of "like fears" as himself. He had tasted the goodness of the Lord, but also knew the painful experience of doubt and spiritual struggle. The giants he fought were not only the oppressors of the establishment; he also battled powerful spiritual enemies--the world, the flesh and the devil. His spirituality was rugged and down to earth. Though the 17th century may be far removed from our experience, Bunyan's life and writings still have a powerful message for our age with its easy-going view of great religious and moral issues, its superficial attitude to life, its hedonism and indifference to absolute truth.

Bunyan derived a great comfort from Scripture, appropriating for himself its truth for comfort, inspiration and guidance. During most of the twelve years in jail he wrote books. His spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, appeared in 1666, and the first part of his major work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the greatest work of its kind in English, was published in 1678. Except for the Bible itself, no book was held with such high esteem among the lower and middle classes of England during the 18th century as *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is good reading, stirring the soul, stimulating the mind, warming the heart. Literary circles ignored Bunyan until the Romantic movement in the 19th century. Today secularists duly appreciate his genius and sublime thought; but few understand or appreciate his profound Christian insights. *Pilgrim's Progress* has been translated into many languages and is often quoted even when the source of the quotation is unknown.

*Pilgrim's Progress* is full of people John Bunyan knew. Yet they are timeless, as human nature does not change. The central character is Christian; the pilgrim who leaves his home, family and city, which is threatened by destruction. Unlike the claims made by today's health and wealth gospel advocates, his pilgrimage is wrought with trials, which symbolize real life experiences. The pilgrim, convicted of sin, searches for salvation and is in mortal fear of being cast out eternally from God's presence.

Christian, soon after the way to travel has been pointed out to him, falls into the Slough of Despond. It signifies the period of depression in which a convert is liable to fall after the first enthusiasm of his conversion. At the foot of a hill, he passes an open tomb. Then upon a little knoll, he finds himself beneath a wayside cross. Suddenly his burden

of sin slips from his shoulders and falls off his back. It tumbles into the mouth of the tomb, never to be seen again. Pilgrim gives three leaps for joy, and goes on his way singing. But great dangers are still ahead. He passes through phases of spiritual despair and terror; he has to face the mockery and anger of public opinion in the town of Vanity Fair. Christian does not travel alone. One of his fellow pilgrims is Hopeful. These two men have different temperaments and correspondingly different reactions to their experiences. As they make their way to the heavenly city they come to Doubting-Castle, which belongs to the gloomy figure of Giant Despair. In this castle their journey almost ends. The Giant, encouraged by his wife, is out to destroy the pilgrims. He beats them unmercifully. He provides them with a noose, a knife and a bottle of poison. And he counsels them, "Your only way out of this place is by death. So why are you waiting? Make an end of yourselves! Why should you choose life, seeing it was attended by so much bitterness?" In their despair the pilgrims turn to the Lord. Suddenly Christian remembers in his pocket an old key called Promise. The key fits and unlocks the castle gates. Doubt can be overcome through prayer and Scripture. And as Christian and Hopeful leave behind the horrifying Doubting Castle, they decide to erect a pillar as a warning for other pilgrims. "Over this stile is the way to Doubting Castle, which is kept by Giant Despair, who despiseth the King of the Celestial Country, and seeks to destroy the holy pilgrims." This warning sign is still needed today!

Johan D. Tangelder  
October, 1995