

ESCAPE FROM “DOUBTING CASTLE”

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In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* Christian is captured by the giant of Despair. He is thrown into the dungeon of Doubting Castle where Despair lived. There Christian is beaten daily. Many Christians are living in Doubting Castle where they have lost their joy and their song. But no one has to stay there. You can escape Doubting Castle the same way Christian did. One day he looked in his pocket and said, "What a fool I have been. All along I have had in my pocket a key which unlocks every door to Doubting Castle." It was the key of "The Word." With the key of "The Word" Christian unlocked the doors of the dungeon of Doubting Castle and escaped, never to return. You can escape Doubting Castle.

There is a mystery all of us go through that we need to unravel: why is it that so often when we've been on cloud nine and we have enjoyed unusual happiness that we suddenly find ourselves, like the hero in *Pilgrim's Progress*, suddenly plunged into the castle dungeon of Giant Despair? Things suddenly seem to all go wrong. Why? Well, the Bible unravels the mystery. (1) As a teen, Joseph is riding high in the joy of his earthly father's favor and in the sunshine of His heavenly Father's too, and suddenly is sold into Egyptian slavery (Gen. 37). And he had had youthful dreams of a grand career. From the top of the world to the bottom!

(2) Then, after that calamity, when in loyalty to God he refuses to commit adultery in an alluring temptation, as his reward for purity God lets him be thrust into an Egyptian prison (ch. 39). Looks like God is playing games, maybe torturing him. Why did God give him those dreams of fantastic success, then apparently thrust him into the darkest failure when he'd done nothing wrong to deserve it?

(3) Then there was Elijah. After three and a half years of crushing heartache and wrestling with doubts in the long famine, finally he gets to see God's blessing on Mt. Carmel and his prayers are answered. Oh, glory! The great revival and reformation in the nation is off to a good start; the influence of the prophets of Baal is ended; now there is smooth sailing for God to work (1 Kings 18). Then bang! When he is most tired and needs sleep, Elijah is thrust into the very depths of miserable despair, runs for dear life, exhausted, and is so depressed that he actually wishes he could die (ch. 19).

(4) Then there is Jeremiah: as a sincere but youthful prophet he watches the great revival and reformation begun by his Majesty King Josiah; at last God's sun is shining and the kingdom is on the way to glorious spiritual success. Then suddenly the good king gets himself killed in a foolish misadventure, and from then on it's endless heartache and sorrow for Jeremiah, and the ruin of everything.

(5) Then finally there is Jesus: after the heavenly anointing by the Holy Spirit at the Jordan River and the Father Himself embraces Jesus at His baptism,

He suddenly finds Himself “driven” by the same Spirit into a “wilderness” of dark, agonizing temptations (Mk 1:11-13). What’s going on? God is training each of these persons for eventual success. He’s training you, too!

Let’s say a word in behalf of those who sincerely want to follow Jesus yet meet setbacks, discouragements, frustrations, disappointments. It seems their prayers go nowhere. Could it be that perhaps God has not accepted them? They must stand Outside, watching the party going on Inside; if God has accepted them as members of His family, why are they tormented by doubts and fears?

Here is great good news for them: Jesus had precisely the same problem! His was an up and down experience. The “up” was His baptism, the brightest, sunniest day of His life, for He heard this Voice from Heaven – “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). Who wouldn’t be on Cloud Nine forever after if hearing that? But then, says Mark, “immediately” came the “down.” He felt Himself “driven . . . into the wilderness” of heart-rending temptation to doubt. (Elijah had a similar problem; his “up” was the glorious height on Mt Carmel, his “down” came immediately when he fled to his “wilderness,” felt himself a total failure and wanted to die [1 Kings 18, 19]).

An awful temptation almost overthrew Jesus right after that glorious baptism. Was He indeed the Father’s “beloved Son”? “If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.” He was in agony, not only from physical hunger and weakness (when for all of us temptation is most

fierce), but also spiritually. The tempter wrung His soul with plausible Bad News logic and rationale: if You really were the Son of God, how could you be bereft of friends and help here alone in this desert with wild animals all around You, hungry, emaciated, forsaken? You look awful! This is no way for the Son of God to be! You must be that famous Enemy of God; if You really are the Son of God, prove it! Take a bungee jump off the temple pinnacle – settle it forever in Your soul when You see God rescues You! Then You’ll know You are the Son of God! Oh, scared to do it, eh? Okay, then give up; forget this hallucination that You are the Messiah; You never heard a real Voice at Your baptism, You only thought You did. Join the crowd, the world; otherwise You’ll never amount to anything! (Mt. 4:1-11).

Finally, on His cross that barbed and poisoned arrow tip was shot at Him again: “If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Prove it by doing something no crucified criminal has ever been able to do! Easy, if You are the Son of God! How can You otherwise expect us to believe You? That moment was His lowest “down.” But He wasn’t “out.” He chose to believe the Word. Even that Voice at His baptism was nothing more than a direct quotation from the Bible words of the Old Testament (Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1). You hear that same Voice speaking to you in the Bible. Do like Jesus did – make a choice to believe it.

What does it mean to “live under the new covenant,” or the promise of God? All God’s promises were made to the “Seed” (singular), which

is Christ (Gal. 3:16), and the only way we come into the picture is “in Christ.” But thank God, that’s our “way.”

Christ was known as “the son of David” not only through physical ancestry, but because in His incarnation He “lived” in David’s psalms. As the leadership of God’s true church condemned Jesus, so the divinely appointed leadership of His true church in the days of King Saul condemned David. Saul was “the anointed of the Lord,” and David’s agony was not only the physical exertion of constantly fleeing from Saul but wrestling with the greater temptation to doubt that God had truly anointed him to be king of Israel, when “the anointed of the Lord” condemned him. He had to overcome, to believe that God would take care of him.

Thus we have David’s psalms written during his exile (57, 59. for example); repeatedly, the future king begins by wrestling with fear (old covenant-inspired!), and before the end of the psalm he erupts in new covenant joy of believing that the LORD will not forsake but vindicate him.

A millennium later the Son of God, “sent in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” which He had taken upon Himself, wrestles with the same temptation. Again He is “tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15), triumphing again over our old covenant fears, emerging day by day into new covenant sunlight (cf. Isa. 50:4, 5). This goes on continually in His earthly life until the greatest temptation of all to old covenant unbelief as He hangs on His cross in

the darkness crying, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” And there on the cross He wrestles His way through the darkness into the sunlight of new covenant faith, crying out joyously as His heart was already bleeding to death, “You who fear the Lord, praise Him! . . . He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted [Me!], nor has He hidden His face from Him [Me!], . . . He heard”! (Psalm 22:23, 24). Jesus has taught us how to live under the new covenant.

Young people especially wrestle with the constant temptation to doubt and fear for their future, afraid that they are not accepted by God, conscious of their sinfulness and hesitant to believe that God can really bless them.

The Bible says that everyone who will be saved at last is a child of Jacob; frequently the Lord addresses His people as “O house of Jacob” (cf. Isa. 2:5 etc). I don’t know that any of us are better than Jacob, whose name was Supplanter, someone who was so self-centered that he wanted to get ahead even from his birth. If you think you were better than that from your birth, well, you probably don’t know your own heart. The life story of Jacob will be encouraging for you to study. Here was a man who felt God-forsaken that night when he tried to sleep with a stone for his pillow (Gen. 28:20-22). He knew he had sinned; he was keenly conscious of his unworthiness (we are, too!); yet the Lord tried to assure him of a ladder from heaven to earth right where he was, with angels of God ascending and descending on it to help him. Jacob sometimes had trouble remembering that dream, just like

sometimes you have trouble remembering God's goodness to you; Jacob had plenty of disappointments and sorrows, and he had to spend a whole night wrestling with the Lord in prayer. But his name was changed from Jacob to Israel. And so will your name be changed! Please accept some encouragement from the story of your "father" Jacob.

For thousands of years thoughtful people have reached out trying to feel that God is near. One "method" that has often been recommended is to "practice the presence of God." Some think they find it helpful to set out an empty chair and imagine that Jesus is sitting in it; that makes them "feel" that Jesus is near. Others like to finger a Rosary because it helps them, or others keep a crucifix near by. Multitudes think that images help them visualize the presence of Jesus or "holy saints." Stained glass windows in churches and cathedrals are the same – a favorite "aid" to worship.

But nowhere does the Bible encourage the idea of "practicing the presence of God." Rather, it teaches us to remember the presence of God. We cannot create His presence, or make it a reality; but we can realize what is already the reality of His presence. Both the Old and New Testaments are emphatic in their rejection of even the slightest whiff of idolatry. "No man hath seen God at any time," says John; therefore visual representations of Him are useless.

But what is helpful is what follows: "If we love one another [with *agape*], God dwelleth in us, and His love [*agape*] is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in Him, and He in us, because He

hath given us of His Spirit. . . . We have known and believed the love [*agape*] that God hath to us. . . . He that dwelleth in love [*agape*] dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 Jn. 4:12-16). The religion of Jesus is not based on anything we can make, or do, or even imagine; it is based on the revelation of His love in His life, His death, His resurrection, His high priestly ministry, and His promises to return in person. It's truth far more tangible than emotions, "feelings," or "touch." It's truth that faith believes.

Doubting Thomas was reassured when he "saw," but Jesus said He has far greater happiness for us: "Do you believe because you see Me? How happy are those who believe without seeing Me!" (Jn. 20:28, 29). Don't try to "practice" the presence of God, but do practice believing! Then your faith will grow.

According to the inspired interpretation of Isa 53, we can lay our sicknesses as well as our sins upon Him—He bears them both. Somehow I believe the two go together, but I can't explain it. Note how in Ps 103 the two are joined almost in the same breath—"all thine iniquities" and "all thy diseases"; and here in Matthew's inspired version, "griefs," "sorrows", and "iniquity" are all alike laid upon Christ with "infirmities" and "sicknesses."

If so, we have something yet to learn about how Christ is our sin-bearer and our sickness-bearer. There is an indication of truth yet unappreciated in these words: "Sickness of the mind prevails everywhere. Nine tenths of the diseases from which men suffer have their foundation here." 5T 444. "The relation that exists between the mind and the

body is very intimate. When one is affected, the other sympathizes.” MH 241. We have usually supposed that those statements have reference to people who are not church members, those who are “outside” who do not know the Lord as we know Him. I wonder if they could have meaning for us who are “inside” the church, even us who are workers? We may not know if any conscious sin or anxiety that troubles us; but could we suffer from some deepseated anxiety or discontent that “breaks down the life forces” unconsciously?

I read of an interesting case history of a lady doctor of 27 who was suffering from severe migraine headache. Nothing helped her—no drugs would work. A psychotherapist probed her unconscious through analysis, discovered a deep-seated anxiety that had troubled her and was hidden even since childhood. Her mother died when she was about two, and the shock of being apparently “forsaken” by her mother thus had angered and frightened the child so that she felt very insecure and anxious thereafter. But as she grew older of course she forgot the feelings until recall in the psychoanalytic process. As some of those long-silenced chords began to vibrate again in the “harp” of her inner experience, she wept like a child. Result: migraines ceased miraculously.

We have been “conditioned” toward a tendency to doubt and anxiety and insecurity that is more deeply seated than we can realize. The remedy: a trust in God, a faith that permeates more deeply into the roots of our soul.

I am a sinner; I was born one. My sin is basically a distrust of God, a fear that in time of real crisis He might let me down, an anxiety that eats out the depths of the heart. I am called to “overcome” even as Christ “overcame.” Wondrous thought! What I suffer from He tasted to the full on Calvary when He cried out in despair, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” That was the atonement. I wonder, my brother, you who are so dear to me—will the experience of the “final atonement” prepare us to trust God in the darkness like Christ did?

If so, that will be a deep work, and a blessed work. I think much of these words: (the context is clear that they must have reference to the closing work of God in this earth): “I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Me, as one mourneth for His only son, and shall be in bitterness for Him, as one that is in bitterness for His firstborn.” There is no evidence there that the “mourning” or weeping is egocentric—based on selfish desires for security and salvation. Apparently they will have learned to love Christ and not themselves.

In “The Time of Trouble” chapter in *Great Controversy* the saints are *not* anxious about their own salvation or security, but their agony is entirely due to anxiety lest they bring shame upon the name of the Lord!) The result of this experience, says Zechariah: “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.” Is that

blessed experience of a deeper appreciation of the atonement on the cross the “final atonement”?

The ancient Hebrews enjoyed a blessing that saved them from many of the ills that we modern men know who are so tense and anxious. Custom decrees that we not show our emotions, and so we repress them, to our hurt. As *Ministry of Healing* says, these repressed emotions of “grief, anxiety, discontent, remorse, guilt, distrust, all tend to break down the life forces and to invite decay and death.” *Ministry of Healing* 241.

The Hebrews did not repress these things. How often we read that they “lifted up their voice and wept”, freely, like a little child. And with the weeping came release and freedom—and health. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

Modern man takes a pill instead of weeping through the night until the Lord gives joy again. Somehow what we need is to be found there in the cross of our Lord, in His experience in our flesh. We have pierced Him, Zechariah says; when we come to sense what it means, as a people, “there shall be a fountain opened.”

Found comfort in reading *Great Controversy* Vol 3 old edition): “Jesus is ever ready to speak peace to souls that are troubled with doubts and fears. This precious Saviour waits for us to open the door of our heart to him, and say, Abide with us. . . . Our life is a continual strife; we must war against principalities and powers, against spiritual wickedness, and foes that never sleep; we must resist temptations, and overcome as Christ

overcame. When the peace of Jesus enters our heart we are calm and patient under the severest trials.” (p. 219).

And, it was as they were praying that Christian, amazed at his forgetfulness, suddenly blurted out, “What a fool I am! Here I am lying in this stinking dungeon when I could be walking around freely! I have a key in my coat called Promise that will, I believe, open any lock in Doubting Castle.”

“Wonderful,” said Hopeful. “This is good news, Brother. Hurry and try it.”

Then Christian pulled the key out of his coat and inserted it into the lock on the door. Immediately the lock gave way, and the door opened with ease. The pilgrims quickly fled from the dungeon and made their way to the door leading into the castle yard. Again the key opened the door. Then came the iron gate, and although the lock did not turn easily, it did turn.

So Christian and Hopeful thrust open the gate and hastily made their escape.