

Faith Saves  
 Second Sunday of Christmastide —2 January 2022  
 Texts: Galatians 3:4-9

As a reminder for those who attended last week, and as notice for those who were celebrating Christmas elsewhere, we spoke about the end of fear occurring with the forgiveness of sin as enacted by Jesus on the cross. It was sin that introduced fear (Gen. 3:10) and it was the forgiveness of sin on the cross that cancels the cause for irreverent fear. What I mean by *irreverent fear* is “spiritual” dread of God, fear of judgment *as well as* the fear of death (through famine, pestilence like COVID and natural catastrophes), fear of personal exposure and shame, of lost “standing,” or status and even gainful employment—all those fears which Satan uses to cripple, disable and to subjugate God’s children. Satan aims to tyrannize all who succumb to cowering, abject fears. Irreverent fear causes us to distrust God, and that distrust is fed by misconceptions and misrepresentations about God—when I have heard the picture of God held by many atheists, my response is frequently: I wouldn’t believe in a God like that either! Irreverent fear distorts God’s true image.

Now we know that Satan’s rule is a rule of lies, of counterfeit and intimidation. When we are controlled by fear, and beset with distresses, we experience ourselves as subjects of his domain. It is a bondage we need to be freed from! It is the chain-busting, bondage breaking power of Jesus Christ, *received by faith* and imputed to us, along with righteousness and His divine nature, that liberates the believer and sets us as captives free. But if you are ignorant of the doctrine of Christ, and particularly of His atonement, you would neither know what you are saved from, or what you are saved for!

Real Christianity is established on the precious truths, or doctrines of our faith, as received, as part of the church’s traditional teaching. On December 30, 2021 I delivered Lecture 54 of my presentation of Martin Lloyd-Jones Great Doctrines of the Bible. (Three books in one, published by Crossway, 2003) The entire series has been recorded and can be accessed. I intend to complete the series in 2022. This has been a most humbling and edifying discipline for me—if I thought that I had a good grip on Christian doctrine before, all I can say is “Man, was I ever mistaken.” I am eager for others to follow my lead—at your own pace, when you choose to in the privacy of your own homes—without a firm foundation in Christian doctrine, our defense of our faith and our promotion of our faith both languish due to a careless and unnecessary ignorance. We sound ignorant because, frankly, we may well be. Anyway, while I am sure that I do not know everything Christian, or biblical, I can plainly assert I am less ignorant of my faith and doctrine. I invite you to step it up . . . for the glory.

There are, in this life, many lesser bondages than those named above—addiction, unforgiveness, institutionalized slavery, poverty for example—yes, and many plain and obvious oppressions, tyrannies, that beset us . . . that mar our liberty, and disfigure our identities as children of God (for the faithful) or as human beings (for everyone else). But Christ delivers us from them all.

But, where unbelief prevails, the adherents of it and truly in a vast prison. John Bunyan depicted that prison as the Dungeon of the Giant Despair in Doubting Castle in his epic Pilgrim’s

Progress (1677). Bunyan's book is a vivid cyclorama of Christian Doctrine, in this allegory written as a travel narrative, biblical doctrine is always popping up, informing the plot and instructing the attentive reader. I want to turn our attention to the teaching on Doubt and Despair. If you have not read Pilgrim's Progress, I highly recommend that you do so; it is indispensable reading for Protestant Christians especially. (And, yes, there is a commendable, contemporary video version for those who want to whet their appetite with a quick take. The original text, with Scriptural citations in the margin, is a treasure trove of biblical doctrine.

Perhaps some of you can recall the gruesome giant and his horrid wife? Christian and Hopeful are imprisoned in their castle, in the captivity of which I speak(!), where the captors, unable to kill their captives, strongly encourage them to give up hope and kill themselves so that they can cannibalize them. Hopeful reminds Christian that suicide is sin and this also restrains them.

It is the key of Promise—together with the Giant's weakness in sunlight!—that liberates them. The Promise is to Abraham, and to every believer, including ourselves! So relevant! Christian applies the key, an act of faith, and secures their escape. So much for the "easier path" through By-Pass Meadow, which ran straight away from the Holy Way (doctrine) and the River of Life (doctrine) and its fruit trees which ran beside to strengthen and revive the pilgrims (doctrine)! Again, doctrine and more doctrine!! There is, we learn, no shortcut to holiness, friends. And we learn that sanctification (another doctrine!) is a life-long process.

- Christian's "Progress" is in righteousness
- Christian's "Progress" is in glorification
- Christian's "Progress" comes about because he is Heaven-bent.

Once back over the stile by which they entered By-Pass Meadow, neither unscathed, both sore and chastened, they erect a memorial stone, a pillar, inscribed with these words: "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 his holy Pilgrims." Life is full of sins and repentances, trespasses and recoveries, debts and payments; risks, perils and dangers.

We could attribute their spiritual "misadventure" to poor judgment, or chalk it up to "carnal self-indulgence" including spiritual laziness—various sinful motivations which almost leads them to death and destruction several times along the King's Way—where they deviate, mister and are enticed to sin. One commentator on this episode in Bunyan's classic writes, "The imprisonment in Doubting Castle symbolizes a period of extreme spiritual distress on the part of the two Pilgrims. They end up locked up by their own fears and doubts. This is the human condition, spiritually assessed.

- Can they keep the Faith *as it should be kept*?
- Are they among those *predestined* for salvation?

Giant Despair represents "the despair in their own hearts," That despair may be over suffering, pain and distresses. The giant's hold is broken as soon as Christian remembers that he is carrying a key of Promise that will, he is persuaded, "open any lock in Doubting Castle," as

proves to be the case. Again, the key is "called Promise," a belief in the assurance that a true Christian will be forgiven his trespasses and errors, *if minor*, and not be rejected at the Celestial Gate." This explanation is helpful, only up to a point. Where it deviates from the truth, we must have issues. And chief among those deviations is the suggestion provoked by the qualifications of 1. "a true Christian will be forgiven his trespasses and errors, *and* 2. if minor."

To the discerning mind, questions as to whether we are "a true Christian," and as to which trespasses are "minor" enough to be forgiven, appear to be as the hinges to the door of Doubting Castle!! The upper hinge ("minor sins"), note this, when Christ forgave all our sin, He abolished the distinction between major and minor by the very *magnitude* of his sacrifice: all means all/forgiven is forgiven to the uttermost. The key point here is this: our assessment of major, versus *minor trespasses* is irrelevant *and that is what makes the promise of the Promise promising*. Thank goodness.

The lower hinge, the "true Christian" assessment of the individual Christian, is weightier as a consideration. We are exhorted in Scripture to **work out our own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure**. (Phil. 2:12) And there is a parallel passage in 2 Cor. 13:5-6: **Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize *this about yourselves*, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you [a]fail the test? 6 But I expect that you will realize that we ourselves [b]do not fail the test**. These verses endorse self-examination but are not intended to induce self-doubt. I know this because in each passage the focus, critically enough is on God. **It is God who is at work in you and Jesus Christ is in you . . .** these realities establish what a Christian is! A true Christian is a person who is inhabited by God, by Christ, and it is the truth of God, the truth of Christ which defines me.

It is fair to consider how godly I am, how Christlike I am, but the object(s) of our faith are God's truth, Christ's truth—these are not up for consideration!

We work out what has been implanted in us. So there is no such thing as a carnal Christian; if you are carnal, you are not Christian. There is no such thing as half-converted, when Christ enters, it is the whole and entire Christ . . . not an installment, not an incremental deposit! The whole Christ indwells the Christian and brings to completion the work of sanctification until our holiness replicates His holiness. God does not save by half measures. This is our faith in essence: this hope, this promise, this truth. **Christ in us the hope of glory!**

Transitioning to Galatians 3:4-9:

**4 Did you [a]suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? 5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works [b]miracles among you, do it by works of [c]the Law, or by hearing [d]with faith? 6 Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. 7 Therefore, recognize that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God [e]would justify the [f]Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations will be**

**blessed in you.” 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed with [g]Abraham, the believer.**

Here’s what unites us essentially with Abraham—he was a believer just as we are believers. The promise of God was as much a key to him as it was to Christian and Hopeful! And to us! “Faith Saves.” Abraham **believed God** and it was **reckoned to him as righteousness**. *The very same holds true for us.*

Now, again, just as we resorted to Gen. 3:10 to establish that the introduction of sin brought fear, Paul is resorting to Gen. 12, 15 and 17 to show that Abraham was saved by grace through faith well before the transmission of the law unto Moses—by-passing the dietary laws, the ceremonial law and even the Levitical code. Abraham’s obedience was not through following the letter of the law! He walked with God by faith. He was obedient and he taught the way of the Lord to those of his household *just as God anticipated that he would*. That is the argument of Gal. 3:5-6. All the Scriptural validations aside, and there are many, they are all vacated by this precedence of faith over law.

Those who believe in the gospel, all those who believe that Abraham was saved by faith through grace, all of them will be persecuted for the truth they uphold! The Galatians had already suffered many things for being professing Christians and for resisting Jewish identity, the latter being the religious path of legalism. Life for them was a dangerous, a truly risky pilgrimage (with costs and risks, losses and gains).

If they were to cave to the demands that in order to be a “true” Christian you had to conform to Jewish ceremonial law, *things would not get better—in fact they would get much, much worse*. Why? Because they would have made the cross of Christ pointless, irrelevant (null and void). Their sins would no longer be forgiven as being under the blood; no, they would earn forgiveness by their meritorious living *as a Jew*. Impossible.

While there are mighty gifts, incredible blessings entailed in becoming a Christian, the chief setting is one of suffering. Christians are called to undergo hardship in their discipleship. There are captives to be set free, enemies to be defeated, the enlightenment of those trapped in satanic lies and deceptions—all those in bondage, suffering in bondage. **Many are the afflictions of the righteous** (the saints?) **but the Lord delivers them out of them all**. (Psalm 34:19) If you are following God’s call for your life, Timothy writes: **You will suffer persecution**. (2 Tim.2:12) The Apostle Peter chimes in: 1 Peter 4:12 **Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though *something* strange were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that at the revelation of His glory you may also rejoice and be overjoyed. 14 If you are insulted [a]for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, and of God, rests upon you**. On their part he is blasphemed, but on your part he is glorified.

**We are witnesses to salvation in Christ and he has saved us and commissioned us to liberate others through our words and witness!**

Many are those who are glory-seekers in this world, but most are seeking their own glory *out of egotism and vanity* (which Bunyan would personify as Vain-glory!)—don't be suckered by them! Tune out their noise and spin. But the example set before us is that of Christ who glorified the Father, and of Paul who glorified the Christ *and towards that end marshaled all his gifts, endowment and talents*. Let us then imitate Bunyan's Christian and Paul both—and live to glorify our King—doing that will win others to Him! I freely admit, that it is not easy being green—but to be Christian is to be different, better than green! Things which are temporal, transient and passing away can be put to service toward the glory of God! Hear the Lord speak on this in Matthew 5:10-12:

**10 “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**11 “Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

And we close with Paul from Romans 8:35-39:

**35 Who will separate us from the love of [a]Christ? *Will* tribulation, or trouble, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 Just as it is written:**

**“For Your sake we are killed all day long;  
We were regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”**

**37 But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

**Amen**