Chapter Four

Christian and Pliable Confront the Slough of Despond

A. The Unwary Pilgrims are Ensnared.

Now I saw in my dream that just as they had ended this talk, they drew near to a very miry slough [filthy quagmire] that was in the middle of the plain. And not watching where they were going, they both suddenly fell into the bog. The name of the Slough was Despond. Here therefore they wallowed for some time, being shamefully bedaubed with the dirt; and Christian, because of the burden that was on his back, began to sink into the mire.¹ Then Pliable spoke:

Undoubtedly Bunyan draws upon his own experience here as described in Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners, §§ 82-111. In conflict and wrestlings just prior to his conversion, he comments:

[M y original and inward pollution, that, that was my plague and my affliction; that, I say, at a dreadful rate, always putting forth itself within me; . . . I was more loathsome in my own eyes than was a toad; and I thought I was so in God’s eyes too; sin and corruption, I said, would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain. . . . I thought none but the devil himself could equalize me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind. I fell, therefore, at the sight of my own vileness, deeply into despair. . . . And now was I sorry that God had made me a man, for I feared I was reprobate.”²

However, this is not portrayed as the norm for all pilgrims since Faithful and Christiana do not experience the same degree of torment concerning personal sin and guilt when they subsequently pass this way.

1. They are careless.

Being on a plain of ease and thus heedless, both Christian and Pliable fall into the Slough [Mire] of Despond, even as Bunyan describes his own personal confrontation with erupting sin prior to his conversion in Grace Abounding:

But all this while as to the act of sinning, I never was more tender than now; I durst not take a pin or a stick, though but so big as a straw, for my conscience now was sore, and would smart at every touch; I could not now tell how to speak my words, for fear I should misplace them. Oh, how gingerly [cautiously] did I then go in all I did or said! I found

¹ Bunyan describes similar experience in Grace Abounding, § 82.
myself as on a miry bog that shook if I did but stir; and as there left both of God and Christ, and the Spirit, and all good things.\(^3\)

They are too inattentive to notice some safe steps that provide a way across the ooze, namely the reassuring promises of God (II Pet. 1:4).

2. They are polluted.

Both pilgrims become besmeared with mud and filth, but Christian sinks all the more deeply because of his felt load of personal sin and guilt. Pliable seems to wallow with loathing concerning the sin and guilt of others rather than himself. Hence, their common loathing is about to be distinguished as involving a radical difference between each other.

3. They are humiliated.

In another work entitled *The Jerusalem Sinner Saved*, Bunyan writes: “[Satan] also casts them [unconverted religious pilgrims] into the mire, to the reproach of religion, the shame of their brethren, the derision of the world, and dishonor of God. He holds our hands while the world buffets us; he puts bear skins upon us, and then sets the dogs at us. He bedaubeth us with his own foam, and tempts us to believe that that bedaubing comes from ourselves.”\(^4\)

B. Pliable’s Rapid Apostasy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pliable: Ah, neighbor Christian, where are you now?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian: To be sure, I do not know.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pliable: (Offended and angry) Is this the happiness you have told me about as we have traveled? If we have such a halting disaster at this early stage, then what may we expect from now on till the end of our journey? If I escape out of this with my life, you shall possess the brave country alone for me.(^3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hence Pliable, making several toilsome attempts, eventually struggled out of the mire on that side of the Slough which was closest to his own house. So he went back and Christian saw him no more.</td>
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Because he is a man governed by feelings and impressions rather than truth, he is quick to defect at the first appearance of distasteful circumstances. His religious pursuit is sensual, not soulish; his ego, which seeks comfort and carnal improvement, is offended and repulsed at the thought of grieving over sin.

\(^3\) Ibid., § 82, pp. 15-16.  
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 96.  
\(^5\) It is not enough to be pliable.
1. His greater buoyancy.

Compared with Christian, Pliable does not sink as deeply, though this does not dissuade him from complaining about his misfortune. Little does he realize how relatively tame this present plight is when compared with the despair that shall overcome the inhabitants of the City of Destruction!

2. His strong discontent.

Frustrated through impatiently expecting uninterrupted happiness, a path of roses, and only fair weather (Matt. 13:20-21), Pliable stridently challenges the promises of Christian's book. His expectation of further trouble along the way is correct, but he fails to appreciate sustaining grace (II Pet. 1:3; 3:18) and the incomparable glory of the Celestial City (Rom. 8:18; I Pet. 5:10).

3. His turncoat retreat.

This early reversal likens Pliable to Turn-away, a citizen of the town of Apostasy, and Temporary. In conformity with his nature and greater buoyancy, he exits from the side of the Slough nearest to the City of Destruction, and that without aid. Lacking perseverance, he gives evidence that he is not a true seeker after the kingdom of God (I John 2:18-19). So Pliable returns home bedaubed [evidently polluted], and he shall remain so eternally, while Christian shall soon receive a new outfit of spotless clothing provided by the King of the Celestial City.

C. Christian Valiantly Struggles to Move Forward.

Therefore Christian was left to tumble in the Slough of Despond alone. But he still endeavored to struggle to that side of the Slough that was further from his own house and closer to the Wicket-gate. And this he did, yet he was unable to get out because of the burden that was upon his back.

In his extreme predicament, this seeker does not need cajoling to press ahead. Rather, as one who senses his spiritual poverty (Matt. 5:3), and in the face of great discouragement, yet he persists in his quest for salvation; he is in deadly earnest.

1. His depressing guilt causes him to sink.

Here Christian is becoming overwhelmed with the revelation of his own sinfulness. As he reads his book, the knowledge of his own corruption seems to gush forth with such abundance that he feels as if he were drowning. The promises of God in that same book seem to be unknown to him at this time.

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6 Ibid., III, pp. 146-7.
7 Ibid., pp. 160-1.
8 Christian in trouble still seeks to get further from his own house.
a. The case of depression in the unbeliever.

Bunyan’s primary concern here is with regard to the condition of the unregenerate seeker. On a wider front, depression on account of sin induced guilt is perhaps the most basic of man’s troublesome symptoms. He would be content if he could but sin in peace. But experience tells him, “there is no peace for the wicked, says the LORD” (Isa. 48:22), since “the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud” (Isa. 57:20).

(1) Bunyan is probably drawing upon David’s description, albeit as a believer, of depression in terms of being swallowed up in “the pit . . . the miry clay” or “deep mire” (Ps. 40:2; 69:3; cf. 42:5-6, 9-11). Nevertheless, the mercy of God upholds (Ps. 94:17-19). Paul also suffered bouts of depression and internal conflict, not only before he was converted concerning his exceeding sinfulness (Acts 26:14; Rom. 7:9), but also as a Christian in the Lord’s service (Acts 18:7-10; II Cor. 1:8). Nevertheless the mercy of God upheld him (Acts 18:9-10; II Cor. 1:9-10).

(2) Those in company with Pliable may put on a callous brave front, but back of this charade is the constant eruption of suppressed guilt (Rom. 1:18). Reckless, offhand mockery of questing after righteousness is a paper thin cover for a profound weight of gnawing anxiety that is the result of abandonment to sin. Christian also has conflict with sin and resultant guilt, but he responds with confession rather than suppression. He cries to God for help and release, and for Christian “Help” is close at hand.

b. The case of depression in the believer.

Now while Bunyan places the Slough of Despond at a point prior to conversion, yet is it not just as biblical to consider a Slough of Despond as being a snare for pilgrim’s following conversion? Of course later incarceration in Doubting Castle will reflect this perspective. In The Saint’s Knowledge Of Christ’s Love, Bunyan describes a believer’s depressed condition as follows: “Christians have sometimes their sinking fits, and are as if they were always descending: or as Heman says, ‘counted with them that go down into the pit [being subject to God’s wrath]’ (Ps. 88:4). Now guilt is not to such so much a wind and a tempest, as a load and burthen [burden]. The devil and sin, and the curse of the law, and death, are gotten upon the shoulders of this poor man, and are treading of him down, that he may sink into, and be swallowed up of his miry clay.”

(1) Martin Luther, John Bunyan, C. H. Spurgeon, and countless notable ministers of God have been plagued with periodic fits of deep melancholy due to a sense of personal unworthiness. Many an honest preacher, even such as George Whitefield, has felt too downcast to enter a pulpit (II Cor. 2:16). Yet notice how God was pleased to mightily use such vessels. Another case in this regard concerns the hymn writer William Cowper who, although encouraged by the fellowship of John Newton, yet suffered frequent bouts of

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depression. He describes these periods in his hymn, Of For A Closer Walk With God. Several verses read:

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?
What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.
Return, O holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn,
And drove Thee from my breast.

(2) Both the unbeliever and believer, though with considerable distinction, are to expect depression, even a treacherous pit especially prepared for them, particularly when they come to a profound understanding as to the nature of sin in their lives. But the believer differs from the unbeliever in this way; he knows he is now constituted as a new person (Rom. 6:6; Col. 3:9-11) who temporarily inhabits an old and corroding carnal shell. Yes, conflict from his flesh within (Gal. 5:17) and the world without (Jas. 4:4) is his present lot. But he also knows of the keeping power of grace (Rom. 7:24-25; 8:10-17), the rest of being at peace with God (Rom. 5:1-5), and the certain hope of great and glorious future compensation (Matt. 5:3-4, 10; II Cor. 4:7-11; 12:7-10) when he is everlastingly transported into the presence of a welcoming God!

2. His struggling perseverance manifests a desire for progress.

Floundering in such a clawing morass, yet Christian struggles to that side of the Slough which is furthest from his home and nearest to the Celestial City (Matt. 10:22). These opposite sides of the Slough may appear to be identical, yet they represent radically divergent attitudes. To Christian has been granted, even before his conversion, the grace of perseverance, and this directing, saving, and keeping power shall preserve him unto glory (Rom. 8:28-30). So Bunyan comments in Saved By Grace:

that all the power and policy, malice and rage, of the devils and hell itself are against us. Any man that understandeth this will conclude that to be saved is no small thing. The devil is called a god, a prince, a lion, a roaring lion; it is said that he hath death and the power of it, & c. But what can a poor creature, whose habitation is in flesh, do against a god, a prince, a roaring lion, and the power of death itself? Our perseverance, therefore, lieth in the power of God; ‘the gate of hell shall not prevail against it.’

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10 Ibid., p. 340.
3. **Application.**

Here Christian experiences the “miry clay” of conviction of sin (Ps. 38:1-8; 40:1-2; 69:1-2) which he desires to deal with, in spite of its ugliness. However Pliable prefers to retreat from the conviction of his own sin. Perhaps the most fearful aspect of this scene is the contemplation of a pilgrim who is neither sufficiently discouraged enough to opt for returning nor sufficiently burdened enough to confess his need of “Help.” Such a person then remains in the most depressing limbo-like state. Their sin troubles them, but not sufficiently enough so as to desperately desire the only gospel remedy. They are miserably religious, but unconverted; they are constantly bedaubed, but lack a sufficient understanding of the righteousness of God. And there are countless numbers of such static seekers today who, no doubt, take the name of “Christian” and yet know nothing about being reconciled to God.

D. **Help Providentially Arrives to Rescue Christian.**

However, I [Bunyan] saw in my dream that a man came to him named Help, and he asked Christian, “What are you doing here?”

CHRISTIAN: Sir, I was advised to go this way by a man named Evangelist, and he directed me toward the Wicket-gate ahead so that I might escape from the wrath to come. But as I was pressing forward, I fell in here.

HELP: But why did you not look for the steps12 across the mire?

CHRISTIAN: I was so fearful in my escape that I missed the safe way across the mire and fell in.

HELP: Then give me your hand. So Christian stretched out his hand, and Help13 lifted him out of the mire and set him on solid ground; then the pilgrim was exhorted to be on his way toward the Wicket-gate ahead.

Remember that in such a grasping mire, human effort only aggravates the predicament by causing the victim to be sucked even more strongly into the overwhelming ooze. So it is also the case with the futile efforts of the natural man. He struggles to extricate himself from a growing sense of his own corruption and becomes frustrated with his lack of success. He also discovers that the application of the Law, which he thought would be for his improvement, only worsens his ensnared condition (Rom. 7:7-11).

1. **His sovereign intervention.**

Help personifies God’s reigning, hovering mercy that takes the initiative for His elect, before their conversion, by means of particular prevenient [preceding] grace (John 17:12; II Thess. 2:13; I Pet. 1:1-2), being mediated through pastoral assistance. Spurgeon preached a sermon in 1865 entitled Prevenient Grace based upon Galatians

11 Ps. 20:1-2; 70:5.
13 Ps. 40:2.
1:15 in which he declared: “Prevenient grace comes before regeneration and conversion. I think we sometimes overlook it. We do not attach enough importance to the grace of God in its dealings with men before he actually brings them to himself. Paul said that God had designs of love towards him even before he had called him out of the dead world into spiritual life.” However this grace here may be pastorally mediated, as illustrated by the case of hymn writer Thomas Kelly who wrote We sing the praise of Him who died, and Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious. As an independent pastor of means in Dublin who died in 1854, he gained a beloved reputation amongst the poor. One man is said to have cheered up his wife in a time of great trouble by saying, “Hould up, Bridget, bedad; there’s always Misther Kelly to pull us out of the bog after we’ve sunk for the last time.”

2. His convicting exhortation.

Help admonishes Christian concerning the steps which he neglected to notice on account of fear. Faith is the foundation of stability in the believer’s soul which, if infected with the dry rot of unbelief due to neglect of the Word of God, results in trembling and stumbling due to fear. Thus God provided a way of escape for Christian from the engulfing mire of guilt by means of the book in his hand, which was not heeded at the hour of need (Ps. 17:4-5; I Cor. 10:13).

3. His merciful deliverance.

Then Help draws Christian out of the filthy slime and places him upon solid ground (Ps. 40:1-2). Because Pliable was not so overwhelmed, it was possible for him to help himself, neglect Christian, and return to certain judgment. But it was impossible for Christian to extricate himself since he had such a crushing knowledge of personal sin and the righteousness of God. Only prevenient mercy could deliver him from such bondage and intense frustration. Furthermore, notice that Christian is rescued by Help only when he is recognized as a bona fide pilgrim fleeing from the wrath to come.

E. Help Explains the Meaning of the Slough of Despond.

As the Dreamer, Bunyan interrupts the flow of the narrative by injecting his own enquiry born of intense curiosity. He addresses Help concerning the hazard which the Slough of Despond presents to passing pilgrims. However it would seem that the explanation given is in reality information that pilgrim’s ought to know about, namely the great conflict that endures between guilt and grace, the impotence of man in sin and the potency of God’s relieving mercy. However, Christian’s imminent encounter with Mr. Worldly-wiseman would suggest that he is not careful to learn from this explanation.

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15 John Telford, The Methodist Hymn Book Illustrated In History And Experience, pp. 120-1.
1. The astonished Dreamer seeks an explanation.

Then I [Bunyan] approached the person who lifted him out and said, “Sir, since the way from the City of Destruction to the Wicket-gate ahead runs directly through this place, why is it that this plat [low-lying piece of land] is not repaired so that travelers might pass through with greater safety?”

Bunyan the narrator is apparently concerned that such a snare and “platt” or “low-lying piece of land” should be found directly in the way of pilgrims who seek entrance at the Wicket-gate. It does not seem evident to him at this point that the Slough of Despond, though a perilous trap, is proving to be an effective testing ground as well. Of course Bunyan himself could easily recall specific instances of apostate disciples such as Pliable who, in such a testing situation, quickly returned to their unbelief. Hence, the Dreamer’s enquiry is really intended for the enlightenment of readers of The Pilgrim’s Progress.

2. The Slough is fed by the filth of doubt and conviction of sin.

And he said to me, “This miry Slough is peculiar in that it cannot be mended. Being low-lying it attracts a continuous stream of scum and filth that is associated with conviction of sin; for this reason it is called the Slough of Despond. As the traveling sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there arise in his soul many fears, doubts, and discouraging perceptions concerning himself; then all of these accumulate and pile up in this place. And so this is the reason for the badness of this ground.”

Whereas citizens in the City of Destruction are happy to be isolated from such a place as this, yet pilgrims who are brought face to face with their own innate corruption must inevitably wrestle with the surfacing of this human decay. It is so repulsive a truth for a pilgrim to encounter that he often stumbles on account of the exceeding sinfulness of sin in his own heart that is exposed. To view this problem collectively, as sin that is pervasive and not simply particular, is to envisage an even more obnoxious pooling of human filth. Hence, to remain at the Slough is to drown in despair. However, in conjunction with focus on the light ahead and the hope of the Celestial City, this Slough does offer incentive to press forward as quickly as is possible.

a. The more sinners are awakened to their sinfulness, the more the Slough overflows with immoral sludge and mire (Ps. 38:2-8; Rom. 7:7-13). Mixed in with this filth are the additives of fear, discouragement, anxiety, shame, and inbuilt recompense.

b. The fumes of this atmosphere tend to render pilgrims dim of sight, dull of hearing, and insensitive to the scarcely visible solid steps that can only be discerned with spiritual insight, born of the Word (I Cor. 10:12-13; II Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:15).
3. The King of the land makes continuous repairs.

“It is not the pleasure of the King\(^{16}\) that this place should remain in such a bad condition. For this reason His laborers have, according to the direction of His Majesty’s surveyors, been employed for sixteen [now over nineteen] hundred years in attempting to mend this piece of ground. Yes, to the best of my knowledge, this location has swallowed up at least twenty thousand cart-loads, that is millions of wholesome instructions that have, at all seasons, been brought from all regions of the King’s dominions. And those that know from experience say that there is no better material for making the ground solid here. This being so, it might well have been mended, but it remains the Slough of Despond still, and so it shall be when they have done what they can.”

His desire has been for a highway of holiness for the past sixteen hundred (now nineteen hundred) years since the gospel of Christ was first proclaimed (Isa. 35:3-4, 8). Of course, one day it shall be perfectly established (Isa. 49:8-13).

a. Highway repairs at this place by the King’s laborers (pastors?) and surveyors (Apostles?) have been constant. This has required twenty thousand cartloads, even millions of wholesome instructions, which materials are best for establishing a firm pathway (Matt. 7:24-27). No doubt attempts were also continuously being made to sweep the steps clean.

b. However, the gushing spring of human corruption is so relentless that the Slough of Despond has remained. And many a pilgrim has been overwhelmed, and as a consequence despaired, on account of his frantic but futile struggles at this place. If they would but call for “Help,” he would gladly multiply his busyness in deliverance. But while pilgrims vainly wallow, with resulting anguish and frustration in this pit of their own making, yet they stubbornly refuse to seek relief outside of themselves. Thus they perish in a sea of their own pollution (Ps. 38:17-22; 73:18-19).

4. The steps of the Law-giver are yet bemired.

“It is true, according to the directive of the Law-giver, that a number of reliable and solid steps\(^{17}\) have been placed through the very middle of the Slough. But at such a time as this when so much filth spews forth, as is the case during periods of changeable weather, these steps are hardly visible. And even if they are noticed, yet on account of guilt-induced dizziness, their feet miss the steps. So they are thoroughly bemired, notwithstanding that the steps are there. However, the ground does prove to be good [firm] once they enter in at the Gate.”\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\) Isa. 35:3-4.

\(^{17}\) The promises of forgiveness and acceptance to life by faith in Christ.

\(^{18}\) I Sam. 12:23.
Here Christian’s distinctive experience contrasts with that of Faithful and Christiana who, being more circumspect (Eph. 5:15-16), avail themselves of the relieving stepping stones of the promises of God (II Cor. 7:1). Further, it is the filth of aroused sin and guilt that not only conceals these steps, but also produces a dizziness which in turn causes a stumbling at the firm promises of saving grace in the Word of God (Rom. 7:9-11). Yet once entrance is gained at the Wicket-gate, the ground of the King’s Highway is found to be continuously firm (I Sam. 12:23). In other words, once a pilgrim walks by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, he finds himself on a solid, changeless, and reassuring foundation (Is. 28:16). Nevertheless, enemies and dangerous detours will still threaten such surefooted saints.

5. Application.

It is the Word of God which is best able to restore the soul that sorely grieves over its deep corruption. Often it will take repeated doses, but eventually buoyancy will overtake the dejected and sinking heart (Ps. 69:1-3, 13-15, 29-33; Isa. 41:10; Rom. 5:20). Isaac Watts has well written:

Plunged in a gulf of deep despair
  We wretched sinners lay,
  Without one cheerful beam of hope,
  Or spark of glimmering day.

With pitying eyes, the Prince of Grace
  Beheld our helpless grief;
  He saw, and, O amazing love!
  He flew to our relief.
F. Pliable Returns to the City of Destruction.

Now I [Bunyan] saw in my dream that by this time, Pliable had arrived back at his house. So his neighbors came to visit him, and some of them called him wise on account of his return to his home; some called him a fool for endangering himself with Christian’s company. But others mocked his cowardliness, saying, “Surely since you commenced your adventure, I would not have been so fainthearted as to give in for a few difficulties.” So Pliable sat cringing in their midst. But at last he regained his confidence so that his neighbors then turned their attention toward deriding poor Christian behind his back. However, that is enough concerning Pliable.

Does he vacillate yet again, wondering if he has done the right thing? Probably not because the stench of the Slough still clings to him. But surely he has exchanged a bad situation for something infinitely worse. What is a mere temporary setback, or indeed numerous passing trials, in comparison with eternal condemnation and remorse?

1. His neighbors come to visit and comment.

   No doubt Obstinate was at the forefront of this inquisition. Even as the crowd gathered, Pliable may well have had regrets of returning, though again for the wrong reason of avoiding embarrassment.

   a. Some call him wise.

      He has chosen the broad way in preference to the narrow way (Matt. 7:13-14). In fact he is a worldly-wise fool in a company of fools.

   b. Some call him a fool.

      He has risked his life with a religious dreamer seeking “pie in the sky when you die by and by.” In reality, he and his friends are those who are deluded.

   c. Some mock his cowardliness.

      Even the world, which boasts in its worldly attainments, hates a quitter. No wonder that Pliable sat “sneaking [cringing]” in shame.

2. His neighbors join in deriding Christian.

   Having been the chief target of derision, Pliable learns how to deflect criticism away from himself by joining in the chorus of neighbors who denounce Christian. So the venom pours forth, the scorn multiplies, and the opinion is unanimous that their departed friend has become their enemy.
a. He is deliriously stupid.

In heading for a gate he cannot see and a kingdom that is out of this world based upon the promises of a stranger, Christian has foolishly left behind numerous home-town comforts, and especially the unity of his family. But did a listening Faithful disagree with this opinion in secret?  

b. He is covered in filth for his trouble.

Surely Christian presents a lonely and forlorn picture. But yet he is better prepared for the Wicket-gate and Place of Deliverance where his disreputable appearance and burden will assuredly be dealt with. Besides, how comfortable will Obstinate and his friends be when the City of Destruction suffers the wrath of the King?

3. His regression is complete.

For an extended exposition of Bunyan’s understanding of a pilgrim in relapse, as epitomized by Pliable, refer to his analysis of Temporary, as well as in his A Holy Life The Beauty Of Christianity.

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19 Ibid., III, p. 117.
20 Ibid., pp. 160-1.
21 Ibid., II, pp. 521-4.