

Chapter Thirty-One

Christian and Hopeful Meet Returning Atheist

A. The Approach of Returning Atheist.

NOW after a while, they noticed someone in the distance coming softly and alone along the highway to meet them. Then said *Christian* to his companion, "Ahead of us is a man with his back toward *Mount Zion*, and he is coming to meet us."

HOPEFUL: I see him, so let us be very careful now lest he should prove to be another flatterer.

So this man drew nearer and nearer until he came right up to them. His name was *Atheist*, and he immediately asked the pilgrims where they were going.

CHRISTIAN: We are going to *Mount Zion*.

The whole topic of atheism was one to which Bunyan gave considerable thought and place. In *The Holy War*, Atheism is an alderman in the town of Mansoul before being taken into custody by Emmanuel, the son of King Shaddai.¹ Mr. Badman was an atheist.² The author relates in *Grace Abounding* that as a young man,

I had one religious intimate companion . . . a poor man . . . [who] also turned a most devilish Ranter [open profligate], and gave himself up to all manner of filthiness, especially uncleanness: he would also deny that there was a God, angel, or spirit; and would laugh at all exhortations to sobriety. When I labored to rebuke this wickedness, he would laugh the more.³

Bunyan then describes that a little later on, "blasphemous thoughts were such as also stirred up questions in me, against the very being of God, and of his only beloved Son; as, whether there were, in truth, a God, or Christ, or no?"⁴ Even at the conclusion of *Grace Abounding* he confesses to "inclinings to unbelief"⁵

1. He causes the pilgrims to be cautious.

This returnee is in no hurry since he believes there is no Celestial City to gain or City of Destruction to shun. For this reason he walks softly, though snickering to himself as he goes. However, the newly sensitized pilgrims are now quick with their caution.

¹ Bunyan, *Works*, III, p. 309.

² *Ibid.*, p. 627.

³ *Ibid.*, I, § 44, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, § 96, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

- a. As a contrary traveler.

For Christian, the most significant fact about this wayfarer is that “his back [is] toward Zion;”⁶ further, he obviously intends to initiate conversation and his appearance is not that of a disturbed pilgrim.

- b. As a possible flatterer.

Both pilgrims remain very sensitive concerning their most recent encounter. For this reason Hopeful recommends extreme caution. Any person who avoids God's dwelling place (Is. 33:5) is to be treated with grave concern.



Atheist

⁶ Ibid., III, p. 151.

2. He approaches as a brazen, untroubled fellow.

His question concerning the pilgrims' direction anticipates an obvious answer that he relishes refuting. Reminiscent of Bunyan's Ranter friend, Atheist ripples with mocking laughter. Both Christian and Hopeful are not amused.

- a. In contrast with the Flatterer.

Here is no gentlemanly manner, no kindly interest, no sympathetic help, only a belittling put-down that reeks of self-importance and conceit. But even so, did not Timorous and Mistrust tell the truth about the way ahead though they were fleeing from it?

- b. In confidence from experience.

What a narrow world experience is when it excludes revelation and truth that transcends our puny sensual universe. Again, the experiences of Timorous and Mistrust were true as far as they went, but yet they fell so far short of the whole of truth, and especially with regard to the saving power of the gospel.

B. The Investigation of Returning Atheist.

Hopeful suspects that Atheist's haughty laughter is critical of their journeying so that he asks for an explanation. Though he might as well seek counsel from a fool as this man (Ps. 14:1; Prov. 18:2).

1. He scornfully charges the pilgrims with ignorance.

ATHEIST: (Having burst into howling and scornful laughter) I cannot but help laugh on account of it being so obvious that you are both ignorant persons; for you have committed your-selves to a very tiring journey that will provide you with absolutely nothing for your trouble, other than a fruitless journey.

CHRISTIAN: Why man, do you think it possible that we will not be received at our destination?

ATHEIST: Received! But there is no such place that you dream of in all this world.⁷

CHRISTIAN: But there is in the world to come.⁸

They do not know that they are ignorant of the real world which is strictly a material world, of randomness, of matter in motion, of the survival of the fittest, of scientific method, of rationalism, of relativism, of amorality, etc.

⁷ Ps. 14:1; Prov. 18:2.

⁸ John 18:36; Heb. 13:14.

- a. They travel to gain nothing.

Their pilgrimage is based upon artifice; their burdens were imaginary; their belief is in fantasy; their anxiety has been for naught; their hopes are for naught; their joys are illusory; their faith is one great big joke!

- b. They travel to a fictitious world.

Christian's probing here is more for the purpose of exposure of Atheist's foolishness than an expression of doubt on his part. So Atheist grasps the bait and expresses his own bone headedness. For to assert that: "There is no such place as you dream of [the Celestial City] in all this world"⁹ is to state the biblically obvious (John 18:36) and reveal profound ignorance.

- c. They travel without a destination.

But Christian is quick to discern the flaw in Atheist's assertion. Again, the Bible clearly states that "here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (Heb. 13:14). Only the right road map will lead to "the world to come."

2. He has vainly followed their course for twenty years.

ATHEIST: When I was at home in my country of origin, I also heard about what you are saying; and it was for this reason that I set out in search of this *Celestial City*, over twenty years ago. But from the day that I departed until now, no such place has ever been discovered.¹⁰

CHRISTIAN: Both of us have heard about such a place and we definitely believe that it is possible to find it.

ATHEIST: Had I not first believed as you do, I would not have come this far in my search. You would think that I ought to have found such a place by now. But having traveled further than you have, I am returning home where I hope to refresh myself with the things that were earlier cast aside for a vain hope.¹¹

Alexander Whyte gently reprimands Bunyan for not elaborating on this pilgrimage of Atheist since he believes that only the Bedford allegorist could have done justice to such speculation.¹² Certainly it must have been an unorthodox journey, while the motivation was most likely detached curiosity rather than the thirsting of a hungry soul. We can be sure that Atheist never received instruction at the house of the Interpreter, nor did he lodge at the Palace Beautiful. We can only conclude that he traveled along those dark back alleys and lanes which, while being in close proximity to the narrow way, yet are the haunts of all sorts of vagabonds and shady characters (Eccl. 10:15; Jer. 22:12).

⁹ Bunyan, *Works*, III, p. 152.

¹⁰ Eccles. 10:15; Jer. 17:15; 22:13.

¹¹ Atheist desires worldly contentment. II Pet. 2:22.

¹² Alexander Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, II, pp. 34-35.

- a. They have hearkened to the same deceitful evangelist.

But surely Atheist, having heard Evangelist, did not follow the instructions he received. Perhaps his evangelist was Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, or By-ends' pastor, Mr. Two-tongues. Or possibly Atheist heard an evangelist who offered him the gospel of prosperity and health in this present world. We can be certain then that what Atheist has sought for so long is not the same as that which Christian and Hopeful have their sights set upon.

- b. They have not gone as far as he.

This boasting of greater experience is void of weight when more closely examined. Where is his coat and roll obtained at the Place of Deliverance? His preference for his original home only indicates his unchanged nature and base appetites (II Pee. 2:22). In reality, he has not at all gone further than Christian and Hopeful. Rather, he never commenced such a journey through the Wicket-gate to begin with.



Atheist despises the Bible

C. The Response by the Proceeding Pilgrims.

Christian has recently asserted to Atheist that they have both heard about and believed that there is a Celestial City to be inhabited. Though his recent discussion with Hopeful concerning Little-faith may have caused some concern about his companion's maturity. Hence he now takes the opportunity to test his pilgrim brother immediately following Atheist's verbal onslaught.

1. Christian questions Hopeful with apparent doubt.

CHRISTIAN: (Seriously addressing *Hopeful*) Is it true what this man is telling us?¹³

His tone of voice pretends to indicate that he has been shaken by Atheist's barrage of unbelief and naturalism. The question is whether Hopeful will stand on the feet of his own faith and not yield to an outside, even if friendly, influence.

2. Hopeful responds with full assurance against Atheist.

Be very careful, for this fellow is definitely one of the flatterers. Remember what it has already cost us for our listening to another sweet-talker like this one. What a thing to say, that there is no *Mount Zion*! Did we not see the very gate of the *City* from the top of the *Delectable Mountains*? Further-more, are we not to walk by faith rather than sight?¹⁴ So let us be on our way lest the man with the whip should catch up with us again.

But my good companion, you should have been the one teaching this lesson to me. So let me plainly address you in both ears: "My son, cease listening to instruction that will cause you to depart from the words of knowledge."¹⁵ I tell you my brother, do not listen to this man any more, but rather let us believe unto the saving of the soul.¹⁶

Now put to the test, he manifests a surge of confidence that is courageous, and understanding that is perceptive. He has become like Mark, "profitable for the ministry" (II Tim. 4:11).

- a. The identity of Atheist is that of a flatterer.

With a combination of pretended knowledge and bombast, he is a flatterer of a different type. His danger is his overbearing boldness that can easily belittle and

¹³ Christian tests his brother.

¹⁴ Hopeful's gracious answer. II Cor. 5:7.

¹⁵ Prov. 19:27.

¹⁶ Heb. 10:39.

overwhelm the more timid type of pilgrim. He intimidates by making one feel that all the world is on his side while religion is for the feeble-minded.

- b. The Celestial City has been viewed with our eyes.

By this it is meant that the pilgrims have seen their destination through the eye of faith. Such perception was really by means of the pastoral instruction given at the Delectable Mountains (I Cor. 13:12).

- c. The pilgrims' walk is yet by faith rather than sight.

However, this faith is in a proven revelation, the inscripturated Word of God (John 17: 17; II Cor. 5:7). Further, belief in the Celestial City is based on the witness of he who has come from that place and promised residence there for true pilgrims (John 7:28; 14:2-3).

- d. The Shining One must not chasten again.

The remembrance of their recent whipping is very fresh and constraining. This newfound zeal is the sought after correctional response (Rev. 3:19).

- e. The true child of God shuns error and embraces truth.

Whereas Christian has been the teacher of Hopeful up to this point, now the roles are reversed. Hopeful boldly instructs his companion by means of whispering in his ear, "round you in the ears,"¹⁷ that which Christian has neglected to teach. Specifically, the Word of God exhorts pilgrims to separate themselves from those who purvey error (Prov. 19:27; Heb. 10:39).

3. Christian reveals the motive for his questioning.

My brother, let me confess that I did not put that question to you on account of my own personal doubt of the truth. Rather, my intention was to test you and draw forth a response that indicated the real commitment of your heart. And as for this man, I know well that he is blinded by the god of this world.¹⁸ So let you and I go forward knowing that we have right belief of the truth, for no lie or false testimony can be of the truth.¹⁹
HOPEFUL: Now I do rejoice in hope of the glory of *God*.²⁰

He perceives Hopeful's earnest concern and feels the force of his exhortation. Hence, he reveals his intention which was to elicit a response, to stimulate a reaction which preferably would uphold the truth and expose error.

¹⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, eds. Wharey and Sharrock, p. 336.

¹⁸ II Cor. 4:4; Rev. 12:9.

¹⁹ I John 2:21.

²⁰ Rom. 5:2; I John 3:2.

- a. He really believes Atheist is blinded by Satan.

The light is darkness to him while the darkness is light (II Cor. 4:4). He sees only through the grid of a material world that excludes spiritual reality, moral absolutes, and creaturely accountability. In believing he is subject only to himself, he has subjected himself to the great deceiver (Rev. 12:9), his god incognito.

- b. He really desires to press on in belief of the truth.

In affirming his commitment to “the truth,” he has in mind that revelation of truth which is both written and incarnate in Christ (John 14:6; 17:17). More than ever, Christian now realizes that it is possible and desirable for both pilgrims to press on in fellowship in the truth (II Thess. 2:13; I John 2:21; III John 8).

4. The pilgrims and Atheist go their own ways.

So both pilgrims turned away from *Atheist* while he, raucously laughing, went on his way.²¹

Christian and Hopeful take the initiative in distancing themselves from Atheist (I Cor. 5:11; II Cor. 6:14) and commence fruitful discourse. Interminable reasoning and disputing with a person “so wise in his own eyes” (Is. 5:21) would be unprofitable.

- a. Having heard Christian, Hopeful hopes in the glory of God.

He exalts in the prospect of being glorified and beholding the glory of Christ (Rom. 5:2; I John 3:2). His defense of the truth has only heightened his passion for advancement in the truth.

- b. Having given a reason for their hope, the pilgrims press forward.

On this occasion a fool asked for a reason for the pilgrims’ hope and received an answer with “gentleness and reverence” (I Pet. 3:15). Now they proceed having been faithful, and set their minds heavenward.

- c. Having given a reason for his hopelessness, Atheist goes backward.

In enthroning himself as his own infallible god, he seeks that company, whether it be at Vanity or the City of Destruction, where the creature is worshipped rather than the Creator (Rom. 3: 18-25).

²¹ Rom. 1:18-25.